

**Written Testimony of Lon Garrison
Executive Director, Association of Alaska School Boards
In Support of House Bill 28
Before the House Education Committee**



Co-Chairs Himschoot and Story, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Lon Garrison, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB). On behalf of our member school districts across the state, I am pleased to offer testimony in strong support of **House Bill 28**, which seeks to establish a student loan repayment pilot program to address Alaska's critical workforce shortages, particularly in education.

The Need for HB 28

Alaska continues to experience significant challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, administrators, and school staff. As outlined in AASB's 2025 Legislative Priorities, we recognize that our schools face an unprecedented crisis in staffing, which directly impacts student success and the ability to provide quality public education. HB 28 aligns with our legislative priority to invest in recruitment and retention strategies by offering a financial incentive for Alaska-educated professionals to return home and serve in our schools and public workforce.

Currently, a substantial number of Alaska's high school graduates pursue postsecondary education outside the state, and only 35% of those students return after graduation. Meanwhile, student loan debt presents a significant barrier to their ability to return and work in Alaska. HB 28 proposes a solution that directly addresses this challenge by providing up to \$8,000 per year in student loan repayment assistance, for a total of \$24,000 over three years, to qualified professionals who commit to working in Alaska as educators or public employees.

Alignment with AASB Resolutions and Priorities

HB 28 is directly aligned with AASB's long-standing commitment to strengthening teacher recruitment and retention. Specifically, our Resolution **4.2 ESTABLISHING A NEW TEACHER INCENTIVE PROGRAM FOR ALASKA** calls for the establishment of a new teacher incentive program, emphasizing the importance of loan forgiveness, relocation assistance, and financial incentives to attract educators to our schools. Furthermore, Resolution **4.5 ADDRESSING THE TEACHER, ADMINISTRATOR, SCHOOL STAFF SHORTAGE** highlights the urgent need to address Alaska's teacher and school staff shortages through comprehensive measures, including salary competitiveness, student loan assistance, and state-supported recruitment initiatives.

By implementing HB 28, the Legislature will take an important step in providing Alaska's homegrown talent with a viable pathway to return, alleviate their financial burdens, and contribute to the stability and success of our education system.

Long-Term Benefits for Alaska's Schools

This program is an investment in Alaska's future. Research shows that educators with strong

community ties are more likely to stay in their positions long-term. By incentivizing Alaskans to return home, HB 28 increases the likelihood that these teachers will remain in their communities, reducing turnover and fostering continuity in student learning. Additionally, this initiative supports rural school districts, which often face the greatest recruitment challenges, by making it more attractive for Alaskan-educated teachers to serve in these areas.

Conclusion

The Association of Alaska School Boards urges the Legislature to pass HB 28 and support this meaningful step toward solving our teacher shortage crisis. The student loan repayment pilot program is a pragmatic, targeted, and fiscally responsible approach that will benefit our schools, communities, and workforce for years to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 28. I am happy to answer any questions and look forward to working with the Legislature to advance this innovative initiative for Alaska's education system.

4.2 ESTABLISHING A NEW TEACHER INCENTIVE PROGRAM FOR ALASKA

AASB requests that the Alaska State Legislature establish and fund a New Teacher Incentive Program for the purpose of attracting and retaining new teachers to Alaska school districts. A sample incentive program could include the following:

1. The requirement that a participant be a graduate from an approved teacher certification program meeting the requirements of initial certification for the State of Alaska; or
2. Meet the requirements of [14.20.022](#) (Subject-matter expert limited teacher certificate) and be currently enrolled in a Teacher Certification Program of no less than 12 credit hours per year directly related to the graduation requirements for a Teaching degree, certificate, or endorsement qualifying the person for a Professional Teacher Certificate or Second Initial Teacher Certificate; and
3. Have all eligible Federal student loans consolidated with a loan program that qualifies for Teacher Loan Forgiveness (FFEL) as long as that program or any substantively similar program exists; and
4. The student must make minimum payments as required to maintain eligibility for Teacher Loan Forgiveness (FFEL); shall be provided
5. A one-time relocation bonus to the new teacher and his/her family of \$10,000 to the district in which they are hired; and
6. A student loan forgiveness payment of the lesser of 10% or \$15,000 directly to their student loan servicer upon completion of each of their first five years of teaching in the same district; and
7. Provide a student loan forgiveness payment directly to the loan servicer of the lesser of 10% or \$10,000 directly to their student loan servicer upon completion of each of their sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and 10th years teaching in Alaska, and
8. Payoff all remaining student loans, public or private, not to exceed \$25,000 total, after the eleventh year teaching in Alaska and after the employee provides evidence that he has applied for Teacher Loan Forgiveness and met all application requirements; and
9. Providing a retention bonus of \$3,000 per year, through year 10, for any qualified teacher not receiving a student loan forgiveness payment in the program; and
10. Provide an additional retention bonus of \$5,000 per year for any teacher certified or endorsed in a Math or Science Subject, or in Special Education, in addition to any loan forgiveness payments or any other bonus.
11. Fund the program as a state Grant through DEED for \$10 million per year (\$150 million total over 15 years) with preference for State of Alaska Residents, graduates from Alaska Colleges and Universities, and members of Alaskan Federally-Recognized Tribes and Alaska Native Corporations.

Rationale. In 2020, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported, unadjusted to cost-of-living, that Alaska was #9 in median teacher pay (Elementary Teachers, excluding Special Education). For Comparison, California was #1, Washington State was #10, and Oregon was #12 (<https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes252021.htm#st>). Secondary teacher pay was substantively similar.

Alaska has always had challenges recruiting and retaining teachers. But as other states catch-up to and pass Alaska, it will be even harder. Alaska will likely see the impacts first in the REAA and other rural communities who have always experienced teacher shortages. The recruitment and retention of students needs to be addressed before we reach a point of crisis as Alaska teachers retire with an inadequate pipeline of new teachers to replace them.

In 2021, 83% of students had student loans and the average student loan debt at graduation was \$36,140. This historic high represents an opportunity for Alaska to capture students who want to teach, are attracted to Alaska, and have a troubling amount of debt to pay-off. Additionally, by linking the first 5-years of teaching to an rural district, the benefits are targeted to benefit the rural districts first. This will enhance the ability of rural districts to recruit and retain new teachers longer, develop teachers more culturally aware and experienced with Native Alaskan cultures and communities, and eventually help all Alaska districts recruit and retain experienced Alaskan teachers.

This program also has reasonable cost controls. With the average student loan debt of \$36,140, this program will be a loan payoff acceleration program rather than loan forgiveness program. This is because the program requires participants to enroll in a qualified Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program and maintain minimum required payments to the lender. Therefore, these payments are in addition to student payment and not replacing student payments. This will also allow more new teachers to participate in the program over the next 15 years. However, it will also attract and retain students with extraordinary student loan debt that would have otherwise left the profession for higher potential earnings.

Finally, this program is built to give preference to REAA Teachers, Alaska Residents, Alaska college graduates, and Alaska Natives. These preferences helps those districts most at risk of recruiting and retaining new teachers but also focuses on groups most likely to remain in Alaska for their entire career. This should maximize the effectiveness of overall teacher retention in the state of Alaska.

Adopted 2021

(Sunsets 2026)

Association of Alaska School Boards

4.5 ADDRESSING THE TEACHER, ADMINISTRATOR, SCHOOL STAFF SHORTAGE

The Association of Alaska School Boards urges the Alaska State Legislature, Alaska State Board of Education, and Teacher Education Programs in Alaska's universities to address the severe shortage of teachers, administrators, and school staff in the State of Alaska. Suggested strategies may include:

- Increasing the Base Student Allocation and ensuring that it keeps up with inflation so that school districts can offer competitive salary and benefit packages to retain and recruit administrators, teachers, and school staff;
- Incentives (salary bonuses, student loan forgiveness, student loan assumption, competitive retirement benefits, student loan interest rate reduction, etc.);
- State supported marketing and licensure assistance to recruit teachers;
- Flexibility in certification requirements and reciprocity;
- Alternative routes to teacher certification;
- Improved access to technology including bandwidth and knowledgeable staff;
- Increasing availability and/or quality of teacher housing, including state subsidized teacher housing
- Mentoring programs for student teachers, new teachers, administrators, and school staff, including Type-M certified teachers;
- Streamline the rehire of retired teachers administrators, and school staff
- Professional support/development;
- Eliminate redundant or unnecessary paperwork.
- Increasing awareness about the lives and communities of Alaska's children.
- A defined benefit retirement system
- Utilize research on system supports that promote teacher retention.
- Train more Alaska students as educators; and
- Seek training opportunities for staff and high school students to increase the pool of qualified staff who are representative of the diverse population they teach.

Rationale. It has been painfully demonstrated that a severe shortage of teachers, specialists, and administrators is being experienced in the school districts in every region of Alaska. Attracting and retaining quality teachers has become a critical issue facing school districts as they work to improve education in Alaska's public schools.

A teacher's job satisfaction is gauged by a number of factors, including a sense of accomplishment, professional support, decent living conditions, and adequate compensation/benefits. The degree to which Alaska meets these needs is a statement of the value we place on our educators.

Adopted 1999

Amended 2000, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2023

Renewed 2020

(Sunsets 2025)



AASB's 2025 Legislative Priorities

On behalf of our member school districts statewide, the AASB Board of Directors has adopted three legislative priorities: **Funding, Educators** and **Students**.

Our Mission: The Association of Alaska School Boards advocates for children and youth by assisting school boards in providing quality public education, focused on student achievement, through effective local governance.

Sufficient and Sustainable Public Education Funding

Sufficient, sustainable and stable funding is required to meet Alaska's obligation to provide quality, public education for every Alaska student. Educating Alaska's youth is the best strategy for successfully meeting and safeguarding Alaska's prosperity.

- ▶ **Increase the Base Student Allocation (BSA)** – AASB strongly advocates for the necessity of increasing the BSA as calculated by Legislative Finance to reflect inflation based on the Alaska-Urban CPI since the last major increase to the BSA in FY2011. From 2011 to 2025, the BSA increased by only \$280 per student (4.9%), while inflation rose by at least 34%. This discrepancy has resulted in severe staff shortages, school closures, and program eliminations.
- ▶ **Incorporate an annual increase in the BSA to account for inflation** – Provide by statute, for an annual increase in the BSA that provides some accounting for annual inflation and drives a philosophy of long-term investment in public education.
- ▶ **Increase funding for student transportation** – Student transportation funding continues to be inadequate. Transportation costs have dramatically increased due to inflation and labor shortages. Transportation funding must increase regularly to keep up with inflation and prevent the use of school district general funds.

Retention and Recruitment of Teachers, Administrators & Staff

School districts face an unprecedented crisis of retaining and recruiting qualified, effective teachers, administrators, and support staff which seriously hinders providing Alaska students with a quality education.

- ▶ **Implement recommendations** - of the Teacher Recruitment & Retention Task Force.
- ▶ **Reinstitute a competitive retirement program** - including both defined benefits and defined contributions.
- ▶ **Invest in teacher housing** - required for nearly all rural school districts.
- ▶ **Grow Alaska teachers and administrators** - work with partners, universities, and apprenticeship programs to improve and expand teacher training programs, teacher-mentor programs, and alternative certification pathways.

Student Wellness and School Safety

Alaska's public school students face a range of challenges that impact their wellness and safety, including academic stress, mental health issues, bullying, violence, sexual abuse, and lack of access to resources like counseling and social services. Violence, neglect, and sexual abuse have increased, resulting in reduced social-emotional well-being and academic achievement.

- ▶ **Address student mental health - Support and fund** mental health services for all Alaskan students, including trauma-engaged practices in Alaska schools.
- ▶ **Prevent student sexual abuse by school staff** - Support the implementation of policies and training regarding professional boundaries between staff and students.
- ▶ **Reduce school and student violence. Support and fund** the needed programs and services that work to improve relationships, communication, respect, and dignity as a few examples.



AASB 2025 Legislative Priorities and Supporting Resolutions

Sufficient and Sustainable Public Education Funding

- ▶ B.7 – EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND FUNDING AS TOP PRIORITY
- ▶ B.9 – MEETING SCHOOL FACILITY NEEDS FOR ALASKA STUDENTS
- ▶ B.10 – FUNDING FOR EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS IN ALASKA
- ▶ 1.4 – OPPOSE SCHOOL VOUCHERS
- ▶ 2.1 – URGING THE TIMELY, PREDICTABILITY, EQUITABLE, AND ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION
- ▶ 2.2 – ENSURING EQUITABLE FUNDING FOR ALASKA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS
- ▶ 2.4 – URGING THE ALASKA LEGISLATURE TO FUND A GRANT PROGRAM FOR SCHOOL PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES
- ▶ 2.6 – RESOURCES TO EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT THE ALASKA READS ACT
- ▶ 2.8 – BASE STUDENT ALLOCATION INCREASE
- ▶ 2.10 – EDUCATION ENDOWMENT
- ▶ 2.12 – SCHOOL DISTRICT CAPITAL PROJECTS
- ▶ 2.20 – ENERGY COST RELIEF
- ▶ 2.27 – URGING THE CONTINUATION OF FUNDING FOR CAREER AND TECHNICAL (VOCATIONAL) EDUCATION
- ▶ 2.40 – INFLATION-PROOFED BASE STUDENT ALLOCATION (BSA) INVESTMENTS

Retention and Recruitment of Teachers. Administrators & Staff

- ▶ B.19 – ALASKA NATIVE TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND SCHOOL STAFF HIRE AND RETENTION
- ▶ 2.19 – LEGISLATIVE FINANCIAL RELIEF FOR ONGOING TRS AND PERS EMPLOYER INCREASES
- ▶ 2.45 – TEACHER EDUCATION LOAN EXPANSION
- ▶ 4.1 – SUPPORTS FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT
- ▶ 4.2 – ESTABLISHING A NEW TEACHER INCENTIVE PROGRAM FOR ALASKA
- ▶ 4.3 – ALASKA STATEWIDE EDUCATOR MENTORING
- ▶ 4.5 – ADDRESSING THE TEACHER, ADMINISTRATOR, AND SCHOOL STAFF SHORTAGE
- ▶ 4.6 – REPEAL THE SOCIAL SECURITY GOVERNMENT PENSION OFFSET AND WINDFALL ELIMINATION PROVISION FOR PUBLIC EDUCATORS
- ▶ 4.7 – RELATING TO DEFINED BENEFIT RETIREMENT
- ▶ 4.10 – ADDRESSING THE PARAPROFESSIONAL SHORTAGE
- ▶ 4.11 – ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO CERTIFY EFFECTIVE TEACHERS
- ▶ 4.14 – TEACHER CERTIFICATION DELAY

Student Wellness and School Safety

- ▶ B.11 – CHILD ADVOCACY MISSION STATEMENT
- ▶ B.15 – PREVENTION/EARLY INTERVENTION
- ▶ B.17 – DECLARING CHILDREN THE TOP PRIORITY OF ALASKA
- ▶ 2.37 – RESOURCES TO EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT THE ALASKA SAFE CHILDREN'S ACT
- ▶ 2.44 – URGING DEDICATED FUNDING OUTSIDE THE FOUNDATION FORMULA
- ▶ 3.1 – DECLARING CHILDREN OF ALASKA OUR MOST VALUABLE RESOURCE
- ▶ 3.2 – PROMOTING STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT
- ▶ 3.3 – FETAL ALCOHOL AND DRUG EXPOSED STUDENTS
- ▶ 3.4 – SUPPORTING SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION AND TREATMENT
- ▶ 3.5 – EDUCATION ON THE DANGERS OF TOBACCO, ELECTRONIC NICOTINE DELIVERY SYSTEMS MARIJUANA USE, AND SECONDHAND SMOKE
- ▶ 3.6 – VIOLENCE (AND PORNOGRAPHY) IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA AND ENTERTAINMENT
- ▶ 3.7 – COOPERATION AMONG SERVICE PROVIDERS SERVING CHILDREN
- ▶ 3.8 – SUICIDE PREVENTION EDUCATION AND TREATMENT EFFORTS
- ▶ 3.9 – SAFE, CARING, CONNECTED SCHOOLS
- ▶ 3.10 – SUPPORT OF STATE FUNDING FOR STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES IN ALASKA
- ▶ 3.11 – HIV/AIDS AND OTHER SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS (STI) EDUCATION
- ▶ 3.12 – EDUCATION OF STUDENTS IN RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIORS RELATING TO HUMAN SEXUALITY
- ▶ 3.13 – IN SUPPORT OF ALASKA CHILDREN'S TRUST
- ▶ 3.15 – SUPPORTING THE ADOPTION OF TRAUMA-INFORMED AND CULTURALLY AFFIRMING PRACTICES
- ▶ 3.16 – REVISE PARENTAL PERMISSION REQUIREMENTS FOR QUESTIONNAIRES AND SURVEYS ADMINISTERED IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
- ▶ 3.17 – STUDENT WELLNESS
- ▶ 3.21 – EXPANSION OF HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE
- ▶ 3.23 – SUPPORT OF FULL STATE FUNDING FOR PUBLIC HEALTH REQUIREMENTS
- ▶ 3.24 – SUPPORTING SEX ABUSE AWARENESS AND PREVENTION EDUCATION
- ▶ 3.26 – SAFE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR LGBTQ STUDENTS
- ▶ 3.29 – POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT