

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 25, 2009  
8:00 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Paul Seaton, Chair  
Representative Cathy Engstrom Munoz, Vice Chair  
Representative Bryce Edgmon  
Representative Wes Keller  
Representative Peggy Wilson  
Representative Robert L. "Bob" Buch  
Representative Berta Gardner

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

OVERVIEW(S): UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA, MARK HAMILTON

- HEARD

HOUSE BILL NO. 126

"An Act relating to continuing the secondary public education of a homeless student; relating to the purpose of certain laws as they relate to children; relating to tuition waivers, loans, and medical assistance for a child placed in out-of-home care by the state; relating to foster care; relating to children in need of aid; relating to foster care transition to independent living; and relating to juvenile programs and institutions."

- HEARD AND HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 126

SHORT TITLE: FOSTER CARE/CINA/EDUCATION OF HOMELESS

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) GARA

02/11/09	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/11/09	(H)	EDC, HSS, FIN
02/25/09	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM CAPITOL 106

**WITNESS REGISTER**

MARK HAMILTON, President  
Statewide Programs & Services  
University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA)  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented and answered questions during the overview of the University of Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Spoke as the sponsor of HB 126.

### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:00:39 AM](#)

**CHAIR PAUL SEATON** called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:00 a.m. Representatives Seaton, Wilson, Edgmon, Buch, and Munoz were present at the call to order. Representatives Keller and Gardner arrived as the meeting was in progress.

OVERVIEW(S): UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA, MARK HAMILTON

[8:01:58 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the first order of business would be an overview of the University of Alaska.

[8:02:22 AM](#)

MARK HAMILTON, President, Statewide Programs & Services, University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), began his presentation by stating that the University of Alaska (UA) system creates about \$1 billion in direct and indirect economic activity in the state. He related that the research activity alone would qualify the university as about the fifth largest employer in the state, employing about 2,300 employees with a payroll of \$92 million each year. The UA research generates about \$6 for every general fund \$1. He opined one of its most vibrant programs. He explained that the legislature appropriated \$9 million for a program, Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR). That program has generated \$63 million in research and an additional \$18.5 million in anticipated earnings over the

next five years, he stated. He opined that the legislature will have earned \$85 million for its \$9 million investment in the UA.

8:04:51 AM

MR. HAMILTON indicated that a generational change has occurred. In 1950 only 20 percent of the jobs in the United States required a 4-year degree. Today only 23 percent require that level of education. The other 77 percent of jobs in the U.S. do not require a 4-year degree. The state's university also embraces the traditional community college mission, which is where the other 77 percent of workers are trained to be workforce ready. The overwhelming majority of the 77 percent of jobs that don't require a 4-year degree require some postsecondary education in apprenticeship programs, certification programs, or one or two-year degree programs. He indicated that the university has focused on the 77 percent since the legislature requested that effort. He characterized the relationship between the UA and the legislature as powerful, beginning with the Technical Vocational Education Program (TVEP) funds, which were directed to workforce type programs. The aforementioned has resulted in the UA graduating 2,400 workforce ready students, specifically in areas provided by the Department of Labor & Workforce Development for positions within Alaska. He related that since his time at the UA 100-plus new programs have been created and of those, 85 percent of the programs are workforce programs requiring two years or less to complete. He directed attention to the committee packet, and referred to the handout titled "New UA Degree, Certificate and Endorsement Programs added since FY 00" which is a list of new programs. He opined that the UA reports its progress each year in terms of workforce development. He further opined that the UA is performing extraordinarily well. For example, the UA has 1,300 graduates in health care occupations alone.

8:08:06 AM

MR. HAMILTON explained that approximately 3,200 students attend the UA throughout its 16 campuses. Nine of ten high school students rate the quality of education as good or very good on the UA surveys. The percentage of in-state college attendees has risen from 42 to 63 percent. The Alaska Scholars' program promotes the top 10 students in schools across the state with an \$11,000 scholarship incentive. He mentioned that more than 90 percent of UA graduates stay in Alaska. The TVEC funding has allowed the UA to increase the number of degrees in the workforce field by 38 percent. He provided other statistics

such that the UA has increased its first-time undergraduate retention by 10 percent, student credit hours by 16 percent, and research by 97 percent in the last 10 years. He related that revenues from donors, tuition, and indirect cost recovery have increased 97 percent.

[8:10:49 AM](#)

MR. HAMILTON referred to the education summit, which provided long-term vision. He surmised that the UA is the only state university system that has a primary operational request outreach to grades K-12. He opined that this is a strategic move. He indicated the UA's goal to double the number of engineers. He opined that when people state that college is not for everyone, they mean that not everyone wants to obtain a 4-year degree. "Postsecondary education is for nearly everyone", he said. Courses at the UA are specifically designed to allow people to enter apprenticeship programs throughout the state. "'Math for the Trades' is one of the courses," he said. The UA also offers numerous summer programs and bridging programs.

[8:13:33 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON offered that several members of the committee attended the statewide strategy meeting. He also offered that he is a UAF graduate.

[8:14:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER applauded the UA, particularly the leadership of Mr. Hamilton. She opined that Mr. Hamilton's leadership has brought the K-12, the UA, and Department of Labor & Workforce Development (DLWD) cooperative and collaborative effort to education. She offered her belief that the UA will not be fully funded and asked how the UA will address less than full funding impacts.

MR. HAMILTON answered that the UA can "do more with more" but if the program is less than fully funded, the UA would provide greater cooperation, effort, and understanding of the existing programs. He opined that the new programs "bear fruit" and ought to be supported. Furthermore, additional funding allows additional "math camps" to be offered. When offered, these camps are full. He recalled that some summer program attendees for the Rural Alaska Honors Institute (RAHI) have been tracked and those students have triple the graduation rate. He related that the UA will work as hard as it can.

8:17:27 AM

MR. HAMILTON, in response to Chair Seaton, explained that the RAHI program is primarily attended by rural area individuals who take classes from college professors and gain confidence in their ability to attend college to attain a degree. He related that the students obtain a "preview" of the separation that happens when the students attend college full-time.

8:19:23 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER, recalling the "brain drain" was discussed last session, inquired as to what is being done to attract students from elsewhere.

MR. HAMILTON answered that he is "not a fan" of recruiting students from the Lower 48. He reminded members that the UA is a state university and his job is to train Alaskans to be the workforce, the citizens, and the leadership in the state. He opined that many states attempt to include students to provide diversity. However, Alaska already has magnificent diversity as evidenced by the 90 languages that are spoken in Alaskan homes. Furthermore, it costs more to educate out-of-state students than out-of-state tuition will cover. He offered that his vision for the UA system is to provide education for in-state students such that they remain in state and become part of the Alaskan workforce.

8:21:50 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER related that she recently attended a roundtable luncheon with university students, some of which were attending the university from homes outside Alaska. These students said they have fallen in love with Alaska. Therefore, she opined that some may stay in Alaska and be committed to work and live in this state.

MR. HAMILTON agreed the students she mentioned are valuable.

8:22:32 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH inquired as to how to prepare students for college. He expressed concern that some students need remedial classes to succeed. He further asked how the success rate could be increased.

[8:23:38 AM](#)

MR. HAMILTON answered that the bridging programs and summer programs are the means for preparing young people to enter college. He reported that many students attend the courses as preparation courses. The K-12 teachers may not be able to meet the needs of fully preparing students for college. Remediation courses have been around since the 17th century, beginning with Harvard University's entrance requirement for fluency in Greek and Latin. The decision was made to allow students to take remedial classes in these topics. The remedial classes allow more students to access the university. He highlighted that some criticize that remediation is not the job of the university. He opined that less remediation would be an indication of success. He offered that about 40 percent of the students require a semester, to one-and-a-half years of remediation.

[8:27:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON inquired what could be done at the K-12 level to minimize the need for remediation.

MR. HAMILTON referred to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address, and paraphrased that "we need to get families involved." He related that career pathways should be laid out on for a student, with options imbedded that assist parents as well as school officials in informing students what courses they need for certain vocations. He offered that many of the technical fields require the same mathematics as the vocational fields. Currently, mathematics is only required through the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He opined that students who stop taking math in 10<sup>th</sup> grade will almost always be in a remedial class in college.

[8:33:27 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON pointed out that the UA offers the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP). He inquired as to whether Mr. Hamilton could address the UA's efforts to assist the fishing industry in Alaska.

MR. HAMILTON answered that the UA has not been involved in commercial fishing itself, but has tried to expand the baccalaureate of the fish and ocean sciences program to create a minor degree in fisheries for someone pursuing other related degrees, such as a business major with a minor in fisheries.

Thus, all of the fields associated with commercial fishing are affected by graduates.

[8:37:10 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON thanked the UA system for its emphasis on the satellite campuses. He related that Dillingham has a Bristol Bay campus. He recalled visiting the campus and seeing the plaques of the university graduates, many of which are for 4-year degree programs. He stated that it is impressive. He opined that partnerships with the Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation complement the other programs.

[8:38:11 AM](#)

MR. HAMILTON pointed out the integral relationships of the rural campuses and their communities. He surmised that 85 percent of the rural students earn scholarships paid for by a community or tribal organization. In some cases the scholarship covers tuition, books, fees, and transportation to and from the village, which represents an investment in education that is unparalleled in other states.

[8:40:03 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON recalled that the UA does not directly train direct fishermen, but provides education in related areas. He inquired as to why the UA has not trained a major industry, fishing, in the state.

MR. HAMILTON answered that the UA uses the most-needed jobs in Alaska list from the Department of Labor & Workforce Development. Perhaps, the university should realize that's a list [and there could be other lists]. He indicated that the beautiful thing about a state university is that it can change focus to address what's deemed necessary.

[8:42:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER praised the president's 11-year leadership.

[8:43:23 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER indicated her observation of the upward swing in the reports she has received from students regarding their college experience, in terms of the quality of the

instruction and the commitment and accessibility of the instructors. However, the concern this year is regarding the bottleneck when registering for classes. She acknowledged that perhaps the bottleneck can be partially attributed to the lack of upper level classes. She asked if the aforementioned is news to Mr. Hamilton.

[8:44:51 AM](#)

MR. HAMILTON likened [Internet] registration to a "food fight" in which there is a massive flurry that results in the [entry level classes and the health care classes] filling fast, which he attributed to not having enough sections available. Although he said he wasn't familiar with a bottleneck for the upper level classes, he acknowledged it surely happens because classes simply fill up. He informed the committee that although the university is expanding the number of [entry level and health care classes] as fast as it can, he clarified that the university "cannot be the university of health." Furthermore, he has heard that the university is trying to be too many things to too many people. The aforementioned notion, he opined, occurs when folks compare the university to other western states with low populations, such as Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, and North Dakota. The University of Alaska offers two-thirds of the Baccalaureate degrees, half of the Master's degrees, and about 20 percent of the PhDs of those western universities. In comparison to low population western universities the University of Alaska's course offerings are not only incomplete, but also have limited capacity within the programs due to [lack of] funding. Mr. Hamilton noted his excitement with regard to the university's relationship with the legislature in terms of funding workforce programs. However, in the last 20 years, the legislature has provided the university with program funds above and beyond fixed costs four times. The aforementioned is why the university is in the situation in which the programs can't expand any further. "I think it's a horror story when somebody ... wants to go to the University of Alaska and wants to stay here that we don't have room for them, but it happens," he opined. Mr. Hamilton then highlighted it's historically and statistically certain that during times of fiscal crisis, more students attend their state university. The aforementioned can be attributed to the economic crisis and the cheaper price of education at the state university. Furthermore, those who have lost a job or fear losing a job will attend their state university to better their position. Moreover, a student loan that covers housing, meals, and tuition can be taken out during an economic crisis.

[8:51:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH discussed programs such as the college-level courses offered in high schools and college-level distance learning. He asked if the aforementioned could be enhanced were funding available.

MR. HAMILTON indicated that distance learning has increased as the number of courses offered [has increased] in conjunction with students and instructors becoming more comfortable with it. Moreover, distance learning [has increased] as the appropriate band width has expanded throughout the state. Distance learning has opened up an enormous amount of opportunities. Although distance education is an effective form of education, it's not a cheaper form of education due to the necessary preparation of the instructors and the technological support.

[8:55:42 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ, recalling Mr. Hamilton's earlier statement that nearly everyone can benefit from a post secondary education, requested comment on the fact that Alaska's dropout rate is the highest in the nation while the state's compulsory attendance laws only require attendance through 16 years of age. She questioned whether the compulsory attendance age laws should be increased in order to combat the high dropout rate.

[8:56:21 AM](#)

MR. HAMILTON remarked that the aforementioned has been debated many times. He then opined, "I'm not sure that compulsion to remain makes much difference unless that individual is pursuing some value for the additional year." Helping a young person embrace a goal is a means for tackling the dropout issue. The statistics clearly relate that the more education an individual has the better citizen that individual will be, the more likely he/she will vote, contribute to charitable institutions, and be less likely to go to jail. He partially attributed the aforementioned to the fact that pursuing an educational path requires a certain amount of discipline and planning. Once the discipline and planning is learned, being a good citizen will follow. Shifting the compulsory age to 17, he opined, would mean a sentence for a young person to live through another year of something that they don't understand. Mr. Hamilton said although he wouldn't choose to [increase the compulsory age for

education], he would encourage counseling and the knowledge that without education people lose life choices.

8:59:46 AM

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ requested an update on the science laboratory in Juneau and the collaboration with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

MR. HAMILTON stated that the NOAA laboratory is currently functioning and the university's relationship with NOAA is very good. In fact, NOAA is allowing the university to rebuild the Auke laboratory [at the NOAA laboratory]. He predicted this to become a noticeable difference in Juneau. The Lena Point addition to NOAA was the top priority with the board of regents 11 years ago and it has finally been brought to fruition.

9:02:00 AM

CHAIR SEATON pointed out that full funding for the new Alaska Region Research Vessel (ARRV) is included in the stimulus package. He asked if the plan to have the university administer and be involved with the aforementioned research vessel is in place.

MR. HAMILTON highlighted that the AARV has been on the books for 25 years. If a dock facility in Seward can be built to service the ship, the university will administer this project. Seward has four years to create the dock and support facilities, which will be valuable to the area. Hopefully, the city will embrace this project and not allow other vendors to take it away.

9:04:40 AM

CHAIR SEATON asked if the university administering the project would create a synergy with the university's fisheries programs.

MR. HAMILTON answered certainly, adding that the capacity of this ship is expansive in terms of research. He then related that the research crew on the ship will be selected via competitive grants. The University of Alaska, he charged, will be very competitive for those grants. Mr. Hamilton told the committee that over the last 11 years, the university has eliminated 80 percent of its earmarks and thus the research programs of the university are run on competitive grants.

9:07:13 AM

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON asked whether the paralytic shellfish poisoning testing will now be performed at the Juneau laboratory rather than the Mat-Su laboratory as it would be cheaper for the farmers and divers in Southeast Alaska.

MR. HAMILTON said that he didn't know the answer, but promised that [the testing] would be performed in the cheapest manner possible. He related his understanding that some paralytic shellfish poisoning testing is performed in Ketchikan.

CHAIR SEATON pointed out that the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) laboratory was moved from Palmer to Anchorage in order to reduce currier costs.

[9:09:09 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER characterized the Anchorage campus as a more urban setting that offers a lot of off-campus employment, internships, and partnership opportunities. She inquired as to what is being done to lure students to the University of Alaska Southeast and the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

MR. HAMILTON answered the University of Alaska web site covers each of the campuses and the opportunities each offers. He pointed out that the state is highly regionalized. For example, [the university] committed to doubling the number of engineers by the year 2012, which he suggested would be accomplished in 2013. The response to the aforementioned commitment across the state was remarkable, he reported.

[9:11:30 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON highlighted that the committee is grappling with student loan issues and needs-based scholarships versus merit-based scholarships. The committee is trying to develop a balanced program with increased scholarship opportunities on a needs-based system. He inquired as to how to address such in a manner that would be most effective for the university.

MR. HAMILTON explained that needs-based scholarships are planned as "last dollar in," and therefore the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) has to be completed first. The FAFSA has to be completed prior to a student being eligible for state funds. He noted that Pell grants have increased to \$500. He related that the [state's] needs-based need, according to a

corporation that does such assessments, amounts to about \$8 million per year. The aforementioned is a significant amount.

[9:15:19 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON related his understanding that there hasn't been feedback from the university regarding the best way to construct a program to ensure that university students are successful in their first year. Therefore, he requested input from the university in terms of an academic standpoint rather than financial standpoint.

[9:17:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ inquired as to where the university stands with regard to the governor's budget and the university's budget requests, including the university's deferred maintenance budget.

MR. HAMILTON responded that the university won't receive the funds [to address its deferred maintenance]. The university owns a massive amount of property/buildings and has a deferred maintenance list that totals about \$700 million. It costs about \$50 million a year to keep the deferred maintenance at \$700 million a year. Mr. Hamilton clarified that the deferred maintenance to which he's speaking is standard engineering-determined maintenance requirements. He mentioned his hope that there would be a larger vision [of the budget and deferred maintenance] such that a specified amount of deferred maintenance is addressed each year for the next five years. He acknowledged that although future legislatures can't be bound by it, the notion could allow for planning of a capital expense that could impact construction companies and apprenticeship programs. If the aforementioned could be timed in conjunction with an Alaska pipeline, Alaskan companies would've been built up to the point that they could bid on the pipeline. Mr. Hamilton emphasized that [deferred maintenance] has been the Board of Regents' number one request.

[9:22:19 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER related that the experimental farm in Wasilla is under the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), and the community college is under the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). He asked whether there's any long-range plan for the property that sits between the experimental farm and the community college. Representative Keller related his perception

that the experimental farm isn't engaged in agricultural research aimed at the Mat-Su Valley.

MR. HAMILTON said that the experimental farm engages in activities that are and are not directly related to crops. There are experiments regarding how game animals forage and digest in order to determine the best way to predict sizes of animal herds. He alluded to some exciting things that may be happening at the experimental farm.

[9:24:41 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER inquired as to the proportion of the university's budget that funds administrative activities, and further inquired as to how it compares to other similar universities.

MR. HAMILTON answered that the relative numbers are continuously compared and indicate consistency with the national average, which he characterized as solid evidence that the university is under what it should be for administrative activities. He mentioned the Alaska factor, the fact that there are 16 campuses scattered throughout the state, which results in replication and duplication of administrative services. He related that this year the university statewide has made cuts. For example, there were six vice presidents statewide and now it's down to four and the university isn't seeking replacements for the two vacant positions. The university is on track for reducing its travel budget by 10 percent. A similar look at administrative costs is being performed by UAF. Specifically to Representative Gardner's question, Mr. Hamilton said he could provide the statistics in which the university compares itself administratively to other similarly situated universities. He mentioned that the university is very comparable administratively to other similarly situated universities.

[9:27:31 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER then inquired as to the portion of the budget that's for administration.

MR. HAMILTON offered to provide that information to the committee.

[9:27:49 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON praised the university's efforts with regard to distance education because it allows those living in rural areas to receive credits, obtain training, and ultimately get jobs in the local area. Chair Seaton further praised the UA for educating Alaskans where they're located at the time.

[9:29:38 AM](#)

MR. HAMILTON, returning to his earlier comments, highlighted that the state, and hence university attendance, is very regionalized. In fact, those students graduating from Diamond High School who want to attend an Alaska university attend UAA while those students graduating from Lathrop High School attend UAF. He related his wish that the regionalization didn't exist because the opportunities that exist in the UA system are remarkable. He noted that he tries hard to offer some things only at one campus, but the regionalization impacts that.

[9:31:08 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:31 a.m. to 9:35 a.m.

HB 126-FOSTER CARE/CINA/EDUCATION OF HOMELESS

[9:35:10 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 126, "An Act relating to continuing the secondary public education of a homeless student; relating to the purpose of certain laws as they relate to children; relating to tuition waivers, loans, and medical assistance for a child placed in out-of-home care by the state; relating to foster care; relating to children in need of aid; relating to foster care transition to independent living; and relating to juvenile programs and institutions."

[9:35:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE LES GARA, Alaska State Legislature, speaking as the sponsor, said that over the past year he and others have discussed what parts of Alaska's foster care system are fixable. He then stressed how the state is the parent of the foster children and has custody of these children. Representative Gara related that the Casey Family Foundation and the University of Alaska have performed some Alaska-specific studies. In fact, a recent university study has reported that roughly 40 percent of foster care children end up homeless at some point in their

life. He asked the committee to keep the aforementioned in mind as if the committee was the parent of these foster children. He then informed the committee that studies show that one of the indicators a child is going to underachieve is when the child is moved from school-to-school. Furthermore, a national study reports that on average foster children nationwide will transfer schools one to two times during their high school years. Even worse, is that roughly 65 percent of foster children [nationwide] have attended three or more elementary schools and many of those school changes occur in the middle of the year. This legislation doesn't change the Office of Children's Services' (OCS) ability to maintain a child in one stable home, he noted.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA related that the national government has taken a certain percentage of foster youth, just those awaiting foster care, and provided funding to school districts so that youth are given transportation funds. Therefore, foster care youth who move within the same district can stay in the same school. The aforementioned, he clarified, only covers those foster youth who are waiting or in emergency foster care not those foster youth who go from one home to another. One of the studies provided in the committee packet relates that the arrest rate among foster youth is 10 times the average of those youth not in foster care. The question for all of these issues is: what can be done to provide foster care youth with a more stable educational experience and what can be done to provide foster youth with greater opportunity than they have now. He then mentioned that nationally foster care youth attend college in about half the numbers as youth not in foster care.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA related that a foster care conference was held this fall during which some very narrow and cost effective solutions were found. He noted that the committee has been provided a proposed committee substitute (CS) that corrects some of the problems found in the original legislation.

[9:40:52 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ moved to adopt CSHB 126, Version 26-LS0309\S, Mischel, 2/24/09, as the working document.

CHAIR SEATON objected for the purpose of discussion.

[9:41:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARA explained that Sections 4, 5, and 9 in Version S includes the statutory definition of "out-of-home care." Section 10, borrowed from the State of Minnesota, provides an immunity provision such that there's no legal right of action against a social worker should he/she miss a monthly [home] visit. In order to allow for the option to extend foster care to the age of 21, conforming language in Section 13 was necessary. Sections 14 and 16 adopt the "out-of-home care" definition. Section 17 provides a monetary living expense stipend in an amount that is not less than the daily rate provided to a licensed foster parent for necessary living expenses. This stipend can be received by the foster care youth for up to a year. The language in Section 17 is meant to be flexible in terms of the amount the foster care youth receives and its duration.

[9:44:52 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON removed his objection. There being no further objection, Version S was before the committee.

[9:45:17 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARA then reviewed various sections of Version S. Section 1 specifies that transportation funds will be provided for those students who move to another school within the same school district. Furthermore, when feasible the student will be kept in the same school in order to avoid foster care students from bouncing between various schools. A similar program, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvement Act of 2001, is being successfully utilized in the Municipality of Anchorage.

[9:46:28 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER pointed out that the requirements don't apply if a student changes district, or if the superintendant doesn't find it to be in a student's best academic interest. She inquired as to the sponsor's view on other types of waivers. She explained that she is a big believer in neighborhood schools and a foster child might benefit from doing all the things the foster family does. Although it may be in the foster child's academic interest to stay at their original school, often the academic issue isn't the primary concern for a child trying to fit into a new environment.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA suggested that Representative Gardner consult with some of the experts on this issue. However, he offered that many foster youth are changing schools during the school year. The academic consequences of the aforementioned, especially with the trauma associated with a foster care change, is terrible. Representative Gara said that although he could imagine cases in which it may be desirable to place foster youth in a neighborhood school, he expressed concern about a flat rule that would always place the youth in a new school when he/she changes foster care parents.

[9:48:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER clarified that she is interested in a waiver based on something other than academic interest, perhaps the youth's best interest.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA said that would likely make sense, but expressed the need to speak with experts in the area in order to address such.

[9:49:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON inquired as to whether [Section 1] only affects a single school year or is forever.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA, referring to page 2, highlighted that the language refers to the standard of "the student's best academic interest". The legislation, as written, would allow a child to attend another school the next school year, if it's in the student's best interest. Adding the neighborhood school preference as suggested by Representative Gardner would require language specifying that such could occur when it's appropriate for the youth and in the best interest of the youth. The problem, however, is that it's not always that neat. He highlighted the difficulty in specifying which placements are stable. Representative Gara clarified that the desire is to avoid the school changes during the semester, especially for those youth who are transferring to many foster families.

[9:50:57 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON inquired as to who determines the best academic interest of the youth.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA answered that the school district would make the determination. He suggested that the committee hear from

two individuals who make these determinations in the Anchorage School District for those foster youth and homeless youth who aren't in permanent foster care.

9:51:49 AM

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER surmised that the sponsor has implied that OCS is moving children around, which is problematic. He questioned whether limiting waivers to only youth who move and the academic considerations would eliminate OCS's ability to make a determination based on social matters.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA replied no. He specified that this legislation doesn't attempt to micromanage what OCS considers to be the most appropriate placement for a youth. The OCS has a duty to serve the best interest of the youth. This legislation doesn't stop OCS from doing a placement as it currently does, rather Section 1 only specifies that if a change is made by OCS such that the foster youth would go to another school transportation funding would provided, if it's determined to be in the child's best interest to stay in the same school. Representative Gara reiterated that [Section 1 of Version S] doesn't impact OCS placement decisions; rather it merely speaks to funding to the school district after a decision is made.

9:54:13 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GARA, continuing his sectional analysis, informed the committee that nationally only half of all foster youth attend college as compared to their peers. He noted that there is some college aid available, including scholarships from the Casey Family Foundation, the university, and OCS. Section 2 provides needs-based aid to foster youth in order that they can attend higher education. He reminded the committee of a few years ago when legislation, commonly know as the aspire bill, passed to provide college aid for youth. The legislation aimed to provide college scholarships to foster youth, but the fundraising effort to obtain private funds hasn't happened at this point. The legislature has made a determination that foster youth would need assistance in attending college. He highlighted that many college students have a parent, a "life line," to call during the college years, but foster youth don't have that opportunity once foster care ends. He noted that part of the effort is to include living expenses for higher education because living expenses are a large part of the problem for foster youth.

9:56:54 AM

CHAIR SEATON, referring to page 2, line 2, inquired from where the language "under 29 years of age" came.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA noted that the language originally referred to "under 23 years of age." The question, he specified, is how long an individual who was in foster care should be given to complete college. The availability of the grant program has been extended to 10 years after high school.

9:57:55 AM

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER, referring to page 2, lines 25-26, inquired as to where the term "state-supported educational institution" is defined.

9:58:24 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GARA explained that the program proposed in HB 126 likely won't have enough funds to send a foster youth to Harvard. The grant program is limited to the state university system, including the Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTEC). He mentioned that AVTEC representatives want to bring in youth. In response to Chair Seaton, Representative Gara confirmed that the intent is to limit [the grant program] to the State of Alaska university system.

9:59:55 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GARA then turned the committee's attention to the other main sections of Version S. One provision extends the option of foster care to age 21 for which there is federal funding available. The notion is that if a youth finds a foster care placement, why take them out if the youth and the parents believe the placement is beneficial. Similarly, this legislation would extend Medicaid benefits to age 21, which is essentially the current practice. The last major provision provides a year of living assistance, if necessary, when the youth leaves foster care. The fiscal note from the Department of Health and Social Services specifies an estimate of \$130,000, which the department has said is a low estimate. Still, doubling that estimate is a small amount, he opined. He also pointed out that half of the state's 2,000 foster youth are in the homes of relatives and the other half are in non-relative homes. Therefore, he estimated that maybe 100-200 foster youth

would come out of foster care in a year, of which a certain amount would be [stable].

10:02:04 AM

CHAIR SEATON, noting that HB 126 has a House Health and Social Services Standing Committee referral, reminded the committee it would primarily focus on the educational impacts of HB 126.

10:02:30 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked if foster youth can refuse to remain in state custody the extended timeframe. She further asked if there is a requirement for the foster youth to be employed or attending school rather than just merely living in someone's house.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA clarified that there is no requirement that the foster youth has to stay in foster care to age 21. The aforementioned would be up to the foster youth and the foster family. Therefore, it's an option. Furthermore, Representative Gara related that no standards have been developed regarding how to qualify for foster care up to age 21.

[HB 126 was held over.]

10:03:15 AM

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:03 a.m.