

January 6, 2014

Senator Gary Stevens,  
Alaska State Senate Education Committee

I, Rebecca Gerik, appreciate the opportunity to comment about the implementation of Alaska State Standards, and specifically Common Core Standards which are being used in the Anchorage School District. I apologize for my absence; I toured Israel over winter break to study world religions and am now stuck in New York because of flight delays. I have written curriculum with an Anchorage School District team of teachers for freshman and sophomore classes that aligns to both sets of high school English Language Arts standards, since the Alaska State Standards and Common Core Standards are so similar. Additionally I reviewed the Alaska State Standards in a committee a couple years ago from the perspective of Title VII to see that the language would be culturally relevant to Native Alaska students. Since then with the support of Title VII staff, I have modified and created online courses for Native Alaskan students that are culturally relevant and aligned with the Common Core Standards.

These standards appeal to me because of their focus on rigorous and relevant teaching. In English the strands include Reading Informational Text, Reading Literature, Speaking and Listening, Writing, and Language. All of these represent necessary skills every English class should focus upon, but a shift has occurred to emphasize informational texts, research, and civil discourse. This offers students a variety of opportunities to prepare for life after high school in the work force, the military, college, and as voting citizens. The ways these standards may be implemented are up to the state and district as the content may vary as long as it meets guidelines for each strand that increase in complexity from kindergarten to twelfth grade.

In writing curriculum for English 1, a freshman class with a focus on genre studies, we shifted the curriculum to include speeches, memoir, and nonfiction texts for half a year, and world literature, Native Alaskan stories, shorts stories, and plays for the other half of the year. The coursework for English 2 is in progress, but will focus on world literature and nonfiction texts. We include a variety of assessment options that meet each standard, and research and speaking possibilities for all units. Teachers will have to alter previous methods to teach these new courses, which may require additional professional development, especially in teaching research and speaking skills. The Title VII online courses I modified consist of lessons based on the writings of Native authors, nonfiction works, and contemporary issues critical to Native students in Alaska. Finding ways for students to be assessed for speaking and listening online offers challenges, but the new requirements provide students with more opportunities to research critical topics and interview people such as Elders. The requirements for the entire district and for Title VII show the breadth of possibilities for the implementation of these new standards, and the ability of school districts to determine what their population requires for an education that offers a multitude of creative possibilities to teachers and students.

Just as students need to always be evaluated on the content and skills they have been taught, teachers need to be held accountable for the standards they are required to follow. New teacher evaluation systems should ensure that teachers are assessed for the implementation of these standards, and not just standardized test scores. I am so excited to teach and develop courses during this time of change that mirrors the new expectations of young adults after they leave high school. The next generation of learners should have all the skills that have been traditionally been taught, but also should be able to speak deliberately and persuasively, research their innovative ideas using appropriate sources, and become informed young voters and participants in government.