

Testimony to Senate Finance Committee
March 13, 2013

Mr. Chairman, members of the Senate Finance Committee.

My name is Jerry Covey, I am an Anchorage based education and nonprofit consultant, a former Alaska Commissioner of Education, a former superintendent, principal, and teacher in Alaska public schools.

I would like to go on the record in support of SJR 9.

First and foremost, I believe in public outcomes for public dollars. I also believe in expanding our education delivery options to better meet the needs of students, parents, and employers throughout the state. And, I believe that increased competition within our education system will translate to improved education for students.

In my view, choosing the school a child attends should be a fundamental right of every parent. Our current system of education does not allow that. Too often the quality of the public schools available to children is determined by the part of town their parents live in or whether the students are fortunate enough to be selected to attend a successful school of their choice or a statewide residential high school. These students have access to the type of education that thousands of others can only dream of.

While we have some outstanding examples of public schools in Alaska, we have many schools in both urban and rural communities that are producing results no one is proud of. For thousands of students, the only choice presently available is to attend schools with low achievement results, disappointing graduation rates, and where a high percentage of students dropout of school.

In my view, the education system should be restructured to put the power of choice in the hands of parents. The system should be revised to accommodate schools that are created and operated by local governments, universities, and nonprofit organizations. There are many organizations throughout the state that have both the capability and capacity to deliver high-quality education to students in grades K through 12 while operating within the public system.

How to Address this Issue

The public owns the public school system, and while I believe that it's important and appropriate for the legislature to thoroughly examine this issue, I believe that the issue of school choice should be placed before the public and the public should have the final say. In my view parents have the capability to make the best educational choices for their children.

I offer that the issue of expanding choice and creating competition within the system looks very different when, as a parent, the hopes and dreams you have for your children are overshadowed by the fact that the only choice available to your child is a failing school.

Alaska has been diversifying the K-12 education delivery system ever since statehood and, as a result, we are better able to meet the needs of our society. Adding competition by expanding school choice within the system is a prudent action that will give parents the power of choice they need to secure the best education for their children.

Looking Ahead

While no one, at this point, can predict with certainty what the K-12 system will look like if the public is allowed to vote on this issue and approves SJR 9, one thing is for certain: it will spark a comprehensive, important, and long overdue examination of our K-12 education system.

I would like to thank the committee for taking up this issue. A most fundamental right – the right of parents to decide who will educate their children – is in your hands. Your actions can support the status quo or open the door for a better education for the current and future thousands of students who attend Alaska's schools.

I have every confidence that your decision on this matter will reach beyond special interests and connect you directly with the life-changing opportunity that expanded choice represents to thousands of parents and children in Alaska.

Thank you.

Jerry Covey