



Leading the Way

Northwest Arctic Borough School District

“Educating Our Children to Lead Successful Lives”

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Testimony to House Education Committee

For the record, I am Dr. Norman Eck, superintendent of Northwest Arctic Borough School District. We have 1950 students in 12 schools in our 11 villages. None of our villages are accessible by roads and all supplies have to be flown in. I have been employed in Northwest Arctic for 14 years, one year as a Director, 5 ½ years as principal, and now I am in my 7th year as superintendent.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak with you today. I support changes in language in School Intervention law. We need to be sure we have as an objective Intervention process as possible. We need to focus on what things are needed based upon the local school situation and listen to local voices as well as provide guidance and support to the educational programs in place.

It does little good to go back and complain about past problems or grievances with the Department of Education over how we were treated when Northwest Arctic was under Intervention by the department. However, now that we are working to craft a better and improved process and model for Intervention, it is valuable to look at past mistakes, mistakes of my own district and mistakes of the Department of Education, in order to put in place an Intervention process that will be a positive model for students, staff, community and school. Working together, and placing the needs of students above all else, we can do this.

First, we must have an objective process for Intervention within a school. To place an entire district under Intervention may not be what needs to be done. For example, Northwest Arctic, as an entire district was placed under Intervention on account of 3 schools with poor academic achievement, but a number of our schools were doing very well. Additionally, when Northwest Arctic was placed under Intervention, two other districts were also placed in Intervention at the same time,

Yupiiit and Lower Yukon. However, there were 7 other districts with student achievement scores lower than Northwest Arctic, but those districts were not placed under Intervention. The placement of Northwest Arctic seemed to me to be a political placement rather than an objective placement.

Second, programs that are considered “best practices” in general by educators on a State or National level may not be strategies that work well in some of our isolated rural villages. We need to look at the local situation and evaluate what can work best here and then look at choices and see what the local capacity is for program change. In the case of Northwest Arctic the Department of Education dictated specific “best practices” and had given instructions to observers and consultants to come and do certain things that were in conflict with what is the best program or action to take locally. Much of this failed.

Third, the current instructional improvement plan that the local district or school may have in place needs to be looked at and worked with before it is thrown out or over-written by a new plan that is dictated by the Department of Education. In our case, when Intervention was put upon Northwest Arctic we already had an excellent improvement plan in place. We already had contracted with certain consultants to help us in a constructive manner. We were forced to use the Department of Education’s plan, and then overlay that plan and the Departments consultants in our schools.

Fourth, the Department of Education, alone, lacks the depth of knowledge and expertise to conduct the Intervention process. Even today, the situation in the Yupiiit District is one of conflict with the local district instead of working in concert and supportive of the District and its administration. For example, expertise from other Districts in the State can be a most valuable resource for advice to a fellow District in need. School Board members from other similar Districts can be a resource and support to the local District Board members in need. Surveys and inventories of processes and programs should be undertaken. Other Districts with similar professionals can be a most valuable resource to the Intervention School and the Department of Education in these cases.

These are good reasons to be concerned about the Intervention process and how it has worked and not worked, well. In the case of Northwest Arctic, we were fortunate to be able to establish good relationships with the head consultants assigned to our District, John Holst and Richard Hebhardt, over a period of 4 years. We learned from them and they each learned from us as we worked together to improve services to students.

Finally, I want to commend the Department of Education for releasing Northwest Arctic from Intervention in August of 2010. In August of 2011, Yukon-Koyukuk was released from Intervention. A national statistic is that only 5% of districts that have gone under Intervention have been released from Intervention.

I want to commend the Department of Education and the Governor for the settlement in the Moore Case. The process for providing targeted assistance to low performing schools as lined out in Moore Settlement can be very instructive to us. The solutions are not dictated or directed by any one party, but by a coming together of parties, listening to the needs of the local school, and providing help that is requested by the Intervention School in the categories authorized in the agreement. In this way, much can be accomplished.

Finally, for successful Intervention (or a better term is school improvement), a process of assistance must be detailed that will provide supports for the students, teachers, administrators, communities, and school board. Districts that need help must be afforded a process of Intervention that truly assists the schools to enable improved student academic performance through targeted assistance in terms of personnel, policy, and finance for specific programs.