

Kimberly Hankins
Invited Testimony in support of HB 147
March 11, 2022

Chair Drummond and House Education Committee members, thank you for the time today to speak in support of HB 147, the importance of growing our own teachers, and supporting multiple pathways for teacher retention.

I'm Kimberly Hankins, Superintendent of the Lower Kuskokwim School District. This is my second year serving as superintendent, and 19th year with the district.

The Lower Kuskokwim School District is headquartered in Bethel. We serve approximately 4,000 students in 29 schools, in 24 locations, across an area of approximately 22,000 square miles. Access to Bethel is via Alaska Airlines from Anchorage, weather permitting, and access to our 24 village locations is via small air carrier, snow machine, four-wheeler, boat, ice road in the winter, and/or dog sled.

Over the past decade and a half, LKSD has worked incredibly hard to implement language immersion models, including a dual language enrichment model program and a Yupik immersion program in the majority of our schools. We have worked to develop place-based, culturally rich and relevant education materials aligned to state standards, in both English and Yugtun. The mission of our district is to ensure bilingual, culturally appropriate and effective education for all students, and this is supported by the LKSD Board of Education's four Key Measures, one of which focuses directly on Yup'ik/Cup'ik proficiency.

In order to staff our schools, the district looks to develop teachers from within our communities as well as recruit from around our state and nation. In the past few years, our teacher turnover rate has hovered between 20-25%, and has been as high as 38%.

Unfortunately, we have seen a trend over the past several years in that we are unable to staff all of our teacher openings despite exhaustive, ongoing recruitment. This places a burden on the district and on individual schools that are not fully staffed, but ultimately underserves our students. Teacher retention and turnover has been and continues to be an issue we face annually, both here in Bethel and in our village sites.

Most recently, the district has found it increasingly difficult to staff positions in Bethel due to the high cost of living –rent and utilities in particular; for your reference a gallon of milk in Bethel is nearly \$9, apples can cost as much as \$4.99/pound, and an 18-pack of eggs costs over \$6.00. While Bethel has a larger population than surrounding villages, it faces similar challenges both in teacher recruitment and retention, and common struggles associated with living in rural Alaska. (high cost of rent, housing shortages, high cost of utilities, access to services, isolation)

In a 2021 study titled "Education Retention and Turnover in Alaska," published by the Institute of Education Sciences and REL Northwest at Education Northwest, it is stated that educator

turnover is associated with a broad range of negative outcomes for students. It is also noted that rural schools in Alaska continue to be hit hardest by turnover, and that teachers and principals prepared outside Alaska continue to be more likely to turn over. In the same study, the following strategies are noted for improving educator recruitment and retention in Alaska:

- Create and support multiple teacher preparation pathways that can increase the supply of Alaska-educated teachers, including grow-you-own programs
- Increase incentives for educators, including loan-forgiveness programs

For more than a decade LKSD has developed and implemented our own TEACH program as a way to develop local talent and grow our own teachers both as a way to meet teacher turnover needs and as a way to staff our dual language and immersion model schools. Our district commits hundreds of thousands of dollars each year to this program and we have numerous certified teachers who have completed this program working throughout the district.

Each year, LKSD devotes a significant amount of time and man-hours in developing new hires and in educating them on district programs, instructional models, and in helping them learn about the culture of the region, communities, and students that they serve. This is a continuous cycle. Locally grown teachers, such as Madelene Reichard, are incredibly valuable in that they are from the region, they have grown up in the culture, they are familiar with and have connections in our communities, and they serve as excellent role models and mentors both for our students and our new to district teachers. They are familiar with the familial structures found in our region, they understand the cultural context of our students and our communities, they enhance relationships in their schools and greatly contribute to school climate and connectedness.

Programs that support developing local talent – or growing your own – and teacher loan forgiveness programs are critical solutions in solving the education retention and recruitment issue faced in rural Alaska.