

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION & SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE
February 24, 2001
10:32 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Lyda Green, Chair
Senator Loren Leman, Vice Chair (via teleconference)
Senator Gary Wilken
Senator Jerry Ward
Senator Bettye Davis (via teleconference)

MEMBERS ABSENT

All Members Present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION QUALIFYING EXAM

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

See minutes dated 1/27/01, 1/31/01, 2/12/01, 2/14/01 and 2/21/01.

WITNESS REGISTER

Mr. Darroll Hargraves
Executive Director
Alaska Council of School Administrators
326 4th, Suite 404
Juneau, AK 99801

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports delaying the implementation of the HSGQE

Dr. Ed McLain
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District
144 North Binkley St.
Soldotna, AK 99669

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District's approach to standards and the HSGQE

Mr. Charlie Epperson
Aleutians East Borough School District
PO Box 349
Sand Point, AK 99661

POSITION STATEMENT: Doesn't like the test and thinks that standards can be met without making students take a test.

Mr. Carl Rose
Association of Alaska School Boards
316 W 11th St.
Juneau, AK 99801

POSITION STATEMENT: Took no position on the HESS Committee's proposal.

Mr. Jerry Dixon
PO Box 1058
Seward, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports the HESS Committee's proposal but expressed concern about lack of funding for schools.

Ms. Jan Chatto
PO Box 3206
Kodiak, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports the HESS Committee's proposal but commented on the needs of special needs students and teenagers in general.

Ms. Barb Morris
PO Box 874254
Wasilla, AK 99687

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports differentiated diplomas; opposed to using the HSGQE as the end-all.

Ms. Tammy Smith
4201 York Avenue
Fairbanks, AK 99709

POSITION STATEMENT: Is concerned that differentiated diplomas would restrict a person later in life.

Mr. Michael Jones
PO Box 1393
Nome, AK 99762

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports delaying the implementation of the HSGQE but opposed to the HSGQE in general.

Ms. Sharon Swope
Superintendent & Director of Special Education
Nome Public Schools
PO Box 131
Nome, AK 99762

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports the HESS Committee's proposal.

Ms. Janette Peterson
Valdez High School
PO Box 2617
Valdez, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Opposed to C average requirement and attendance requirement.

Ms. Nancy Burley
North Slope Borough School District
PO Box 555
Barrow, AK 99723

POSITION STATEMENT: Expressed concern about special education students regarding graduation requirements.

Ms. Catherine Winkler
PO Box 10
Wainwright, AK 99782

POSITION STATEMENT: Does not support standardized tests to measure of a person's abilities.

Ms. Mary Wegner
203 Jeff Davis St.
Sitka, AK 99835

POSITION STATEMENT: Outlined her concerns with the HESS Committee's proposal.

Ms. Millie Ryan
Governor's Council on Disabilities
and Special Education
PO Box 240249
Anchorage, AK 99524-0249

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports the HESS Committee's proposal as a starting point, made recommendations.

Ms. Judy Kearns-Steffen
1101 Halibut Point Road
Sitka, AK 99835

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports a phase-in approach, opposed to too many levels of diplomas. Made suggestions regarding special education students.

Ms. Connie Bensler
Anchorage Principals' Association
11000 Birch Road
Anchorage, AK 99516

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports a phased-in approach. Discussed her concerns with the phases in the HESS Committee's proposal.

Mr. Guy Okada
Anchorage School District Special Education
2909 W 88th Ave.
Anchorage, AK 99502

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed his view of the pros and cons of

the HESS Committee's proposal.

Mr. Steve Cathers
Valdez City Schools
PO Box 307
Valdez, AK 99686

POSITION STATEMENT: Supports the HESS Committee's proposal but it needs a waiver option.

Mr. Wes Knapp
Aleutians East Island Borough School District
PO Box 349
Sand Point, AK 99661

POSITION STATEMENT: The HSGQE is not a standards-based assessment. Expressed concern about an increase in the drop out rate.

Ms. Robyn Rehmann
Anchorage School District Special Education
4800 DeBarr
Anchorage, AK 99516

POSITION STATEMENT: Recommends that a wider variety of assessments be available to demonstrate competency.

ACTION NARRATIVE

TAPE 01-13, SIDE A

Number 001

CHAIRWOMAN LYDA GREEN called the Senate Health, Education & Social Services Committee meeting to order at 10:32 a.m. Present were Senators Wilken, Ward and Green and Senators Davis and Lemman were participating via teleconference.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN announced that delaying the date for the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE) is not being discussed by the committee. The committee is focusing on finding a different way to report back on the results of the test and what those results will mean to students. She asked participants to direct their comments to the proposal provided by the committee. She noted the committee is not going to discuss whether the HSGQE is right or wrong. The question before the committee is if it were to remake and retool the test for use to help students, teachers, administrators and the Department of Education and Early Development (DOEED), what kind of a test would it be.

Number 176

MR. DARROLL HARGRAVES, Executive Director of the Alaska Council of

School Administrators (ACSA), said that no position has been taken on this issue by any of ACSA's organizations. However, individuals have been alerted and will be testifying before the committee today. He read the following testimony.

First let me say that I represent the principals and superintendents of the state. They believe in standards, quality schools and graduation diplomas that represent excellence and academic achievement by graduates.

School administrators have expressed with statements and resolutions the belief that a delay would make it possible for school districts to accomplish an alignment of the curriculum that is required for students to be successful.

We have seen some good come from the efforts to require the exit exam. Administrators tell me that students and parents began to pay more attention, as it became known that the exit exam was on the way. There are some problems surfacing that were not expected when the effort was initiated. I am confident, Senator Green, that's why you put the present proposal before us for consideration. These problems have caused consideration of a delay in the implementation of the exam.

These problems were the very same problems Indiana and other states have encountered and some of them have revised the way they approach the issuance of diplomas.

It is apparent the state policy makers in Alaska today have read the future and they believe, like Indiana, that costly lawsuits are appearing on the horizon. I have talked with the leaders in Indiana who believe that it was the threat of legal action that propelled the consideration and acceptance of the diploma they adopted. But putting all of that aside, the legal bit and everything else - the policy making, I think that we should only look at these things in light of what is best for students. After it is all said and done, what is it that is best for the student?

I would present to you that there are those diploma options. We could just simply keep what we have in the state now and proceed on. We could go to a diploma that denotes academic or vocational. That's a type of tracking diploma that was used in the '50s and '60s. Over the past three decades we've come to be enlightened

to the point that no child should be considered differently, that everybody should get the same thing and the conclusion to that is that we prepare every student academically to go to the University or college. Perhaps it is time to revisit a thought like that. We could adopt the Indiana model, or some revised model of it and that's what you'll be hearing a lot about today from our school administrators.

There's another consideration that I've given some thought to and I've tracked down that it is a type of option that's held in one or two other states, and has been in the past. For example, we could consider two diploma options - one that reflected the state requirement that includes the exit exam and one that reflects local requirements, a state diploma or a local school diploma. A school diploma could be simply the minimal requirements to graduate, pretty much as you would have now. But for those students that wanted and needed to be challenged, and the parents and families who are behind them, you could have the inclusion of that exit exam and have a state endorsement or state diploma at that point.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN noted that Senator Leman was participating offnet.

SENATOR LEMAN commented that the HSGQE has been beneficial as far as getting everyone focused on accountability but the actual implementation of the exam is where the challenges lie. He noted that his proposal delays the implementation of the exam requirement for a few years for that reason.

DR. ED MCLAIN, Assistant Superintendent of the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, informed committee members that he was co-chair of the original math standards committee, which began in the 1990s and co-chair of the math content review of the renewal committee. He has been involved in the standards and assessment effort for quite awhile. In addition, he has been on the tech review committee since its inception.

DR. MCLAIN thanked Chairwoman Green for her leadership and proposal. He informed the committee that the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District passed a policy supporting a certified diploma one year prior to the state's adoption of similar legislation. The district is committed to the idea that students should be able to demonstrate some level of proficiency to graduate. Additionally, the district has levels of achievement: basic, proficient and advanced. The foundational [basic] level

focuses on those things a person should be able to do to function at an introductory level in society. The proficiency level focuses on what is ideal for a student to be able to do upon graduation. The state's math, reading and writing standards reflect those larger competencies. The advanced level is quite advanced - he provided models of that level to the committee.

DR. MCLAIN cautioned that some of the details in the proposals are best worked out by districts, in particular the issue of attendance and what should be included for the proficient and advanced level diplomas. Districts want to provide students with multiple opportunities and formats but those things are done more appropriately in classrooms where teachers have the flexibility to observe students over time.

Number 757

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN said she already thought about turning the responsibility for attendance and the "C" average grade requirement over to the districts by requiring districts to make a decision on those requirements. She pointed out that some districts have not addressed those issues, which is problematic. She indicated that school boards in small districts may be reluctant to take on those issues because of local criticism but will have to if they are required to do so. She noted that her proposal does not address what classes are to be taught.

DR. MCLAIN replied that in a package that he submitted to the committee on February 9, he laid out a diagram. The diagram makes a distinction between the targeted and taught curriculum. There are a variety of things the Kenai district believes should be the goal of all students and the goal of its standard curriculum. However, if a student does not achieve that level, the district would not deny a diploma if a student is unable to do that. The Kenai district believes the question is: what is essential for a student to know to be able to participate in our society? The district asked community leaders, teachers and business people that question. That is a process that DOEED is now moving toward. It is not so much a lowering of the standards but instead it is focusing on them. He believes the HESS Committee's proposal addresses that question as it speaks to a core curriculum.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN asked if the diploma of foundational mastery on page 2 of the proposal is what he is referring to.

DR. MCLAIN said it appears to be very similar, although he has not seen any details. He noted that the Kenai district spent a lot of time describing what the foundational skills will look like. The

Kenai district first looked at what the foundational skills should be and then looked at the performance standards to match them with the measures.

DR. MCLAIN informed the committee that the Kenai district recommends that the state focus its primary emphasis on the assessment at the essential level and let the districts sort out what is defined as above and beyond.

Regarding students with an IEP, the Kenai district special education department looked at that issue and made the following suggestions.

- Given that the HSGQE focuses on essential skills, students with disabilities should be expected to pass the exam or an alternative assessment to receive a high school diploma.
- All students who successfully complete the HSGQE or an alternate assessment and meet other district requirements will receive a diploma. This differs from the current proposal which would not grant a diploma to students who take the alternate assessment.
- A student's IEP or 504 team would adhere to all applicable federal and state laws and regulations when making decisions relative to that student's participation in the HSGQE.
- Three basic pathways should be available to students with disabilities regarding the exam. First, students could participate without modifications or accommodations. Second, students could participate with modifications or accommodations. Third, students could participate in an alternative assessment.
- When a decision by the team is made for a student to participate in a regular assessment with accommodations or modifications, those accommodations or modifications should be specified on the IEP or 504 plan. The IEP or 504 plan should document the reason for their use.
- Accommodations or modifications identified for students should be those that lessen the effect of the student's disability.
- When no accommodations or modifications can compensate for a student's disability on a particular part of the HSGQE, the student may be exempted from that particular part and the IEP should state that no accommodations or modifications would compensate.

DR. MCLAIN said the district feels the accommodations or exemption should be documented on the IEP because it believes the state will be able to track, from school report cards, patterns where unusually high numbers of students are being awarded diplomas that did not take part of the exam or had accommodations. The IEP

documentation will be able to provide answers. IEPs are individualized, therefore rather than try to write a law that would cover all of the unique details, the district recommends simply recognizing that the IEP team needs to be involved and that documentation must be provided. He continued giving the Kenai district's recommendations for students with disabilities.

- Accommodations and modifications should not give a student with a disability an unfair advantage, compromise test security or artificially raise the test score for that student. However, adherence to the standard test administration rules or procedures should not be the determining factor when deciding the appropriate accommodations or modifications for a student.

DR. MCLAIN pointed out the district was thinking of a deaf child when it wrote that recommendation. He offered to send his comments to the committee in written form.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN thanked Dr. McLain.

SENATOR WARD commended the Kenai district's special education team for its well-thought out recommendations. He noted that he had a nephew who needed special education services. His nephew decided he wanted to join the Merchant Marines, which demanded a higher grade point average than his nephew was expected to achieve under his IEP. His nephew was able to achieve the higher grade point average. He questioned when an IEP team decides a student is not capable of passing the HSGQE, whether no test would be issued or whether a simpler test would be issued.

DR. MCLAIN said he and the district believe that the very nature of an IEP team means that professionals and parents are involved and decide what is the best for that particular student. There may be times when the team may decide that an alternative assessment is appropriate. Some people fear that opens the door for some students to "get away" with not demonstrating their abilities to the fullest.

SENATOR WARD said he agrees with the approach of bringing the IEP team into the exam picture.

DR. MCLAIN said in his 29 years in education, he has seen many students surpass what others expect of them. He noted there are students with good work habits who demonstrate hard work efforts - skills that are valued by society. He commented, "For him not to be able to check off that he's received a diploma, we think it just fails the good kid test, if you will."

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN announced that Senator Davis was participating via teleconference.

MR. CHARLIE EPPERSON, the principal of False Pass School, expressed concern that the primary focus of the meeting today is to gather input from educators around the state who are preparing students to take the HSGQE. The main questions seem to be who should be required to take the test and what should be the effective date of the requirement to pass the test. Both questions are the wrong questions to be asking. The original intent behind enacting the legislation that requires passing the HSGQE to earn a diploma was to require accountability of public education. He recommended an online article entitled, The Setting Standards Movement and Its Evil Twin, by Scott Thompson, Assistant Director of the Panasonic Foundation. Mr. Thompson argues against high stakes testing. Mr. Thompson says we need to distinguish between high stakes standardized-test based reform and authentic standards-based reform. The distinguishing factor between the two is their respective influence on the instructional core of schooling and of equity issues. When progress is judged by a single indicator, the common effect is to narrow curriculum and reduce instruction to test prepping. It is possible to require all students to meet a rigorous set of standards in order to graduate from high school without using a single test as the means of determining whether those standards have been met. We should be interested in students who can produce high quality work rather than students who have mastered the ability to take standardized tests. It is the former who will be rewarded in their personal lives after graduation when their test taking skills will no longer be relevant. He pointed out in 1994 and 1995 the state board of education adopted voluntary standards in 10 core subject areas. The HSGQE addresses three areas. He suggested that students would be better served if districts are required to adopt and teach mastery in those 10 areas. A one page test in each area could be used to determine the student's level of mastery. He cautioned that this should not be an unfunded mandate as it may require a lot of remediation work.

Number 1883

MR. CARL ROSE, Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB), said the AASB supports standards and the HSGQE. The AASB would like to set the standards high and refine the assessment so that we know what a basic and essential skill is, and put a sunset clause in the bill. AASB has passed a resolution asking for an extension date of the consequences of the exit exam until 2004. In phase 2, potential endorsements would be recognized on diplomas with a sunset date to 2004. That will give districts

the time they need to refine the assessment so that basic and essential skills are defined.

Alaska is behind in student achievement. The HESS Committee's bill provides for a second phase but the 95 percent attendance rate provision is the type of issue that the state tried to move away from when it adopted a standards-based approach. If there is a way to talk about how to give local school districts more discretion, that goal would merit discussion. Most people are suspicious of grade inflation. If it is standards that we want, we need to hold the line on that and make sure that every child has an opportunity.

MR. ROSE said he listened with great interest to Dr. McLain. Everything Dr. McLain suggested is accomplishable but whether it can be done with a piece of legislation is of concern. Once again, with the timeline for the diploma, this is a political football that the legislature may want to give back to the professionals. He suggested the legislature state what it wants but allow the state board of education and DOEED to come up with the product by 2004.

CHAIR GREEN said the more this issue is discussed, the more likely it is that the committee will turn many of those decisions over to the state board of education. The issue the committee has to deliberate, however, is that many legislators do not want to delay the implementation date. What she thinks will work is to continue to require the test, but to make the distinction that the test alone will not keep anyone from graduating, and a passing grade will be acknowledged, and to lower the test score or change the test so that only essential skills are required. Regarding attendance and some level of proficiency, she feels it is best to require that the districts address attendance but to let the districts do so in whatever manner they choose. Her thinking behind following the Indiana statutes was to give that student who could not pass the test but attended, took all required courses and maintained a C average an opportunity to obtain a diploma. She reminded Mr. Rose that the proposal is only a suggestion.

MR. ROSE said he appreciates her comments. He is concerned that if we provide a pathway of mediocrity, some parents will come forward with a lesser expectation. The point of the standards and exit exam is to build an on-ramp for excellence. Maybe not all children will be able to take and pass the exam, but they will learn more than they would on a pathway of mediocrity. He believes this issue must be resolved within the next two months or we will not be able to avoid the 2002 deadline but we must resist the urge to fail on the side of urgency. The endorsement approach with a sunset clause in 2004 will provide a way to move forward, continue to give the

exam, recognize excellence, and give the people who need to a chance to revisit some of the snags in the current plan.

Number 2281

MR. JERRY DIXON, the building and area representative for NEA in Seward, said he is speaking as a parent on his own behalf. He supports the HESS Committee's proposal. He likes the idea of offering different levels of graduation requirements. He also likes the idea of phasing this approach in. His major concern is that teachers will be blamed when students do not qualify for a diploma. State funding has been cut by 30 percent by the foundation formula that went into effect in 1991. Recently, eight of his colleagues have taken jobs outside of Alaska because of better pay. While he supports the HESS Committee's proposal, he is concerned that districts will have trouble finding the caliber of educators they need.

SENATOR LEMAN pointed out that a major revision of the foundation formula took place three years ago and increased education funding by \$26 million.

TAPE 01-13, SIDE B

MS. JAN CHATTO, a teacher at Kodiak High School, said she is testifying on her own behalf. This is her 20th year teaching in the Kodiak School District. She teaches 6th grade and is currently the director of an alternative program in the Kodiak High School. She has also taught special education. Her daughter is a graduate of Kodiak High School and the University of California and received a Masters Degree from the University of Alaska Southeast. Her daughter has a learning disability. She wonders if her daughter would have had the opportunity to continue her education under the current testing scheme. The University of California had no problem allowing her daughter to use her compensatory skills to work around her disability and work with her strengths. That is one of the main problems she sees with the current test situation. We all have strengths and weaknesses and as adults we learn to play to our strengths. This test would stop many students from ever developing their strengths. She is pleased with the HESS Committee's proposal.

MS. CHATTO expressed concern about the effect testing will have if students get discouraged and drop out. A larger number of drop outs will create a societal problem. She asked if we are prepared to offer those students vocational training. She pointed out in Europe, students are tested for college entry. Those who do not score high enough are offered a sophisticated choice of vocational

programs. She noted the only solution she has heard to his problem is that students can take the test again and receive remedial help. She doesn't know if that is good enough.

MS. CHATTO said that she is also concerned about the accuracy of testing to determine a student's ability to succeed. One of the characteristics of teenagers is extreme emotions. She has found it difficult to determine a student's true ability if extreme emotions get in the way. She has often found that she cannot teach a concept until she helps a student overcome an unrelated emotional hurdle. The exit exam will be one more emotional hurdle that many young people are not prepared to deal with. She questioned whether the test will reflect a student's true academic ability or who can maintain a lower emotional response to the testing.

Number 2254

MS. BARB MORRIS, speaking on behalf of the Mat-Su Education Association, stated support for offering different types of diplomas so that the district is more able to meet the needs and abilities of all students. Standards and accountability are important for our education system. However, developing divergent skills and interests in students is also important. As a resource teacher for 20 years, she has taught many intelligent students who would not have passed portions of the exit exam. They have, however, gone on to college, apprenticeships, vocational schools, or other job training and are successful citizens. The test should be used as one more tool, not the end-all.

MS. TAMMY SMITH, a 3rd grade teacher and parent from Fairbanks, said she only planned to testify on delaying the exam to a certain year. She looked at the HESS Committee's proposal and noticed that it would offer five different diplomas. She is not sure how she feels about that approach and whether it "splits hairs." The levels have the potential to determine the direction of a student's life for years to come. She questions whether teenagers are able to make those kinds of decisions. Students may choose a technical diploma but decide to go to college later on, which may be difficult because they are not considered to have the level of mastery necessary. She cautioned that this approach could inhibit potential growth later on.

MS. SMITH asked why the name of teachers who teach each course in high schools must be submitted to DOEED. She pointed out that younger, inexperienced teachers often do not get to select the classes they teach. She favors delaying the exit exam requirement to 2006. As a 3rd grade teacher, she gave the benchmark exam last year. She has found that the material she is teaching has not

changed, but the methods she uses has. Current high school students have not had that same benefit. She asked legislators to look at what is happening in states in which the exit exam is critical to the life of students and the drop out rates across the nation. She asked legislators to not move too quickly on this issue and to listen to the experts in the field: the teachers and administrators.

CHAIR GREEN explained that item number 7 on page 3 of the proposal applies to high school courses only. Currently no report is given to either DOEED or the state board of education of what courses are being offered in school districts at any one time. DOEED needs to know whether courses are being taught by a teacher or through correspondence or a distance learning program. The fear is that core courses are not being taught in our high schools and if that is the case, that must be changed. DOEED first needs the information to determine whether that is the case.

Number 1989

MR. MICHAEL JONES, a teacher at the alternative high school in Nome, said his first impulse is to ask that the committee continue to discuss the role of the HSGQE and consider abandoning the exam entirely. Too much is at stake and enough time, money, energy and research have gone into the creation and implementation of this exam. Many questions are unanswered regarding this exam - it would be irresponsible to not postpone the effective date to 2006. It is unfair to ask current high school students to wait and just be patient while everyone else figures it out. In the attempt to regain or maintain the accountability of schools, teachers and students, it is the students who will first feel any negative effects. He asked whether authentic and reasonable alternatives to this exam are being considered. No two students learn the same way or express what they learn the same way. As teachers are asked, urged and required to develop alternatives and authentic means of assessing learning, it seems absurd to place such importance on a high stakes pencil and paper test. He applauds the HESS Committee's proposal in that it shows some thinking regarding alternatives. Senator Green's statement regarding the exam as recorded in this week's Anchorage Daily News is correct: at this point just postponing the exam will not solve the problem. He fears that the multi-tiered diploma system proposed by the HESS Committee could create a type of caste system among Alaska high school graduates.

MR. JONES believes the following questions should be considered in the HESS Committee's proposal.

- How will these diploma alternatives be functionally different

or the same?

- How will the late bloomer, the student who is disinterested in high school although capable, be affected later when pursuing his or her academic career?
- How does this help the student?

If the test continues to be required for a student to receive a diploma, the test needs to be adjusted. Real means of assessing student knowledge should be developed - not alternative and potentially unequal diplomas. He asked the Senate to consider delaying the testing until an appropriate plan is created.

Number 1839

MS. SHARON SWOPE, Director of Special Education and the interim superintendent for the Nome Public School District, stated support for the HESS Committee's differentiated diploma system. The Nome District advocates clearly for higher standards-based education for all students, and supports the HSGQE requirement, but it sincerely asks that access to the diploma system be expanded to include all students. The current system will ensure that a large number of students will fail the exam, the consequences of which are no diploma. The system in place disenfranchises large groups of students, such as special education, special needs, ESL, and high risk students. The passing scores will have to be lowered to avoid denying those students a diploma. The consequence of that approach is a lower value of the diploma. The Nome District believes those alternatives are not in the best interest of students. It advocates for the consideration of the differentiated diploma system as proposed in the HESS Committee's proposal.

MS. SWOPE said that the HESS Committee's proposal enfranchises all of the students that would currently be excluded. It needs development and specificity but the Nome district supports the model in concept. It allows the much needed time to collect the appropriate data and determine the validity of the test. It also allows districts time to address litigious issues before them. This model allows the districts to establish their own specific requirements for graduation and allows for local control of each community. This proposal also allows that DOEED articulate and focus on the needed resources to implement remediation.

CHAIR GREEN asked Ms. Swope if the Nome district has an attendance requirement.

MS. SWOPE said it does.

CHAIR GREEN asked if it has anything that refers to a grade point

average.

MS. SWOPE replied the Nome district is currently in the midst of a rather significant education reform. The district is operating right now on the Carnegie system but it is moving toward asking for a waiver of that so that it can use a performance and standards based system that will have levels. When that transition is complete, grades will be of less importance and more emphasis will be place on meeting performance and standards criteria.

CHAIR GREEN asked what the attendance requirement is in the Nome district.

MS. SWOPE said that students are permitted no more than 10 absences per year. Students who are absent more than that go before an attendance committee to discuss the reasons.

Number 1626

MS. JANETTE PETERSON, Special Education Director and School Psychologist at the Valdez School District, informed the committee that Idaho implemented the C average requirement and 90 percent attendance policy in the 1980s and dropped them because it did not work. One of her concerns about the C average requirement is that it is not quantifiable; it is simply a measurement of what one student does in one teacher's classroom on a particular day. She believes we need to look at a system that is standards-based. She agrees with the approach suggested by Ms. Swope. The state needs to find some type of alternative to the attendance and grade requirements. She noted that Mr. Charlie Epperson's testimony reflects everything she feels about the test. She is concerned that 10 standards have been identified by the state board as important yet only three of them are included on the HSGQE. She is also concerned about students who have outstanding skills in reading and writing but do not have outstanding skills in math and that those students may be denied the opportunity to contribute to society because of poor math skills. She believes there is a way to emphasize what those students can contribute rather than what they can't. She also expressed concern that summer school classes or remedial classes are not offered in districts around the state.

CHAIR GREEN informed teleconference participants that a draft of her proposal was available on the Alaska Legislature's Majority website at www.akrepublicans.org under her name.

Number 1355

MS. NANCY BURLEY, Special Education Coordinator of the North Slope

Borough School District, informed the committee that she has 29 years experience as a special education teacher, administrator and diagnostician. She maintained that IDEA 97 clearly requires that school districts provide a free and appropriate public education designed to develop independent living skills and employment skills for children with disabilities aged 3 through 21. The fundamental issue that the HSGQE presents to the special education student population is that of its appropriateness. The second mandate of PL 94-142, since its inception in 1975, has called upon a team approach in the design of the child's education program. The function of this team is critical to the success of the special education student as these teams are charged with the responsibility of identifying the unique needs and preferences of the child in setting up an appropriate educational program as determined by the child's whole school outcome. The HSGQE takes away the decision making obligation of the IEP team. This is contradictory to the mandate of federal law and is a totally discriminatory practice for disabled children. It seems inherently unfair to expect disabled children to meet the same standards as their peers. Congress in its wisdom early on recognized that disabled children must be held to individualized standards. No single measure is ever adequate to determine eligibility for programs for special needs students. By making the HSGQE the measure of success, we are setting our special education students up for failure. Drop out rates will increase if children realize a high school diploma is unobtainable. The outcome will be that children with disabilities will exit school and be unprepared for the world of work, lacking the basic skills necessary for independent living. Any and all decisions regarding eligibility, placement and programs are made by the IEP team. It is clearly the obligation of the IEP team to develop educational programs designed to promote student success. It is her opinion that the IEP team should decide if the HSGQE, or some other instrument, is an appropriate assessment instrument to determine if the child is prepared to effectively make the transition from school to work.

MS. BURLEY said the North Slope Borough School District could support different diplomas but she expressed caution about using the term "IEP completion certificate" as that could be construed as a breach of confidentiality.

CHAIR GREEN asked Ms. Burley if the North Slope Borough School District currently has different diplomas.

MS. BURLEY said every child receives the same diploma.

CHAIR GREEN noted that many districts use different diplomas, particularly for those students who are severely developmentally

disabled.

MS. CATHY WINKLER, a teacher in Wainwright, said she considers herself an advocate for children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). She has not seen the HESS Committee's proposal but the testimony that she has heard gives her hope. She expressed concern that standardized tests do not show the abilities of the student who cannot divide on paper but can take a snow machine apart and repair it without replacement parts. She stated that she hopes if she ever had to crash land in a plane she would be lucky enough to encounter the student with that knowledge rather than one who could only pass the HSGQE. She noted that many FAS children go undiagnosed and that teachers must learn on-the-job about the needs of those students. There is no Master's program specializing in FAS/FAE anywhere for regular education teachers. She questioned why a student cannot be certified for each area of the exam passed. Ms. Winkler also questioned what she should tell students who do not qualify for special education who will never pass the math test but have overcome amazing setbacks in life. She also noted that three of her students committed suicide in the past year and questioned how anyone could survive another child's suicide. She expressed concern that educators might build children up to believe that life is full of possibilities only to tell them they failed.

CHAIR GREEN said she would rotate among the teleconference sites to take testimony.

Number 877

MS. MARY WAGNER, Sitka School District Special Education Director, said she is concerned about the lack of options being offered to students. In her opinion, the whole point of high standards is to give meaning to a high school diploma, however we have to balance this need with appropriate educational opportunities that will meet the needs and goals of all learners. In order to do that, we need to implement some kind of accountability system that will allow students of differing abilities to achieve their goals. People not involved in the education community do not realize the broad spectrum of learners in the schools. We need a system that motivates all students to achieve to their highest potential without stigmatizing them or taking away their dignity. A high stakes exam that only allows a certain percentage of students to receive a diploma has failed. She thanks Senator Green for starting the discussion on options, however there are some problems with her proposal. First, a diploma that identifies students as being in special education violates federal law. We simply cannot have a special education diploma. In addition, the education community is not allowed to share with the general public that a

person is or has been in special education. Second, what does a C grade mean? The whole point of a standards-based curriculum is to do away with potentially arbitrary grades and instead to focus on mastery of specific skills. The Sitka school district is working toward a district wide standards-based report card. This criteria of a letter grade seems contrary to the whole standards movement in Alaska. Third, what about students who move out of Alaska? The categories established in the HESS Committee's proposal will have no meaning to somebody outside of Alaska. Fourth, as a point of clarification, she is assuming that the exit exam scores listed on the transcript will be the highest scores earned by the student. One possible option to the HESS Committee's proposal would be to have an honors diploma for students who achieve passing scores on all three portions of the exam. All other students who could meet the school graduation requirement would then earn a diploma. This would focus on the positive rather than the negative and would be easier for schools to manage. As an educator she is asking legislators to consider this as a viable option. Students in elementary and middle grades have had the benefit of intervention strategies early on, unlike the current high school students. In addition, she encourages legislators to continue the work on developing appropriate exams and accommodations for the learning disabled and developmentally disabled populations.

CHAIR GREEN informed Ms. Wagner that Senator Ward has drafted a bill that will do what she suggested. That bill provides for an endorsement on the diploma for the student who exhibits proficiency in mathematics, reading and/or writing. The student who is not eligible for endorsement would have a different type of symbol. The committee will discuss that proposal once it is formally introduced.

Number 624

MS. MILLIE RYAN, the acting executive director of the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education, said the Council has been very concerned about the impact of the exam on students with disabilities. The Council has submitted some preliminary recommendations to the committee. The Council believes the proposal on the table is a good starting point but it offers the following things to think about. First, in terms of remediation, we need to ensure that there are a variety of remediation courses and approaches available. If students are taught the same way they've always been taught, they may not benefit from that remediation. Second, the Council would like to see an expansion of the number of endorsements that are available to students on their diplomas. For example, a student who can pass one portion but not the others should receive an endorsement for the subject passed.

Third, the Council asks the committee to consider employability standards and an endorsement for students who meet those standards. That will let employers know that the student will come to work with a good attitude, will work well with people, and has demonstrated work skills. The state has developed employability standards but it is the Council's impression that those standards have not been implemented to any great degree and particularly not for children who are receiving special education.

MS. RYAN said if there is a vocational-technical endorsement, we need to ensure that students receiving special education services have equal access to those classes. Many students with disabilities can excel in vocational-technical classes and graduate with skills to offer employers but they need access to those classes. Regarding allowable accommodations, those that are allowable are not necessarily being made available to students when they take their examinations. The Council recommends that until there is a very solid method for determining what is allowable, and that a broad group of stakeholders have determined a good accommodation policy, the accommodations that are generally allowed in life and in the world of work be allowable, such as calculators and spell checkers. The Council would like to see a group convened to look at accommodations. The Council would be happy to convene a group to do that.

CHAIR GREEN said a group from Career Pathways will be giving a presentation to the committee on the employability standards issue on March 7. She assumes that information will be forwarded to DOEED and the state school board and they will integrate those standards. She pointed out that her proposal uses the term voc-tech but that the term employability standards would be better. She asked if the Governor's Council will be called in on the accommodations portion if the employability standards issue goes to the state board of education.

MS. RYAN said she would hope so.

Number 270

MS. JUDY KEARNS-STEFFEN, a special education teacher in Sitka, stated support for phasing in implementation of the HSGQE. She would like to see educators on the committee to talk about the phases. She believes the proposal contains too many levels. Rather than offering an advanced mastery or foundational mastery diploma, perhaps grades and transcripts can be put on the diploma. For IEP or 504 students, the diploma might state that modifications were made or that the students took an alternative assessment.

MS. CONNIE BENSLER, President of the Anchorage Principals' Association, said her comments are her own. She reviewed the HESS Committee's proposal. She supports high standards in education and accountability for school districts but she hopes no one uses performance on the standardized test as the measure of a well educated student. There are many other components of a student's education that better indicate whether a student is well educated. She definitely favors phasing in the test. However, she does have concerns about the phased-in approach. Under phase one, the students who do not pass the test are most likely to be the students who have difficulties across the board in school. If those students are locked into having to do certain things like attend school 95 percent of the time and maintain a C average, we may be decreasing their ability to function in the current education program. She spent many years as a high school administrator and a number of students who were going to college on athletic scholarships had to deal with NCAA rules and approval of courses. It was an absolute nightmare trying to get a lot of courses that are new, different, remedial, optional - just slightly different from core courses, approved by NCAA. If we add that difficulty to the already rigorous 22.5 credits required to graduate, some of the students may be pushed to the 20 year old bar and will be too old to continue in school.

MS. BENSLER said phasing in the endorsement that is attached to each diploma causes her some concern, particularly about tracking: college prep endorsement versus foundational endorsement versus vocational-technical endorsement. Technology is such a huge part of her high school's curriculum across the board, it would be difficult to separate students who are technologically competent and at a master level from those students on a college prep track.

CHAIR GREEN explained that neither is mutually exclusive - a student could have multiple endorsements.

MS. BENSLER said the other thing that worries her about that particular part of this proposal is that under each mastery level, the board is expected to develop the appropriate curriculum. She is all for state standards but it scares her when a state developed curriculum is discussed. In Anchorage alone, each high school is so unique that even though the district has standards, only four of the same courses are taught in each high school. The rest of the course offerings are student driven. For example, if 90 students request advanced placement chemistry, then the principal must provide 3 classes of AP chemistry. If only five students want to take that class, it probably will not be offered.

MS. BENSLER said she likes the idea of a differentiated diploma and

agrees with Ms. Wegner that allowing schools to offer an honors diploma and regular diploma would be simple, clean and would not micromanage schools. She said the Anchorage district loses 6 instructional days per school year when it administers the test because it is given to 10th, 11th, and 12th graders.

CHAIR GREEN said she thought Ms. Bensler would like this proposal as it requires the test to be given on an in-service day.

MS. BENSLER said the problem with that is in-service days are so precious and necessary for staff development.

CHAIR GREEN noted that many people have expressed concern about one-third of the student population who are disenfranchised and without leadership while the exam is being administered.

MS. BENSLER said maybe the school year needs to be extended. She is concerned that the bottom line of a good school is a great teaching staff, which requires staff development time. She also expressed concern about the item in the proposal that would require school districts to submit a list of courses taught to DOEED. As the curriculum principal at Service High School, she had to prepare such a list for the NCAA. That list is a very fluid document that changes from semester to semester, based on what students want to take. If the proposal is referring to core courses, that is different. The names of teachers teaching each course changes as well. Teachers will feel paranoid about that requirement as well. She noted that many high schools are offering creative programs to get out of the box of seat time and traditional delivery systems so she is concerned about that requirement.

CHAIR GREEN repeated that her proposal is just three pages of words and is a starting point. She noted that there is a very real problem in Alaska when DOEED and the state school board cannot determine what courses are being offered in the state. We have to have that information to substantiate that the courses that will qualify students to take a standardized exam are being taught. She suggested that schools could send their schedules from their registrars. That requirement is not meant to be invasive or regulatory.

MS. WENSLER indicated that listing what is being taught is very different from listing what is being offered. Schools offer a lot of courses but don't always teach everything offered.

CHAIR GREEN stated that requirement is not meant to be difficult; it is for informational purposes only.

Number 757

MR. GUY OKADA, principal of Dimond High School, informed the committee that right now, 75 Dimond juniors are working with teachers for five hours today to prepare themselves for their third try to pass the test. In the last two weeks, over 200 hours have been expended to prepare and organize for the exit exam. On Tuesday, about one-half of Dimond students will be taking the test. He likes the uniform standards reporting information on transcripts. We need to have a statewide database and a way to track those students because Dimond has a 25 percent mobility rate which equates to about 500 students per school year. Many of them come from villages and Dimond must seek out individually which tests they have passed. He also likes the suggestion to administer tests on non-school days. Dimond just cannot afford to give up any more in-service days. Dimond is trying to offer new courses and remedial courses and other things to help students pass the test but teachers need time to work on these things. To take away anymore in-service days will impact the quality of education.

MR. OKADA said he also supports uniform pre-exam study materials, as well as uniform language for administering the exam. Addressing students who transfer from in state and out of state is critical. He has three concerns with this proposal. The first phase is so immediate that he does not see how it can be implemented in time. Second, he fears we are moving toward a tracking system for our students. Dimond High School and four of the others in Anchorage are working toward creating smaller learning communities. These include opportunities for students to meet in smaller groups in a large high school of 2,000 students. He is afraid that this will derail those efforts. Also, the proposal calls for some new courses, which takes away from local control.

CHAIR GREEN said she has seen curriculum meetings occurring at hotels in Anchorage on weekends that are organized by DOEED, however the participants are teachers. She thought that is what the proposal refers to, rather than what textbooks schools should use, etc. She does not think the state board of education has any desire to dictate curriculum. She favors trying to maintain local control, but some districts are not offering what needs to be offered. She was surprised to learn there is no mention of the transcript in statute. Personally she would rather see the transcript become the vehicle that carries the information about the student rather than the diploma. It is the transcript that follows students to college and to the employer.

MR. OKADA said he is also concerned about the requirements of the IEP team, counselors, administrators or teachers. About 250

juniors at Dimond have not passed the math portion of the exam. Writing recommendations for those students will create a tremendous workload. He thinks differentiated diplomas are a good idea but the workload will have to be simplified or resources will have to be provided to schools to handle the demand. He asked the committee to look at the timeline more carefully, to fully fund whatever is mandated, and to leave curriculum development to local school districts. He urged committee members to solicit the opinions of practitioners on this issue.

CHAIR GREEN said that a solution somewhere in between requiring passage of the exit exam to receive a diploma and her proposal would probably be suitable.

Number 1295

MR. STEVE CATHERS, Valdez City School District Superintendent, told committee members he is testifying on his own behalf. He is also President-elect of the Alaska Association of School Administrators (AASA). He supports standards and the qualifying exam. There have been significant changes in student seriousness and in classroom content and methods because of high stakes testing and statewide standards. The challenge before us now is to continue in the direction of school improvement and avoid technical pitfalls that might derail us in our forward momentum. Regarding the Indiana plan, proposed by Senator Green, he supports it in general. It offers a critical opportunity for fairness to students who have legitimate reasons for not passing the qualifying exam. It is not the only possible solution to mounting problems with implementing the exam next year, it would address the most serious problems.

MR. CATHERS stated that anyone who says no students will be discriminated against under the current law is oversimplifying both the education and legal rights issues. The notion that the current system will fix itself, if we proceed blindly, is wrong. Constituents in his district are braced to suit the state and the district over special education issues now. He and Mr. Hargraves audio-conferenced yesterday with the executive director of the Indiana Association of School Administrators Roger Thornton about problems they experienced with their implementation of Senator Green's provisions. His opinion is that Indiana has implemented high stakes testing smoothly because of the waiver option in their law. It should be noted that many of the provisions in the HESS Committee's proposal, according to Mr. Thornton, were not in the original Indiana bill, but were developed as regulation by the Indiana Department of Education. He indicated the Indiana bill only required there be a waiver option for certain reasons, including special education and vocational education.

MR. CATHER stated that critics of the HESS Committee's proposal will say it lowers standards and relies on subjective measure - student grades. His first reaction was the same. However, after speaking with Mr. Thornton and considering the plan further, he feels it is a creative and meritorious idea which shows insight into educational realities. The plan does not offer a waiver indiscriminately. It is specific in its requirements. The grade and attendance requirements are only two criteria and if a teacher and an administrator recommendation is needed, there is every opportunity to screen out students who are not good candidates. Grades, while subjective, are much more reliable than many believe. There is a stronger correlation between high school grades and college success than there is between test scores and college success. Grading practices have also changed over the last ten years. Teachers now must document and objectify grades more than ever because of successful suits about sloppy grading. He suggested that if grades and attendance are to be used as a waiver, they should be phased in so that they only apply to 11th and 12th grades next year, 10th, 11th and 12th grades the following years, and all four years of high school the following year. Without that, he foresees some due process challenges tying up many districts in the state.

MR. CATHER said another significant feature of the bill is that it requires remediation in every case. That is commendable and speaks to the intent of the qualifying exam directly. In some cases, alternative assessments are required. To not allow that practice, at least in certain circumstances, begs a legal challenge. Remediation efforts must be promoted statewide, regardless of the direction the legislature takes on the qualifying exam issue. To tackle the question of the correct way to improve our schools, there is no silver bullet. All districts, DOEED and the legislature must work together to improve education in the state through a multitude of efforts. He offers the record of Unalaska City Schools of one of many examples in the state of significant improvement and high achievement. The board and staff at Unalaska City School District has taken many energetic and bold steps during the last five years to make student achievement its top priority. The result for Unalaska has been enviable benchmark and qualifying exam scores and being named this fall as one of the top 100 districts in the nation by an independent research group as published in Offspring Magazine. Unalaska was the only Alaska district to receive this honor.

MR. CATHERS explained that Unalaska was able to achieve its goal by a combination of hard work, staff commitment, effective staff development, curriculum development and alignment, close

supervision of staff, a strong student discipline system, and targeted remediation. Though it was painful at times, a number of mediocre teachers were not retained over several years time. The willingness by the board to not retain teachers who were the best was a factor for Unalaska. He also believes it enhanced the status of all good teachers. A strong commitment to remediation was made five years ago and summer school was implemented. Other remedial activities, such as weekend exit exam boot camp, were offered with a targeted skills approach also. It is not easy for a small district to fund this kind of program. It must be done at the expense of other programs.

MR. CATHERS told the committee that school improvement will happen without strong school leadership. He urged them to support school leaders who work largely in isolation from collegial support and often for less daily pay than those they supervise. He fears with the administrator shortage that looms in Alaska, all quality schools efforts will fail if that is not addressed.

CHAIR GREEN said that she hadn't heard about the shortage of school administrators.

MR. CATHER offered to send her articles.

CHAIR GREEN asked Mr. Wes Knapp to testify.

MR. WES KNAPP, Aleutian East Island Borough School District, told committee members that he spent 40 years in education, 30 of them in New York where the Regents exam is required. The New York Regents Exam's 70 year history was called into question about 10 years ago and the school diploma system has been phased out and replaced with one test that all students must now pass. In Alaska, if we do not address the special needs students we will be disenfranchising special needs students who, even after meeting IEP goals, will be told if they don't pass the same test as others, they will not get a diploma. Students will become discouraged and the drop out rate will increase. If special education students meet the goals defined for them by their IEP, they should not be denied graduation. Although he supports standards, he suggests that requiring a paper and pencil test given on a specific date is not a standards-based instrument. Students who receive standards-based instruction should be tested when educators feel they have reached a target or goal, not a specific day prescribed by someone in Juneau. He applauds the efforts to address the needs of special education students, and other students as well. The test requirements and diploma issue needs more time and deliberation; we should not attempt to implement something that is flawed or not well thought out. More time is needed to study this issue. The

HSGQE is based on a norm-based testing model, rather than a standards-based test. He encouraged legislators to solicit more input from educators and to examine the possibility of different types of diplomas. While some states may have phased out that approach, the fact that that approach lasted as long as it did requires that we give it more thought.

Number 1790

MS. ROBYN REHMANN, Director of Anchorage School District Special Education, stated that this issue is vitally important to all of the students in our state. If done properly, the proposal for standards and the exit exam will certainly raise the abilities of all of our students. Districts, schools and teachers are currently examining their curricula, how students learn, and raising outcomes for all children. The proposal for differentiated diplomas is an important one. She is hesitant to accept it, however, because she is concerned it could cause a significant backlash in terms of tracking students based on performance. It could limit students in terms of potential and ability. She is also concerned about the required remediation classes and the impact that could have on students who do have disabilities that are able to compensate and move to a higher level of instruction. If those students are trapped in a series of remedial courses, they will be severely penalized.

MS. REHMANN said she is very interested in the proposal put forth by the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, which is to offer a basic foundational diploma with endorsements for each portion of the exit exam passed. She highly encourages the committee to support federal law, where students on IEPs and 504 plans are included in all statewide assessments - looking at a wider variety of accommodations and modifications available to those students, that are related to their IEPs. She asked committee members to look at expanding opportunities for students to demonstrate competency and opportunities for alternate assessments. She asked legislators to not limit or label students in any way and instead to work with educators and students to ensure success of all students.

MR. Darrol Hargraves once again thanked the committee for the time it has spent on this issue.

There being no further testimony, CHAIR GREEN noted that Mr. John Lilibet (ph) of the Governing Board of Alaska School Counselors Association submitted written testimony in support of the delay of the implementation of the HSGQE until 2006.

CHAIR GREEN then adjourned the meeting at 12:45 p.m.