

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT MEETING
SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE
SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
HOUSE HEALTH, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE
February 21, 2008
3:08 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Senator Bettye Davis, Chair
Senator Joe Thomas, Vice Chair
Senator Kim Elton

SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Senator Charlie Huggins, Vice Chair
Senator Bettye Davis
Senator Donald Olson
Senator Fred Dyson

HOUSE HEALTH, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Representative Peggy Wilson, Chair
Representative Bob Roses, Vice Chair
Representative Anna Fairclough
Representative Wes Keller
Representative Berta Gardner
Representative Paul Seaton

MEMBERS ABSENT

SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Senator John Cowdery

SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair
Senator Gary Wilken

HOUSE HEALTH, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Representative Sharon Cissna

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

Civics Education Taskforce Final Report

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record.

WITNESS REGISTER

DIANE KELLER

Civics Education Taskforce Member
Mayor of Wasilla
Wasilla, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Read comments from the taskforce.

VICKI OTTE

Civics Education Taskforce Member
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Spoke to the importance of improved civic education.

JONATHAN KATCHER

Civics Education Taskforce Member
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed the taskforce's recommendations.

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR BETTYE DAVIS called the joint meeting of the Senate Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee and the Senate Special Committee on Education and the House Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee to order at [3:08:48 PM](#). Present at the call to order were Senators Bettye Davis, Joe Thomas, Charlie Huggins and Donald Olson; Representatives Peggy Wilson, Bob Roses, Wes Keller, Anna Fairclough and Berta Gardner. Senators Kim Elton and Fred Dyson and Representative Paul Seaton arrived shortly thereafter.

Civic Education Taskforce Final Report

[3:10:21 PM](#)

CHAIR DAVIS announced the committees would hear from the Civics Education Taskforce. She introduced Diane Keller, Jonathon Katcher, Vicki Otte and Carl Rose, director of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

[3:11:04 PM](#)

Representative Seaton and Senator Elton joined the meeting.

REPRESENTATIVE FAIRCLOUGH told members that Ms. Otte is a teacher at Gruening Middle School in her home town, Eagle River, Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER told members that Ms. Keller is his Mayor and they are not related.

[3:12:36 PM](#)

DIANE KELLER, Taskforce Member and Mayor of Wasilla, read the following comments into the record:

Thank you for the opportunity to serve on the Citizens Advisory Taskforce on Civics Education. Again, my name is Diane Keller and I am the mayor for the City of Wasilla. Wasilla has a strong mayor form of government which keeps me very busy because I am the CEO for Wasilla. One aspect I take very seriously about my job is the opportunity to interact with children in our community and teach them about civic education and ask them what that means to them.

I share with them that for more than 250 years, Americans have shared a vision of a democracy in which all citizens understand, appreciate, and engage actively in civic and political life. In recent decades, however, increasing numbers of Americans have disengaged from civic and political institutions such as voluntary associations, religious congregations, community-based organizations, and political and electoral activities such as voting and being informed about public issues. Young people reflect these trends. They are less likely to vote and are less interested in political discussions and public issues than either their older counterparts or young people of past decades. As a result, many young Americans may not be prepared to participate fully in our democracy now and when they become adults.

Recognizing that individuals do not automatically become free and responsible citizens but must be educated for citizenship, scholars, judges, teachers, civic leaders, local, state and federal policymakers have with the encouragement of the President of the United States, called for new strategies that can

capitalize on young people's idealism and their commitment to service and voluntarism while addressing their disengagement from political and civic institutions. One of the most promising approaches to increasing young people's informed engagement is school-based civic education.

A few reasons why schools are such an important venue for civic education are:

It is critical for the future health of our democracy that all young people, including those who are usually marginalized, be knowledgeable, engaged in their communities and in politics, and committed to the public good.

Encouraging the development of civic skills and attitudes among young people has been an important goal of education and was the primary impetus for originally establishing public schools.

Schools are best equipped to address the cognitive aspects of good citizenship, civic and political knowledge, and related skills such as critical thinking and deliberation.

Schools are communities in which young people learn to interact, debate, and work together with others, an important foundation for future citizenship.

[3:14:52 PM](#)

Representative Berta Gardner joined the committees.

[3:15:50 PM](#)

Senator Dyson joined the meeting.

[3:16:25 PM](#)

VICKI OTTE, Teacher of American History and Civics at Gruening Middle School and Member, Citizens' Advisory Taskforce on Civics Education, said that she and 58 others from 13 countries were sworn in as American citizens last Friday at 11:00 am at the federal court house in Anchorage. In order to become a citizen she had to fill out many forms, pay a \$200 fee, reveal personal information about herself, present legal documents, be finger

printed, submit to a character investigation by the FBI, take a test on American History and Government, undergo a personal interview to assess her ability to speak, read and write in English, surrender all of her foreign travel documents, and renounce princes, sovereigns and potentates. Finally she pledged an oath to defend the Constitution of the United States.

She said her students followed her progress and they had a number of discussions about the process. She asked them what they had to do to become citizens, and they answered "nothing." She challenged them to name something in their daily lives that was not affected by the local, state or federal government and offered a \$1 incentive if they could provide an example. None of them could come up with an answer because there wasn't one. Because the role of government is so important, she administered the same test to them that she had to take, using the study guide provided to her by U.S. Customs and Immigration. They did very poorly, but she assured the committees that by the end of the current school year, her students would understand the value and the responsibility of citizenship. She highlighted her commitment to the importance of civic education with a quote from Kofi Annan:

"No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth."

[3:20:39 PM](#)

JONATHAN KATCHER, Member, Citizens' Advisory Taskforce on Civics Education, said he had a report from the taskforce with some recommendations he hoped the legislature would consider for next year. He related a story about his teenage daughter, whose eighth grade class was asked by their social studies teacher to write an essay. Her essay became part of an endeavor put on by the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and she won the Spenard Award, then the state award, and then fourth place in the United States for her essay about citizenship. The point he was making was that most parents and students in the state are unaware of the program and its potential rewards. Consequently the students do not benefit, and the VFW does not get the maximum benefit from its program. The task force recommended coordinating the various programs that VFW and other civic organizations have to offer.

[3:23:38 PM](#)

MR. KATCHER said it's more than teaching civics in the classroom; it is having statewide opportunities that promote and encourage people to be active participants in this civilization. These programs encourage students to be good, civic-minded adults.

The taskforce recommended an effort through the Department of Education and the Lieutenant Governor's Office to coordinate these programs around the state. They would like to see the development of standards for civic education; assistance for local school districts with the development of curriculum; and professional development programs for civic education teachers around the state.

The centerpiece of the effort would be an Alaska Council on Civic Learning and a Coordinator for Civic Learning. The council would be through the Lieutenant Governor's office and would work through the Coordinator for Civic Learning in the Department of Education to bring all of the various organizations together to maximize and facilitate the programs that they believe would promote and enhance civic education.

[3:26:30 PM](#)

MR. KATCHER closed by saying this is the most exciting year in politics since 1968. At the same time there has been corruption going on that could lead people to a degree of cynicism that would be undermining. The decision he felt they needed to make was whether to let the cynicism and lack of involvement continue, or to capitalize on the current political motivation.

[3:27:49 PM](#)

MAYOR KELLER reminded everyone that the young people today would be filling their shoes soon. She maintained that civic education should start very young, through the family, and be reinforced through the schools. She offered the following quote from John Dewey:

"Democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife. When we fail to educate our children about history and our representative democracy, we miss an opportunity to enrich our children's lives. We also miss an opportunity to enrich our country through their involvement. Our responsibility is to teach our children the American story. We must instill in our young people a deep and abiding understanding and appreciation of our heritage."

Alaskan educators, students, and community members place a high value on meaningful civic learning in our schools, yet research both statewide and nationally shows a steady decline in the attention paid to advancing civic learning opportunities. As the research from the Final Report of the Alaska Civic Learning Assessment Project indicates, the state of civics knowledge and awareness among Alaskans is not what it should be. Young Alaskans will not learn the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship unless we teach them. We hope that through the research and recommendations included in this report, we can help elevate the importance of educating for citizenship in Alaska and ensure that our young people have what they need to commit to a life-long civic engagement. The strength of our democracy and the health of our community demand no less.

In closing, Mayor Keller offered a quote from Thomas Jefferson.

"The qualifications for self-government are not innate. They are the results of habit and long training."

[3:30:20 PM](#)

MAYOR KELLER thanked the committee for its support of HCR 6 and for the opportunity to present their recommendations.

[3:30:44 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR DAVIS said she hoped the legislature would be able to do something with the program next year.

CO-CHAIR WILSON asked when the taskforce was organized and how long they had been working on their recommendations.

MAYOR KELLER said their first meeting was in September 2007 and they met four times in Anchorage.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER recalled a roundtable discussion on civic engagement at the University of Alaska, and asked if the taskforce members participated in it.

MAYOR KELLER said she did not.

[3:32:40 PM](#)

MS. OTTE said they didn't even know about the roundtable, and felt that was an illustration of the need for a coordinated approach.

There being no further business to come before the committee,
Co-Chair Davis adjourned the meeting at [3:35:46 PM](#).