

***The Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB)***  
***Testimony to the***  
***Senate Finance Subcommittee on Education***  
***Given by Sue Hull, AASB President***  
***September 11, 2013***  
***Anchorage***

Hi, I'm Sue Hull, President of the Association of Alaska School Boards, representing 330 school board members around the state.

I like the three questions you asked us to answer. They're important, and they help us focus on what we need to transform education and do what's right for kids.

1. Where are Alaska's schools headed educationally?

I suspect you know this: Alaska's schools are in the "Perfect Storm" as we call it--higher standards; new (and far more challenging) assessments; new teacher evaluation systems; a new star rating system for schools; declining oil throughput and the goal of a 90% graduation rate--all in the face of a "mixed bag" relative to student performance, with some students performing at exceptionally high levels and others falling behind.

From the national conferences I've attended the nation's schools are headed toward 1) personalized learning (where the system adapts to the needs of each student); 2) rapid expansion of 1 to 1 programs (the "Tablet Revolution" as they say) and 3) raising the bar (higher standards, new assessments, etc.--and many of them are well ahead of us in implementation).

The more important answer to your question has to do with what Abraham Lincoln said: "The best way to predict your future is to create it."

We get to choose where we're headed. I believe Alaska's schools could be headed toward leading the nation in some very important ways--ways that could enable progress on all of the "Perfect Storm" challenges we face and open opportunities to a much brighter economic future for our state.

Don't get me wrong...the "Perfect Storm" has no "Perfect Answer," but how we respond will make all the difference.

Ten years ago, AASB began creating our future, in a way. Carl Rose invited the entire legislature to a luncheon (attended by over half of them) where he passed out copies of "The World is Flat" and described how AASB proposed to ignite digital learning in our state. That work has continued at AASB every year since, but frankly, it was underestimated and underfunded. And while progress was made, it was only transformational in the parts of our state that grasped its' potential.

Today, we stand on the verge of a whole new opportunity, where that experience puts us in a position no other state in the union can match. But more about that later, let's move to your second question.

2. What do our students need from a K-12 educational system?

The answer is simple. How to do it is not. Our students need to be academically prepared for success in a rapidly changing world. The real question is how do we do it?

What will their world look like? How do we meet each student's needs? How do we keep them engaged? How do we support their teachers and empower their families? How do we make sure they come to school ready to learn? And of course, how do we fund it?

I've been involved in setting and influencing policy for Alaska's education system for over 30 years. Many of the questions are still the same, but there are some "enablers" that have powerful potential.

We can keep doing what we've always done, or we can change to more nimbly respond to the needs of students--and our world. If we adapt, our chances for success will be far better.

Therefore, I want to spend most of my time on what our association would like to change.

### 3. What are five things you would like to change?

Last November, our association debated, modified and approved the foundation of our positions--130 resolutions and belief statements. Then our board of directors set priorities, based on those positions. They are the best frameworks for what we would like to change.

#### 1. Early Childhood Development

Student performance research shows that when kids come to school behind, they tend to stay behind. Brain development research shows that the first years of life--birth to age two or three--set the trajectory for cognitive performance.

Expecting schools to recover five years of lost ground is unrealistic and a prescription for failure. The first thing AASB would recommend you change is how our state supports the development of young children during their early years.

Our position is clear. We're not suggesting all kids should be in a class somewhere. There is a wide range of approaches that can be successful. It isn't about formal instruction. It's talking and reading and playing with babies and toddlers. It's asking questions and providing books and making sure all parents know the simple things that can make all the difference.

Schools can be involved as support in a number of ways, but the focus should be on helping families and communities surround young children with opportunities to exercise their brains.

AASB supports the work of Best Beginnings, Parents as Teachers, schools and others that provide preschool services--and most importantly, Alaska's families. Our focus is not on how youngsters get prepared, rather on making sure they are.

#### 2. Innovation

As I said before, we believe our schools have to change. We've got to get better. Innovation is mandatory, not optional.

We want our student to be producers and creators, not passive recipients of content. We want instruction that connects and engages all learners, not just those who thrive in a traditional classroom.

The strategies for innovation are limitless. But there's one strategy that enables, enhances and liberates most all of them: ubiquitous access to appropriate technologies. (You knew it was coming...)

Let me talk for a few minutes about what I believe is the most powerful opportunity to transform our education system--far more transformative than any of the other innovations being considered

The Alaska 1 to 1 Initiative was proposed by the Governor last year. It would provide students and teachers with digital devices selected by their school districts. It would also provide professional development and a range of technical services.

Here are some reasons why it would be transformative:

Reason #1: Expanded Resources. The digital resources available today are mind boggling. Never before in human history have schools had access to such rich content. And for places where broadband is an issue, there are over 80 educational apps that are self contained and do not require broadband.

Reason #2: Deeper Learning and Increased Engagement. Recently, a legislative committee asked a state education official what the most challenging issue was and he replied, "Student engagement." The digital resources available not only can increase engagement, but deepen learning overall.

Imagine the potential of giving teenage boys simulations for learning, rather than lectures. Would chemistry be more interesting with 3D models and video content for students to study at home? How about content in Native Languages, like the readers AASB has produced in Yupiit?

And what about results? Teachers tell us that student engagement and attendance go up, behavior issues go down, differentiated Instruction and mainstreaming for special needs students go up. And in the House District 6 project AASB conducted 3rd graders **more than doubled** the expected learning gains, using iPads.

Reason #3: Transformed Instruction. All of the instructional innovations in the areas on this slide are activated and enhanced by having on-demand access to technology for every student.

The Courts have been clear that the state must demonstrate more support in underperforming schools. How else can you put master teachers, such as Sal Kahn from Kahn Academy in remote locations, as backup to the classroom teacher?

And what if parents could check-out an iPad for their preschoolers by attending regular parent meetings? How might that transform early learning?

Reason #4: Personalized Learning. Our students are diverse, with diverse learning needs. Digital content can adapt instruction to each learner.

Reason #5: Cost Effective. We call this the "Bump to Pivot". School districts are already spending dollars on technology, without the benefit of on-demand access for all students.

Would we tolerate five or six classes sharing one set of textbooks? Of course not, but that's what's happening in our schools now—and with a greater investment than would be required through the One to One.

Each year now, districts are spending upwards of \$28 million. The first cohort of the 1:1 would cost the state \$3.9m and the districts \$2.4. That's only .003 of the Foundation Funding presently in place.

It creates new economies of scale in hardware, instructional content, professional development and technical services, all the while unifying focus and attracting new talent. The best teachers want to be where they have the best tools.

At full implementation, the cost would still be less than districts are currently spending--at \$16m for the state and \$9.5m for the districts. Not to mention the savings from reduced paperwork and copier costs, textbooks and consumable materials. And the best is Reason 6...

Reason #6: We can do it! We have the know-how, long years of experience, infrastructure, and support to make it happen.

Here are the locations where AASB has conducted One to One projects to date.

Bob Whicker and Steve Nelson produced a digital textbook that walks districts through the processes for One to One implementation, available now on iTunes U.

The financial structure is astonishing at a total cost of \$200 per student. And the 4 year lease includes 2-4 year refresh cycle to take advantage of new technologies as they become available.

The components of the Initiative are listed on this slide. It's much more than hardware!

And the real bang for our buck comes in the Alaska Institute for 21st Century Learning that would be located in Anchorage as a hub for innovative strategies and technical support--all using private funds, rather than state dollars.

Next Steps: Alaska could lead the nation in access to the tools of the future. Imagine what that could mean for our students' future and for ours! And it would cost us less than we're spending now.

Now back to your question and our third recommended change...

### 3. Funding

Our members overwhelmingly say that funding must be changed. We need adequate, equitable, and predictable school funding.

As you know well, education is the only constitutionally mandated responsibility of the state. The Framers understood the importance of developing our human capital, not just our natural resources, to secure our state's future.

Across our state last spring, school districts struggled over which "essentials" to cut. In Fairbanks, it was the most difficult budget season I've ever been through. We made cuts last spring that were not good for kids, including raising class size, something that had not been done in over 20 years due to its high priority in our community, with dozens of people opposing the increase.

Is this where we want to head? Trying to cut our way into excellence? We can do better—even with declining production. Smart states don't treat education as just another line item, asking schools, year after year, to absorb the effects of inflation and rising costs.

A few recommendations:

1. Set priorities and make the tough decisions. The sequestration mentality doesn't work-- where smart investments and extravagant niceties are treated the same;
2. Judiciously utilize the over \$20 billion legislators wisely set aside outside the Permanent Fund to meet our top priorities and ensure our future;
3. Develop cost containment strategies and statewide pools, particularly those that reduce cost and amplify learning, like the One to One;
4. Prioritize and protect the ability to deliver excellent instruction. It's short-sighted to claw away at the instructional program. That's a dangerous scarcity mentality;
5. Recognize that rapid growth in healthcare and pension commitments is separate from the funds that serve the classroom. The classroom should not be at the mercy of spiraling expenses elsewhere.

As David Teal illustrated in recent testimony, despite increases for PERS/TRS, healthcare and other expenditures outside the classroom, funding for general school operations has stagnated in recent years.

Again, our schools need adequate, equitable, predictable and sustainable funding to ensure our kids are prepared for the future.

Those are our three priorities, but since you asked for five changes, I'll throw in one more for good measure.

#### 4. Change the Terms of Engagement

Sometimes, I feel, we forget that we're all on the same team with preparing Alaska's students as our common goal. We fall into dangerous games, like "Brinkmanship", where each side tries to push the other to the brink of disaster, in order to win greater concessions from their opponent.

We're partners! We school folks need to listen to your concerns about declining revenues and disappointing performance. By the same token, we hope you'll listen to us about the challenges we face, our efforts to meet them, along with the legitimate pressures on our budgets.

Then, together we need to craft viable solutions. Not looking to take advantage or penalize each other, but rather to use the synergy of our collaboration to amplify what we each can accomplish.

Let's look for ways to "Create our Future" by working together.

This task force and the questions you're asking are a big step in the right direction. Thanks for allowing us to participate!