

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Representative Justin Ruffridge and Members of the Legislative Task Force on Education Funding

**From:** Lon Garrison, Executive Director, Association of Alaska School Boards

**Date:** November 26, 2025

**Subject:** Understanding Differences Between Statewide School Climate Survey Results and Anecdotal Testimony

My earlier submission to the committee on the School Climate and Connectedness survey did not directly address Representative Ruffridge's question about why the statewide SCCS results show relatively high satisfaction and connectedness scores, despite testimony and anecdotes suggesting otherwise. This memo clarifies why statewide SCCS data often appear more positive than the concerns expressed in testimony from districts, parents, students, and community members. Based on feedback from our AASB staff who work with the SCCS, the following common issues in large-scale perception surveys help explain these results without dismissing the validity of concerns raised by students, educators, or families. I hope this addresses your questions from our October 30<sup>th</sup> testimony.

### 1. Statewide Averages Mask Important Local Variation

When data from all participating districts are combined at the statewide level, the result is a broad, generalized picture. This aggregation **smooths over differences** between schools, regions, and demographic groups. As a result:

- Districts or schools with strong climate outcomes elevate the statewide mean.
- Smaller groups or individual schools with significant challenges become "buried" inside the average.
- Meaningful differences such as grade-level variation, regional disparities, or subgroup gaps require **disaggregated analysis** to be visible.

In short, the statewide average is **too coarse** to capture the nuances and localized experiences that often surface through testimony or local stories.

### 2. Satisfaction-Based Surveys Tend to Skew Positive

The SCCS is a perception survey, not a proficiency measure. Research across many fields shows that **satisfaction and climate surveys consistently pull toward higher responses**, even in systems experiencing stress. This is because:

- For example, respondents may generally report being "somewhat satisfied" even when challenges exist.
- Across comparable national surveys, a 70–85% "positive" response rate is typical and should not be interpreted as unusually high.
- These figures differ from, say, survey data on academic proficiency, which aim to illustrate a broader distribution that can highlight variability within larger populations.

Thus, high percentages on satisfaction items are more likely and not necessarily indicative of uniformly strong conditions.

### 3. Different Climate Indicators Produce Different Patterns

The SCCS includes multiple domains—student voice, belonging, relationships, cultural connectedness, safety, adult support, and others. Not all items behave the same:

- Some indicators (e.g., perceptions of adult respect or safety) often score higher.
- Others (e.g., student voice, mental health, cultural connectedness, relevance) show **lower scores and larger gaps**.



When these diverse items are averaged into a single statewide percentage, areas of concern can be overshadowed by stronger domains.

#### 4. Participation Bias in a Voluntary, Paid Survey

Because the SCCS is voluntary and requires a district to invest time and resources, the districts more likely to participate are those:

- Already prioritizing school climate improvement,
- Equipped with the internal capacity to gather and use survey data,
- Or actively engaged in related initiatives.

Districts facing more substantial challenges or resource limitations may be underrepresented. This does not invalidate statewide results but **does influence the overall picture**.

#### 5. Testimony and Anecdotes Highlight a Different Slice of Experience

Public testimony tends to emphasize:

- Students or families experiencing acute challenges,
- Communities with pronounced concerns,
- Cases where the system fell short or caused harm.

These stories represent **important and often urgent perspectives**, but they often do not reflect the full distribution of experiences captured in the survey. It is not unexpected—to see:

- **A generally positive statewide dataset**, and
- **Testimony highlighting significant pockets of concern.**

Both sources provide valuable insight, but they answer different questions.

#### Conclusion

The statewide SCCS results provide a high-level picture of student perception across the participating districts. At the same time, the concerns expressed through testimony are valid and often reveal issues that only become visible when the data are examined at the school, subgroup, or regional level.

For the most accurate understanding of student connectedness and school climate, it is essential to use the survey to look beyond statewide averages and focus on **disaggregated data, domain-specific indicators**, and **local context at the district and school level**.

AASB is available to provide additional detail and examples at the committee's request.

Respectfully,

Lon Garrison  
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