

Remarks by AASB President Sunni Hilts

To the Senate Education Committee

January 7, 2014

Anchorage, Alaska

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the new Alaska standards for English language arts and mathematics.

Our statewide organization and our member school districts have been involved in developing and implementing education standards for better than two decades. As an educator yourself, you are undoubtedly aware of the history of academic standards in Alaska – from the first standards developed in the 1990s under Governor Hickel, to those that followed in the wake of NCLB. Today, we have standards by which administrators, teachers, school boards and students are measured. And in each of those cases, we have usually set the bar higher each time the standards have been overhauled or amended.

AASB believes the Department of Education & Early Development did a good job in establishing the Alaska Education Standards in 2012. What our member districts are requesting are the resources and time to implement them efficiently and effectively, with common sense and continued emphasis on local participation – from parents, teachers and students. Alaska's K-12 students must be prepared for careers or college, and the new Alaska Education Standards can help in that preparation. But only if they are wisely implemented.

If they are wisely implemented, Alaska can continue to strive for educational excellence. In the last decade, public schools as a whole have increased the high school graduation rate from about 60 percent to more than 71 percent statewide, with the five-year cohort approaching 75 percent in 2013. We have lowered the dropout rate to less than 5 percent. If we are to improve the standing of U.S. students in relation to their counterparts in other developed countries, and if we are to lower the remediation rate at our own Alaska colleges, then higher education standards are one answer

Of course, standards are merely one part of the equation: School Districts must also develop a *curriculum* to teach the standards, provide teachers the *professional development* and *instructional strategies* so the curriculum can reach the classroom, and provide the *assessments* necessary to gauge whether teachers are effective and students are learning. School districts are doing these important tasks all the time, but with the new standards, the urgency of the work and the workload itself has increased immensely.

Let's take one school district to illustrate the process of implementing the Alaska Education Standards: this school district is of moderate size for Alaska, is off the road system but connected by plane and ferry service, has a good graduation rate

and a fairly stable workforce of administrators and teachers, even in the face of layoffs and budget reductions.

Like most districts, this one normally budgets money to conduct a curriculum review over a six-year period. If there are 200 different course offerings in the district, that means 35 of them on average are reviewed each year to assess the content being taught, the instructional materials being used and the training and development needed by staff. This schedule leaves the remaining staff to focus on teaching and increasing student performance.

That six-year cycle is now being crammed into two or three years because in addition to the new Alaska Education Standards, the State Board of Education & Early Development also changed the way staff is evaluated and student performance is measured. This new accountability system is to be implemented in 2015-16 when 20 percent of an educator's evaluation will be based on student growth. By 2018-19, student performance will compose 50 percent of an educator's evaluation. And districts must also gather input for each educator's evaluation from parents, students, community members and fellow educators.

At our recent Annual Conference, the member districts of AASB approved two resolutions that express their concerns regarding assessments in general and the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam in particular. I submit those resolutions separately for your information. In short, our members – your local school districts – are asking for help from EED to implement the standards and enable students to do the new online assessments. School boards are also asking the state to repeal the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam because it is out of date, expensive and time-consuming. The resources – and the six school days devoted to the test each year – can be better used elsewhere, such as implementing the new Alaska standards.

Finally, I ask you to help us and the Department of Education provide the public with information to understand the new standards as they unfold in your communities. There will be many adjustments and – yes – some bumps in the road as teachers learn new lessons, districts acquire new curriculum and as students reach toward a higher level of learning.

But we know that our students get only one chance at a K-12 education. They will do what we expect them to do. If the adults in their life step up, so will they. At AASB, our mission is to advocate for children and youth by assisting school boards in providing quality public education, focused on student achievement, through effective local governance. Today, AASB would like to thank the State of Alaska for adopting higher education standards and for the Alaska Legislature for assisting school districts in implementing them. Thank you.