

Thank you House Education Committee Members for your time today. My name is Jodi Taylor, I'm pleased to be speaking from the perspective as one of the primary education stakeholders, a parent. I've written and spoken about education in Alaska for many years and believe, effective and inspiring education opens the door of opportunity and creates a love of life long learning that will benefit the student, their family, and our community. Through that process of writing and speaking, I have heard from fellow parents across the state. Today I share a handful of their stories and mine, from rural and urban, special needs to highly gifted, different socio-economic and racial backgrounds, from vocational to basics, to help provide context on why students in our state need your action on educational choice.

I have volunteered in my children's public schools, actively contributing time, talent and money, however my family had several issues with the public school system that caused us to rethink how we educate our kids. We found that, at times, public schools did not align with our families values and educational outcome expectations.

The following is an example of when the school did not align with our values. One of my daughters was in the highly gifted program, within her cohort many students chose ivy-league schools. While qualified to attend those schools, she wanted to attend the university my husband and I both attend that is sponsored by our Church. When one teacher heard this, she verbally assaulted our daughter in front of the class and belittled our daughter for her religious beliefs. Yet another highly gifted teacher announced to the class he could "smell when students were menstruating" and another publicly shamed and singled out my daughter for being the one pro-life student in the class (afterwards a few other students came up to my daughter and said they were also pro-life, but afraid to say anything for fear of exactly what happened to my daughter). This was a program my family spent about an hour a day driving her to and from so she could get the benefit of participation in that program. It doesn't matter what your beliefs are, no child should be shamed or belittled for their beliefs by teachers, especially in full display of the entire class, nor should body cycle shaming have a place. It would have been nice if we could have enrolled our daughter in a similar program that aligned with our families values.

The following is an example of when educational outcomes were not aligned with our educational expectations. I was on the advisory board of the charter school my children attended, the school was founded based on academic excellence and had, previously, been the top performing school in the state but had been steadily declining. While trying to work with the school to try to focus on improving student outcomes, I reached out to national experts for advice who kindly offered, at no expense to the school, to help reset the school. The principal, while verbally talking about how outcomes were so important, stonewalled any attempt to change outcomes, instead focusing the advisory board on one of her stated goals for school - having potlucks. Imagine yourself as a parent, being concerned about the declining student outcomes, having national experts willing to come in to help improve student outcomes at no cost, to be ignored in place of potlucks - again, this was at a charter school parents had to opt into. When the principal then later issued a letter to all school parents informing them she would not entertain any requests by parents of which teacher their child would have, our family decided to enroll our children in the correspondence program. My son's teacher at this school had largely disappeared during COVID - of course informed parents should care and request

certain teachers for their child rather than accept a teacher known to underperform. The school was simply not providing the educational outcomes we were looking for.

Do you think if those same teachers and administrators had to compete for students they'd act that way?

My children have tried out several different private solutions, some worked and some didn't but, with the correspondence program we could simply pick something new to correct what wasn't working. The point of education choice is that parents are in the driving seat with options; they can choose what best fits their child, and that can change - which is just fine. My son entered Kindergarten the year of COVID, naturally I was concerned about his reading. He has been in both public and private school, done in person and remote learning. His reading was still lagging this year, a diagnostic test registered him two grade levels behind despite consistently working with him at home. We got him a private reading tutor that came highly recommended, in two months of one hour a week Zoom sessions, he had increased a full grade level. He is currently at grade level after four months. As a parent, I knew there was a problem that was not being adequately addressed at school, in this case, a private school, and, as a parent, I was able to get an effective solution for my son and was able to get reimbursed through the correspondence program for the tutor.

Let's talk about the experiences of other families, I use their stories with permission.

Ms. Wolfe is a single mom who has a special needs son, they've lived in different villages and in cities. Ms. Wolfe was told her son had to leave his special needs class and daily also attend the grade level class. Ms. Wolfe saw her son's behavior begin to change for the worse once this started happening, he was starting to wear a hoodie daily and pulled the hoodie over his head during school to "hide" from the class he did not thrive in, to him, it simply reinforced he was not like other children. He asked his mom if he could stay in the special needs class, she took this request to the school teacher, was told no, then the school administrator, she was told no again. She was told it was policy that students needed to be integrated into the normal classroom. Clearly, the district imposed policy was not helpful to her son, and she was unable to get any changes and could not afford other educational options outside public school.

Ms. Carlene, an accredited professional in the special needs field, has an intensive special needs daughter. Ms. Carlene estimates that the district receives \$140,000 in educational funding for her daughter; she feels the education her daughter is receiving has very little value. Her daughter is forced to take a class that teaches the government structure in India, it makes Ms. Carelene angry to see her daughter, the aide and teachers' time wasted on content that clearly is not helpful to her non-verbal, intensive special needs daughter. Ms. Carlene says there is no tracking of measured outcomes for her daughter. Instruction should be aligned with outcomes and be relevant, which is frustrating for this parent. Ms. Carlene told me that, if the state allowed funding to follow the student, even if it was only \$25,000 of the \$140,000 the district is currently receiving, she could pivot to the correspondence program and vastly improve her daughter's outcomes. Currently money for special needs students does not follow the student to the correspondence program. That would be a \$115,000 state budget savings with just one child in one year and a happy mother and daughter with a custom plan they created

and approve of and can tweak along the way when they see the need to. Over the course of her education, that would be over \$1.3M savings. This is a win for the state and a win for the family.

Mr. Derrek's son was bullied relentlessly for almost a full year at his elementary school, the bully was daily verbally accosting and belittling his son, many times a day, including some physical contact. Mr. Derrek and his wife approached the school several times and then escalated to the district level. They were told, "every child deserves an education" and as parents they were "not allowed to know " how long the school would knowingly allow the bullying to continue or what measures the school would take to stop the bullying. The parents and child being bullied had no resolution from the school. Nothing changed until the teacher began to be bullied as well. The district's solution was to pay for a full-time aide to sit with the bully and make sure he wasn't hurting the other kids and teacher. Mr. Derrek's sons' mental health and grades suffered through this needlessly long, drawn out process. Mr. Derrek and his wife looked at private schools, but are not religious and wished there were more choices for schooling outside the traditional public school options. Mr. Derrek feels that if they had educational choices, the district would have been more responsive to their complaints due to increased competition.

Mr. J has a son who is highly gifted, particularly in certain subjects. His son was enrolled in the district gifted programs, which he quickly surpassed. The district offered no other options in the traditional model, so Mr. J moved his son to the correspondence school program where his son is taking college classes, at the college of their choice. The correspondence program, Alaska's current educational choice option, helped one of our brightest Alaskan students - that's a win!

Ms. Theresa's foster daughter was in a neighborhood school. During K and 1st grade she was constantly having to go to the school to try to improve the outcomes of her foster daughter who was lagging way behind. She was exhausted by this constant, in her words "fight" with the school who seemed unconcerned about the educational outcomes of her foster daughter. At the expense of her retirement account and taking in a roommate to pay rent, Ms. Teresa put her now adopted daughter into a private school that worked hard to get her daughter to grade level. The private school accepted her daughter's challenging past, and was able to customize a plan to get her to grade level, which she proudly was by the end of 3rd grade. This is success! But it shouldn't be coming at the expense of her retirement account or needing to take in a roommate to pay rent. This year, she is using the correspondence program to help pay for classes at the private school and is grateful to have this option. Parents around the state should have individualized options.

Interestingly, Ms. Teresa also took in another foster daughter during Covid. The foster daughter was not allowed to go to school as the district would not allow her to enroll during that time. Yes, you heard that correctly, the district would not allow this child, who had been displaced from her home due to abuse, to enroll in school during Covid. Luckily, the private school her daughter was attending, allowed the foster daughter to attend alongside her.

Let's talk about vocational educational opportunities. Families using the correspondence program for a skilled trade or certificates programs, would vastly improve the vocational opportunities for Alaskan students. That would translate into living wage jobs upon graduation - without student loan debt that is crushing so many families. Please let me provide one example. I had a parent call me after a radio interview where I discussed a coding certificate program offered by Google. She was stunned that after a 6-8 month class costing around \$250, a student could get a coding job that pays between \$55,000-\$100,000 per year. This is an example of education choice.

On a federal level, students are able to use Pell Grants or the military GI bill, for the school and program of their choice. The government does not see the need to interfere with their education choices. It's long past time for Alaska to provide parents the same flexibility with their K-12 choices. Unfortunately, despite Alaska providing nation leading educational funding for the last twenty plus years, Alaskan student test scores continue to be among the worst in the nation - we simply cannot afford to waste another 20 years, it's time to do something different - Education Choice.