

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 13, 2009

8:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Paul Seaton, Chair
Representative Cathy Engstrom Munoz, Vice Chair
Representative Bryce Edgmon
Representative Wes Keller
Representative Peggy Wilson
Representative Berta Gardner

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Robert L. "Bob" Buch

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative David Guttenberg

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 33

"An Act relating to compulsory school attendance; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD AND HELD

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON STRUCTURING A NEEDS-BASED SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM FOR ALASKA

- HEARD AND HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 33

SHORT TITLE: RAISE COMPULSORY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AGE

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) MUNOZ

01/20/09	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/9/09
01/20/09	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/20/09	(H)	EDC, FIN
03/13/09	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM CAPITOL 106

WITNESS REGISTER

JACQUELINE (JACKIE) MARTIN, Executive Committee Member
Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS) of the Grand Camp;
Counsel Member, ANS Camp 70 Local Camp
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Her testimony in support of HB 33 was read into the record by Representative Munoz.

TERRY HARVEY, Staff
Representative Cathy Munoz
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HB 33, on behalf of Representative Munoz, prime sponsor.

ELI ROLFE, Student
Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on HB 33.

REBECCA LEE, Student
Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on HB 33.

BRETT DILLINGHAM, Co-Chair
Alaska State Literacy Association (ASLA) Advocacy Committee
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Expressed the need for modifications to HB 33.

PATRICIA GEORGE, Co-Chair
Alaska State Literacy Association (ASLA) Advocacy Committee
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Encouraged the committee to amend HB 33 in order to change the compulsory school attendance age to 6.

LYDIA GARCIA, Executive Director
NEA-Alaska
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 33.

JULIE MACHAKOS
Home School Parent
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: During hearing of HB 33, questioned whether raising the compulsory school attendance age would necessarily

provide an 18-year-old student more of a reason to attend school than a 16-year-old student.

PEGGY COWAN, Superintendant
Juneau School District
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Encouraged the committee to forward HB 33 and support it.

CODY BALDWIN, Student
Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on HB 33.

JORDON CURDOW, Student
Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on HB 33.

MARK CHOATE, President
Juneau Board of Education
Juneau School District
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 33.

DIANE BARRANS, Executive Director
Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education
Department of Education and Early Development (EED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the roundtable discussion on structuring a needs-based scholarship program for Alaska.

SAICHI OBA, Assistant Vice President for Students
University of Alaska Fairbanks
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the roundtable discussion on structuring a needs-based scholarship program for Alaska.

HARRY NEED, Graduate Student
University of Alaska Anchorage
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the roundtable discussion on structuring a needs-based scholarship program for Alaska.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:04:08 AM](#)

CHAIR PAUL SEATON called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:04 a.m. Representatives Seaton, Wilson, Munoz, Keller, and Gardner were present at the call to order. Representative Edgmon arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 33-RAISE COMPULSORY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AGE

[8:04:32 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 33, "An Act relating to compulsory school attendance; and providing for an effective date."

[8:05:27 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ, speaking as the sponsor of HB 33, said that she was motivated to introduce HB 33 due to what she has observed in Juneau. She related that in Juneau one of four-five youth don't complete school. Anecdotally, these drop-outs aren't necessarily failing academically, but rather there could be bullying issues and interpersonal problems. In fact, she related her understanding that whether a student drops out could be correlated with the failure of freshman physical education. Allowing youth to [end there secondary education] at the age of 16 sends the wrong message. Across Alaska, 57,000 Alaskan residents over the age of 18 don't have a high school diploma. Furthermore, 4,000 youth are dropping out of school every year. This legislation proposes to change statute while maintaining the existing exemptions for those youth who are home schooled, attend private schools, as well as those youth who meet the requirements of the law prior to age 18. Representative Munoz opined that strengthening the law and extending the mandatory attendance age is a tool that will empower parents since parents will have the ability to say the youth has to stay in school and the law will support that. The change proposed in HB 33 is supported by school districts across the state, including the Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and Cordova School Districts. Representative Munoz expressed the need to work hard to continue the successes such as in the area of vocational education in order to find meaningful work and experiences for students. She pointed out that the committee packet should include a letter of support from Anchorage Superintendent Carol Comeau.

[8:09:37 AM](#)

JACQUELINE (JACKIE) MARTIN, Executive Committee Member, Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS) of the Grand Camp; Counsel Member, ANS Camp 70 Local Camp, had her testimony read into the record by Representative Munoz [original punctuation provided]:

We support HB 33; to encourage and give young people a chance to return to school to complete their education. We can read negative into House Bill 33 and say that 50% of our students are (commonly called) "Drop outs," but we say we have 50% graduates and the rest are "Push out."

Please accept these comments as encouragement to pass HB-33. I offer these answers to the questions put forth by your Education Committee.

1. What are the basis of a high school diploma

Basis for a high school diploma comes easily with a positive family and community; even then, sometimes this isn't enough, they need a second chance once obstacles have been identified. The second chance is HB-33.

A high school diploma is hard to come by, rules and laws change not quickly but fast enough to see a difference in graduates. "No Child Left Behind" "Qualifying exam," and other obstacles such as drugs and alcohol are made available to the children. There are many social issues in large and small communities. Please don't misinterpret me, I believe in some of the new laws and changes.

2. Is there an inherent problem with the design of graduation requirements that produce drop outs?

The Tlingit tribe in this area can take up hours of your time telling you sorrowful stories in our own Juneau school district. Some inherent problems are discrimination, social issues, and poverty.

Yes, it is an inherent problem, not only in Alaska but, it is a national problem. There are many beautiful teachers that give more than themselves; they also use their own funds, and I offer these teachers kudos.

How does a community instill zero dropout tolerance of its community? Pass this Bill and let's get our communities back on track. I believe in the old saying "it takes a community to raise a child".

3. Is the high school qualifying exam a positive or a negative as relates to student performance and graduation?

I spoke about the percent success rate among the Alaska Natives, so now let's address the negative. According to newspapers we [Alaska Native and American Indians] have the highest rate of drunks, the most suicides, the most thieves, the most sex abuser, and we have the highest percentage of drop outs. I would like to see solution to these statistics; it is tiresome to read statistics without solutions.

I heard a speaker talk about herself as an Alaska Native [she is a successful person today was perhaps talking about the natives as a whole] as being invisible in the school system. Time is changing relationships among the Natives and Governments and local residents. I do see many good changes, I see Alaska Native gaining respect in our community, and I'm 66 years old and have seen more natives and non natives working together, there is hope for change among our students. I believe with the passage of this bill, change will begin and the drop out rate will lessen, not immediately, but it will begin soon.

Is the qualifying exam a good thing? Yes, it helps our successful natives' offers an equal chance in the national population.

Then on the other hand this is a difficult exam for many and many oppose this exam, I believe also that this is one of many reasons why many drop out of school today, they can't pass the exam.

Conclusion

Thank you for your time, we realize that there is much opposition to this House Bill; we heard many statistics about the Native Peoples' problems. Today we the ANS Grand Camp and ANS Camp 70 stand in support

of HB-33 as a beginning of many solutions to come for our students.

8:14:40 AM

TERRY HARVEY, Staff, Representative Cathy Munoz, Alaska State Legislature, paraphrased from the following prepared statement, which read [original punctuation provided]:

On February of this year President Obama in his State of the Nation address to Congress stated,

"Dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself; it's quitting on your country. And this country needs and values the talents of every American."

That's a powerful statement. "Dropping out of High School is no longer an option."

The premise of HB 33 is to take that statement and bring it home to Alaska. We take that statement and add,

"Dropping out of High School is no longer an option for students in Alaska until they reach the age of 18.

The current age for an exit early from school in Alaska is 16. There are exemptions in our statutes, but otherwise, until 16, you must remain in school. HB 33 proposes a change in that statute and says to our young people in Alaska, "You no longer have our permission to leave school before you graduate."

That's also a pretty strong statement. But it is meant to be. It's tough love. Compulsory attendance age laws in our nation are tough love and have been in place in Alaska since 1929.

"Dropping out of high school is no longer an option."

It's a very strong statement. But if you recall from last Wednesday's House Committee on Education, during our round table discussion on the subject of the dropout dilemma in Alaska, there were equally strong statements made.

Karl Rose, Director of the Alaska Association of School Boards, who is here today in support of this bill, spoke about the effort of solving this problem, he stated;

"Schools cannot do this alone"

We agree. It takes a community to address a problem of this magnitude. Karl has stated in the past, "This is an issue we all own." The Legislature is a part of that community in Alaska and indeed is part owner of this problem. HB 33 is how you, as legislators, can be a part of the solution, by addressing one component, one piece of the puzzle.

Eric McCormick was here from the Dept of Education on Wednesday. He spoke of the recent gathering last month that included the Department of Education, School Boards, School Districts, and Teachers, who met to find ways to address the early exit problem in Alaska. He said we will approach this with the new 3 R's

"Rigor, Relevance, Relationships"

HB 33 requires the rigor of students, and of educators, to make it all the way to graduation. This morning we will no doubt discuss the issue of 'Competence versus Endurance'. That's a valid debate. We will discuss competence, and diversity, and alternative programming, which are designed to engage our students on whatever level is necessary to reach success. We welcome that discussion as it directly correlates to our bill. Because without the diversity in school programming that reaches out to the individual needs of each student, raising the compulsory age will have little effect.

Getting back to competency versus endurance, make no mistake; getting the 21 credits required to graduate from our schools does require endurance. Anyone who has graduated from high school can attest to the endurance needed to get that diploma, some of us in this room, certainly I can. But in order to endure the rigor of getting that diploma, we must do everything we can to encourage our students,

especially our at risk students, to stick it out, to make it to the end.

HB 33 does that. It tells everyone there is an expectation that until the age of 18 you will be in school, it's in our statutes, it's a minimum requirement.

Walter Sobeloff, who has been in the education business in Alaska for 39 years, 39 years as a teacher, as an administrator, currently as an instructor for people of all ages who have dropped out seeking their GED. Walter was here on Wednesday and said,

"Our responsibility is to look for every possible solution to seek success for our students."

HB 33 is one of those possible solutions that this legislature can seek. I believe we can all agree there is no single solution to this problem. And we say again, HB 33 is only one component towards our common goal.

Karen Martinson, an educator from Sitka, an alternative high school teacher, who knows a great deal about this, stated on Wednesday,

"We need an emergency response"

She is right. HB 33 is that kind of response.

Bottom line, HB 33 represents a public policy statement that the legislature can make to address the commonly used excuse for early exit students;

"Because I can."

To Parents, Teachers, School Boards, Administrators, Citizens of this State, and the Legislature, this bill provides our response to 16 year olds in Alaska. These young people, many of whom, if not most, or even all, are not prepared to make an important decision like this. And we have stacks of evidence sitting right here that is compelling. We know early exit kids will earn far less than those who graduate, that even staying in school for an additional year,

graduate or not, will increase their earning potential substantially. We know if they exit early they will be more likely to be a part of our Corrections system, and not as employees. They will need more in the way of public assistance costing our state multi millions in dollars every year. We can, with HB 33, remove the one excuse most early exit students declare, "Because I can."

8:20:31 AM

MR. HARVEY then directed attention to the committee packet, specifically Attachment A, entitled "Raising the Compulsory School Attendance Age: The case for Reform." Page 2 of Attachment A specifies the "Top Five Reasons Dropouts Identify as Major Factors For Leaving School," which included the student feeling as if he/she had too much freedom and not enough rules in his/her life. Another important aspect of the aforementioned report is that overall enrollment rates among 16-year-olds are lower in states that allow them to dropout at age 16. Mr. Harvey related that a study performed by Joshua Angrist and Alan Krueger utilized a complex equation and studies that found the compulsory age has been affective in raising the percentile rates. He then turned attention to Attachment B, entitled "Stay In School: new Lessons On the Benefits of Raising the Legal School-Leaving Age" by Philip Oreopoulos. The aforementioned study took an academic approach with a complex formula that ultimately predicted that raising compulsory ages to age 17 or 18 had a positive percentage increase [in those staying in school]. The committee packet also includes a study from the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER), which addresses the overall issue of early exits and provides overall general information. He noted that the committee packet should also include the National Education Association's 12-point action plan, which lists mandating high school education at the top of the list. This particular study is specific to Alaska, and thus it was viewed as necessary to include.

8:23:26 AM

MR. HARVEY then informed the committee that the committee packet should include Attachment E entitled "Understanding the Issue of the High school Dropout Age" from a Learning Point Associates report about compulsory school attendance ages. The study relates that in Texas compulsory school age laws are allowed to be raised on a county-by-county basis. The Pasadena school district has done an excellent job of tracking and has had

positive results from changing the compulsory age from 16 to 17 years of age.

[8:24:18 AM](#)

MR. HARVEY, referring to Attachment F, reminded the committee that last fall Senator Lisa Murkowski brought a number of educators in Anchorage together. The aforementioned, he opined, highlights the awareness of this issue in Alaska. He then directed attention to Attachment G, which highlights a specialized alternative program in the Chugach School District that has been successful. The Voyage to Excellence program boasts a 98 percent graduation rate.

[8:25:45 AM](#)

MR. HARVEY, in response to Chair Seaton, clarified that the Chugach School District hasn't mandated a compulsory age of 18. The desire to highlight this program was to merely illustrate its success, even with the existing compulsory age of 16.

[8:26:58 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON inquired as to the meaning of the term "shall" on page 1, line 7, of the bill. He also inquired as to whether there will be any type of enforcement mechanism.

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ answered that "shall" is the current language in statute. The legislation only changes the mandatory compulsory age.

[8:28:05 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON expressed excitement for the support from the school districts for this legislation, as this is not a new idea. She characterized HB 33 as a start, an anchor. The latest brain development research indicates that a 16-year-old isn't capable of making decisions with consequences, which really doesn't materialize until about age 24.

[8:29:49 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER directed attention to the e-mail from Kelly Foreman, which includes statistics that indicate that states with a compulsory attendance age of 17 or 18 have a slightly higher dropout rate that states with a compulsory attendance age of 16. She then highlighted an e-mail from Todd

Brocius that discusses truancy data that is reported federally on a regular basis. She expressed interest in having the truancy data in order to review how 15-year-olds who don't go to school are addressed. She questioned why one would believe those who can't get their 15-year-olds to stay in school would be able to do so until the youth is 17- or 18-years old.

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ said she would obtain the truancy information. Additionally, she recalled that there is information outlining the numbers of dropouts per age. She further recalled a spike in the number of dropouts at age 16.

[8:32:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER recalled her children relating that there were many students who cut school, misbehaved, and did drugs in 9th grade, but not in 11th and 12th grade. She recalled that the students who were problems in 9th grade were gone by the time they would've reached 11th or 12th grade. She surmised that those are the youth being targeted [by HB 33], and pointed out that targeting these youth isn't without risks to the rest of the school population.

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ related that the former principal of the Juneau alternative high school reports that often a single situation, something simple, can result in a student feeling frustrated and wanting to give up. She opined that if the compulsory age is 18-years-old or until the student reaches the specified education requirements, the easy exits wouldn't happen as often.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER said although that approach seems reasonable, the chart [provided by Kelly Foreman] doesn't seem to bear that out.

MR. HARVEY pointed out one of the frustrations with the dropout issue is accurately tracking it because states are compiling, reporting, and tracking the data differently. Furthermore, the information could be interpreted to mean that compulsory age rates don't really make a difference.

[8:35:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER suggested then that perhaps comparing over time a state that had a compulsory age of 16 that went to 18 years of age would make more sense.

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ offered to obtain such information.

[8:35:55 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON opened public testimony.

[8:36:51 AM](#)

ELI ROLFE, Student, Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School, opined that the reasons students dropout are various.

[8:38:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER inquired as to what he thinks of HB 33.

MR. ROLFE said he believes the proposal [encompassed in HB 33] seems good, for the most part. However, he questioned what will happen to those students who don't attend school. For those students who don't attend school in order to work and earn money for their family, fines for not attending school would be counterproductive.

[8:39:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ related her understanding that existing law includes an exemption for emancipated students who have to earn a living, and this law would not change that.

[8:40:19 AM](#)

REBECCA LEE, Student, Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School, expressed concern for those students who have to face things that others never do, including having a child and not living at home. She related that when she, under the age of 16, dropped out of school she didn't see a truancy officer for 1½ year. She acknowledged that students are too young to realize the importance of school. In fact, she recalled that it wasn't until the middle of her junior year that she discovered the importance of school. Therefore, she opined that raising the compulsory attendance age is probably the best scenario.

[8:41:22 AM](#)

MR. ROLFE added that perhaps speaking with students as equals would be helpful in terms of helping potential dropouts understand that they can't survive as well without graduating from high school.

8:41:54 AM

MS. LEE opined that students have more of an influence on their peers than teachers, which are often viewed as authority figures "who are trying to put us down."

8:42:21 AM

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON shared that she was a student who dropped out of school, had a baby, and then returned to school, and therefore has some understanding of the situations teenagers face. She remarked that just because a student drops out, it doesn't mean that he/she can't return to high school. She thanked the students for having the courage to testify today.

8:43:01 AM

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER asked if the alternative school Ms. Lee and Mr. Rolfe are attending have helped them clarify the goals to achieve graduation.

MS. LEE identified confrontations with other students and teachers as an issue. Confrontations among students can be ignored because the school is large enough. However, confrontations with teachers are another matter since students have to be with them for lengthy periods of time. She characterized the environment in the Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School as a big family. She related that on Fridays, everyone works on how students will graduate and how they will go to college. Basically, [staff in Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School] get to know the students. The aforementioned makes a big difference, she opined.

8:44:42 AM

BRETT DILLINGHAM, Co-Chair, Alaska State Literacy Association (ASLA) Advocacy Committee, informed the committee that the Alaska State Literacy Association has over 500 members, making it the largest educational organization in the state. He related that the members of ASLA would like modifications to HB 33, particularly changing the compulsory start age to age 6. For those children who don't start school until age 7, almost all of those children are behind in reading and arrive unprepared for the testing that begins at age 8. A very high percentage of the aforementioned students have behavioral problems and become drop outs later in life. Therefore, ASLA

believes that a compulsory start age of 6 would take care of many of the problems down the road.

8:47:08 AM

PATRICIA GEORGE, Co-Chair, Alaska State Literacy Association (ASLA) Advocacy Committee, provided the following testimony:

The Alaska State Literacy Association strongly believes that mandatory school age attendance age should be lowered from age 7 to 6. There is several House and Senate bills currently under consideration that would provide quality preschool and kindergarten programs. In your packet you'll see the Alaska State Literacy Association's position paper on literacy development in Alaska children ages 3 to 5. However, we believe that ... our children need to be required to attend school by age 6. We have provided the committee with a chart and summary showing that ... there are 32 states that require students attend school by age 6.

From my personal experience as a First grade teacher, there is no way to compel parents to have their children in school ... to compel students to attend school. ... if they're not at their [school] regularly and on time, they miss critical learning steps. I know that there are parents who feel that changing statute will infringe on their rights as parents, but it is my understanding that the change in mandatory school attendance age doesn't change any of the waivers already built into the law. It is important to have children who attend public school come to school regularly so that they don't miss the critical steps in the learning process. House Bill 33 is an appropriate vehicle to make the change in state statute. We urge you to amend House Bill 33 to lower the mandatory school age from 7 to 6. We provided ... a proposed amendment. Thank you and we'd be happy to answer any questions.

8:49:15 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked if there are any reasons involved parents might not want their 5- or 6-year-olds to attend school for a full day of school. More specifically, Representative

Gardner asked whether full-day school is appropriate for all 5- and 6-year-olds.

MS. GEORGE clarified that ASLA is requesting compulsory school attendance for children age 6, which is normally the age of a first grader. As a First Grade teacher, Ms. George related that even many competent parents don't believe that their children have to be at school on time or even come on a Monday, say. The aforementioned, she opined, stems from the lack of a mandate requiring a child under the age of 7 to attend school.

[8:50:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER specified that she is referring to parents who are well engaged. She opined that there are some children who aren't developmentally ready to attend public school, or their parents are doing things with the children, but it's not formally home schooling. She related her belief that full-day kindergarten may not be appropriate or in the best interest for all children age 5 or even 6.

MR. DILLINGHAM related his understanding and suggested that perhaps there's a way to identify such children. He further suggested that perhaps a waiver or an exemption could be utilized.

[8:52:26 AM](#)

MS. GEORGE pointed out that the committee packet includes documentation regarding the mandatory school attendance age in each state. The chart illustrates that most states with a compulsory school attendance age of 5 also provide for a waiver. As a teacher, Ms. George related her belief that it's important to meet the needs of every child in the classroom, even those children who aren't as developmentally developed as the remainder of the class. Most teachers, she further related, recognize that students enter school with a broad range of abilities. However, she pointed out that as the student ages, the gap between the "cans and cannots" widens.

[8:54:03 AM](#)

LYDIA GARCIA, Executive Director, NEA-Alaska, paraphrased from the following prepared statement [original punctuation provided]:

I'm here today to testify in support of House Bill 33. This bi-partisan legislation is an attempt to address the problem of, quite frankly, children not remaining in school.

The reasons teenagers decide to drop out of school are many and varied, but certainly there are times when it is just the fact that legally they do not have to attend school which helps them out the door.

House Bill 33 will raise the upper end of mandatory attendance in Alaska's schools to the age of 18. While this is certainly not a silver bullet, it is a good ingredient in any recipe for success in life. As the sponsor has stated, the more education one receives the better earning potential one acquires and a better chance of personal success ensues.

About six weeks ago, 450 public school employee delegates, elected by their peers met at the Anchorage Hilton and set the policy for the coming year for NEA-Alaska. One of the resolutions passed by the 2009 NEA-Alaska Delegate Assembly stated **"NEA-Alaska believes the legislature should establish policies for non-compliance with Alaska's compulsory attendance laws."**

This legislation takes those laws a step further. It is the belief, however, of NEA-Alaska that a law with no teeth would serve little purpose.

Alaska's school employees work hard to offer our children opportunities that prepare them for life. We cannot fulfill the promise of a high quality education for Alaska's children if they are not in our classrooms.

We applaud the efforts and direction of House Bill 33 and ask that you move this legislation from committee.

[8:56:53 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON pointed out that the committee packet includes Attachment D entitled "NEA's 12 Point Plan for Reducing the School Dropout Rate." The aforementioned plan calls for a compulsory school attendance age until age 21 or the individual

receives a diploma. He asked if that's the position of NEA-Alaska as well.

MS. GARCIA replied yes, adding that the intent is not to be punitive, but rather finding systems to build in to assist students to succeed in education. At times that may look differently due to alternative education options. Furthermore, special needs of the student could cause the circumstances to vary.

[8:58:13 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON related his understanding that NEA's position is to mandate high school graduation or equivalency as compulsory for everyone below the age of 21.

MS. GARCIA specified that age 18 would be the ideal situation. However, reaching out to the 19- to 21-year-olds is an option for providing education to those who want it, but can't accomplish it by age 18. She clarified that the intent isn't that youth need to stay in school until age 21.

[8:59:12 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON related support for the concept of HB 33. However, as pointed out by Todd Brocious in Attachment J, there's no uniform or standardized response to truancy in Alaska's public schools because such laws are explicitly given to districts to establish their procedures. Furthermore, statistics provided by Kelly Foreman, seem to indicate that this may look good on paper but may not achieve exactly what is desired. Therefore, he questioned whether more than merely raising the bar from age 16 to 18 is necessary.

MS. GARCIA related her perspective that raising the compulsory school attendance age is not the limit of what needs to happen. She suggested that there should be an infusion of funds to schools to enhance the programs, enhance professional development for educators, and enhance opportunities for families, schools, and community partnerships.

[9:01:20 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON relayed that every study he has read suggests raising the compulsory attendance age in conjunction with changing the delivery of education. However, he cautioned the

members with regard to discussions of other changes because only HB 33 is before the committee.

[9:02:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON questioned whether there is any merit to reviewing Alaska's truancy laws to support HB 33 going forward.

MS. GARCIA answered that she always encourages review of current laws with regard to whether they're working and if not, what's necessary for them to be more effective.

[9:03:05 AM](#)

MS. GARCIA, in response to Representative Gardner, clarified that NEA's 12-point action plan is the national action plan and doesn't include NEA-Alaska's resolution encouraging the legislature to develop policies for noncompliance with Alaska's school attendance laws.

[9:04:19 AM](#)

JULIE MACHAKOS, Home School Parent, referring to the previous comment that students should be allowed the chance to complete education, said that children have a chance to do so whether it's compulsory or not. For the two young people who testified today, it is apparent that they have a reason to be in school and are taking responsibility for their own education. However, she questioned whether raising the compulsory school attendance age would necessarily provide an 18-year-old student more of a reason to attend school than a 16-year-old student. Ms. Machakos further questioned whether compulsory school attendance laws create a desire to learn in students. Perhaps changing the way things are done in schools would make more of a difference than compulsory education. She noted that she likes the notion of an alternative school in which students are very involved in their education.

[9:07:12 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER commented that the best thing that students can have is caring parents. He opined that it's a dangerous situation if the state becomes the parent and takes over the responsibility of the parent.

MS. MACHAKOS related her belief that for those children whose parents aren't involved, it's important for the children to be

motivated to learn, which seems to be the case in Juneau's alternative high school.

[9:08:58 AM](#)

PEGGY COWAN, Superintendent, Juneau School District, paraphrased from a written statement, which read as follows [original punctuation provided with handwritten additions]:

One of the JSD Board of Education priorities for this legislative session is increasing the compulsory attendance age. The Board's priority statement on this issue reads in part,

"The current law requires attendance until age 16. So far in the JSD this year, 46 percent of dropouts were under age 18. Increasing the mandatory age to 18 helps prevent students who are not mature enough from making decisions to forgo basic education and provides a chance for them to meet performance standards and pass the HSQE [high school qualifying exam]."

We own the drop out problem as a district. We are addressing the drop out problem in our district. Since I became superintendent the graduation rate has increased by 22% in the Juneau School District. We worked with our borough and established local truancy penalties and will continue to work on the penalty and enforcement side. We still have a ways to go and room for improvement. We will continue to do what we can. This is a big enough problem that we need to team with the state. At the policy level the legislature can assist districts by raising the compulsory attendance age and clearly communicating that the state of Alaska believes that education is important for all of our children.

As Representative Wilson stated, brain research clearly shows that the judgement portion of the brain in a 15-16 year old child is not well developed.

The legislature will empower parents to keep their 16 and 17 students in school with this law. Now, parents can NOT stop their child from dropping out on their 16th birthday.

The correlations with dropping out are ALL negative - greater chance of poverty, ill health, incarceration, domestic violence, under employment and need for costly public services. This is not the future we want for the children of Alaska.

Misconceptions of dropouts - many students are successful - passed HSGQE.

This is an opportunity for the legislature to take a stand against the state's high drop out rate.

[9:12:05 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON questioned how the earlier student witness who testified to, at the age of 16, being out of school for a year-and-a-half with no contact from a truancy officer.

MS. COWAN acknowledged that there's a problem in that area. She mentioned that the Juneau School District is in need of more [truancy officers]. The Juneau School District has one truancy tracker in the district. Ms. Cowan explained that truancy is an offense at the state level, but it's difficult to pursue at the state level because the dockets are so full. Therefore, truancy was changed such that a ticket is issued similar to the ticket issued for [underage] smoking. The Kenai School District does the same, she noted. School district employees can ticket truancy offenses, she said. In response to Chair Seaton, Ms. Cowan indicated she would provide information regarding the Juneau School District's truancy efforts and their effectiveness.

[9:13:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON inquired as to the teacher student ratio at Juneau's alternative high school.

MS. COWAN answered that it's the same as it is in the mainstream high school, 26.25:1. However, the teachers use a variety of methods, including teaming, to reduce class size.

[9:14:59 AM](#)

CODY BALDWIN, Student, Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School, related his belief that students need to be able to know how to use the freedom they receive. Changing the compulsory school attendance age from 16 to 18 years of age doesn't mean

these students will know what to do with that freedom. He recalled that of the top five reasons dropouts identify as major factors for leaving school, the top reason was classes weren't interesting. Mr. Baldwin opined that the first three years of high school aren't particularly interesting; the mandatory classes are not compelling. He said he didn't believe raising the compulsory school attendance age is going to help.

[9:16:58 AM](#)

JORDON CURDOW, Student, Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School, suggested that the alternative high school is well run, with smaller class sizes that provide more individual support for students.

[9:18:17 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER inquired as to what would be used to compel a 15-year-old dropout to return to school.

MR. BALDWIN opined that having to be in school to obtain a driver's license could be a compelling reason to stay in school.

CHAIR SEATON encouraged the students to forward along any ideas regarding how to keep youth in school.

[9:19:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON surmised that the students who testified were relating the positive aspect of having additional teacher attention. She asked if there is a difference in the teachers of the regular high school versus those in the alternative high school.

MR. CURDOW replied yes, adding that the regular high school teachers are biased against those students they dislike.

MR. BALDWIN interjected that the teachers at the regular high school don't seem to care about personal issues. He said he has a connection with each of his alternative high school teachers. He characterized the alternative high school as a big family.

MR. CURDOW opined that it helps to have teachers with whom the students can relate.

[9:23:29 AM](#)

MARK CHOATE, President, Juneau Board of Education, Juneau School District, related that last year, despite efforts otherwise, 57 percent of Native students [in the Juneau School District] didn't graduate, commonly referred to as "pushout." The state average [for Native students who don't graduate] is over 30-35 percent. Not graduating, he opined, takes away an individual's options and future. More importantly, not graduating takes away the options and future for society as a whole. He highlighted that other countries have an understanding of the importance of education; mastery of technology is the key to success for any society, he stressed. However, in the U.S. that same importance is not prioritized. This costs society across the board. Mr. Choate then turned to the advantages of youth staying in school and applauded the idea of obtaining a driver's license as a reason to stay in school. He also suggested that employers shouldn't employ those youth who aren't attending school; Juneau's alternative high school will work around the schedules of its students. In conclusion, Mr. Choate encouraged keeping every child in school because it's the only way society will be successful.

[9:27:12 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON pointed out that local school boards and superintendents control how education is delivered in the local district. He then returned attention to the top five reasons students dropout, which can be controlled at the local level point of delivery of education. Chair Seaton expressed difficulty in understanding how forcing students to stay in school two more years will impact the outcome of the pushout.

[9:28:33 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that HB 33 would be held over.

[9:28:52 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease form 9:28 a.m. to 9:34 a.m.

[9:34:31 AM](#)

OVERVIEW(S): ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON STRUCTURING A NEEDS-BASED SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM FOR ALASKA

[9:34:52 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the final order of business would be a roundtable discussion on structuring a needs-based scholarship program for Alaska. He explained that the goal with today's meeting is to develop principles to incorporate into legislation for a needs-based scholarship

[9:36:48 AM](#)

DIANE BARRANS, Executive Director, Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, Department of Education and Early Development (EED), opined that agreement rests on the fact that the current needs-based aid in the state is minimal. A program has been in place for the last three years from which needs-based grants can be offered. With the additional funding the legislature approved this year, the program can offer grants in the maximum amount of \$2,000 to approximately 1,200 students. With annual public institutional attendance costs ranging from \$14,000-\$18,000 a year, the aforementioned grant is the tip of the iceberg. The only other, non-loan, statewide program is the University of Alaska Scholars program, which offers a four-year award for those students who finish in the top 10 percent of their class. However, due to funding constraints of the university, the dollar value a student can receive annually is capped. Therefore, the University of Alaska Scholars program doesn't pay for the cost of attendance for those who qualify for the award.

[9:38:46 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON inquired as to the amount of the cap of the University of Alaska Scholars program.

[9:38:53 AM](#)

SAICHI OBA, Assistant Vice President for Students, University of Alaska Fairbanks, the cap for the University of Alaska Scholars award is \$11,000 over the course of five years. In further response to Chair Seaton, Mr. Oba specified that the award would be equally divided over four years. However, the student has up to five years to use all the funds. He confirmed that the student receiving this award would receive approximately \$2,700 per year.

[9:40:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON asked if the existing needs-based scholarship of \$2,000 is given per year.

MS. BARRANS answered that the \$2,000 needs-based scholarship is given per year with a student limit of \$8,000 over a 4-year period.

[9:41:14 AM](#)

MS. BARRANS, in response to Representative Gardner, explained that when determining need for the state grant program, the average cost of attendance is utilized. The cost of attendance generally includes living expenses, book allowance, tuition and fees, some transportation, and miscellaneous costs. Therefore, the \$18,000 is all included. In further response to Representative Gardner, Ms. Barrans clarified that the \$2,000 needs-based scholarship is grant funds.

[9:42:02 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON surmised then that a UA scholar who also qualifies for the needs-based scholarship would receive approximately \$4,700 per year.

MS. BARRANS confirmed that is correct. She then pointed out that the \$4,700 wouldn't even cover 50 percent of the cost of attendance for one year.

[9:42:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON inquired as to the percentage of students who would qualify for both the needs-based scholarship and the University of Alaska Scholars award.

MS. BARRANS responded that she didn't know. She then pointed out that there is not a needs component with the University of Alaska Scholars program, it's purely merit-based.

[9:42:55 AM](#)

HARRY NEED, Graduate Student, University of Alaska Anchorage, offered to provide a student's perspective regarding financial issues. He also informed the committee that UA students support HB 94.

[9:43:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER inquired as to whether there is any information regarding the number of students who would like

help, but don't qualify for any grants or loans. He also inquired as to what private loans are available for those students who can't receive a Pell grant and don't qualify for the University of Alaska Scholars program.

MS. BARRANS specified that for those who don't qualify for either federal or state grant aid, there are other loan programs in Alaska. For instance, the federal education loan, a relatively low interest loan with annual loan maximums that vary by year and school, is a loan to which students are entitled. The federal education loan varies between \$7,500 and beyond \$12,000 a year. Students are encouraged to seek federal loans first. The state does have its own alternative loan program, which allows undergraduates to borrow up to \$8,500 per year and graduate students to borrow up to \$9,500 per year. The combination of potential financing through the loan programs is substantial. However, there is concern that the student will leave school with substantial debt.

[9:45:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER related that it has been reported to him that for 80 percent of the students there are no options, except a private loan with an interest rate of 6-18 percent.

[9:45:38 AM](#)

MR. NEED related that he has been told that if the UA system is allowed to increase its credit limits in order to allow the student loan corporation to offer loans in the future, up to 80 percent of the students receiving those student loans may not qualify under the new criteria with the new credit limit. Of course, without an increase in the credit limits the loans won't be available and no one can receive the loans, he acknowledged.

[9:46:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GUTTENBERG expressed interest in hearing Mr. Need walk through the student's perspective [on finances]. However, he specifically expressed interest in the single parent who decides to attend college later in life, the student who is eligible for the University of Alaska Scholars program, and the student who isn't.

[9:48:03 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON listed the following financial options: the financial needs grant, the University of Alaska Scholars program, and federal and state loan programs. He asked if there are other programs.

[9:48:33 AM](#)

MS. BARRANS pointed out that for the neediest students Pell grants are available. Next year the Pell grant will increase to a maximum amount of \$5,350 per year. In order to qualify for a Pell grant, the individual would need to be in the lowest economic quartile. Individuals in that situation in Alaska simply aren't going to college now. Those individuals who are going to college in Alaska typically fall in a higher economic quartile, and therefore it can't be assumed that a high percentage of Alaskan students would receive the Pell grant. In response to Representative Wilson, Ms. Barrans estimated that those in the lowest economic quartile would have a total income of less than \$20,000 a year for a family of two to three. Even with a larger family, the total income wouldn't be more than \$35,000 per year.

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON surmised then that those in that category are not continuing to further their education.

[9:50:12 AM](#)

MS. BARRANS informed the committee that individuals in that economic quartile graduate from high school at lower rates. Those that do graduate from high school benefit from postsecondary education at lower rates. Oftentimes, because those in that economic quartile don't have a model within their family attending college, it's simply not in their realm of choices. In further response to Representative Wilson, Ms. Barrans said that Alaska, in comparison to other states, has a lower percentage of individuals who would qualify for the Pell grants. She estimated that less than 10 percent of the students in the UA system qualify for Pell grants.

[9:51:40 AM](#)

MR. OBA informed the committee that approximately 50 percent of all students at UA applied for federal financial aid. Therefore, he characterized Ms. Barrans' estimate of 10 percent of UA students qualifying for Pell grants as reasonable.

[9:52:15 AM](#)

MS. BARRANS, in response to Chair Seaton, suggested that 10 percent of the total student body apply for Pell grants. She mentioned that perhaps some students may not have qualified for federal aid in the past, and therefore decide not to apply again.

[9:53:06 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GUTTENBERG inquired as to how all of the aforementioned impacts the demographics of the university.

MS. BARRANS suspected that it would have a negative effect. If [the state] is unable to encourage Alaska's lower income echelon to enter postsecondary education, the benefits UA can offer the state will be diminished, particularly with Alaska's flat population growth and an increasing proportion of Alaska's population falling into the lower income echelon.

[9:54:11 AM](#)

MR. NEED offered his perspective as a student. He informed the committee that he had okay grades, didn't qualify for any scholarships, and took out student loans. He is currently in graduate school and is paying on his loans. He and his wife have a combined loan total of \$120,000 that amounts to a payment of \$1,200 a month. This prohibits their ability to contribute to the local economy, he said. Even with federal and state loans, as well as scholarships, students still face seeking a fair amount from private loans. Private loans are becoming tiered with an average rate of 16 percent for repayment. Therefore, in the future students with only an undergraduate degree would look similar to Mr. Need, perhaps with \$40,000 worth of debt at a 16 percent repayment rate. The aforementioned would be crippling to the average graduate as well as the state because the graduate wouldn't be able to fully contribute to the economy. Without state granted aid, the aforementioned could be the picture of an average graduate in a few years.

[9:57:09 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON asked whether there is any sort of work incentive program for welfare recipients, such that they can attend school and their schooling would be paid. She recalled such a program [in another state] that she used to attend nursing school. She borrowed funds for the first year of school

and then the program paid for her tuition, books, and babysitter so that she could attend school.

MS. BARRANS stated that she isn't knowledgeable of the programs available through the Department of Labor & Workforce Development. However, she did believe there are programs available, although they may not be as generous as the one in which Representative Wilson participated. She offered to research that and provide information to the committee.

[9:59:05 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON inquired as to the criteria that Ms. Barrans would consider the most responsive to Alaska's students and that would provide a reasonable manner in which to address this problem.

MS. BARRANS pointed out that the committee packet should include a letter from her dated February 23rd, in which she addresses the best practices that have been deployed in other states. For instance, one of the most successful programs is the Indiana scholars program. However, Ms. Barrans suggested that perhaps the starting point should be to determine the specific objectives of the policymakers in program design. If the desire is to improve high school graduation, certain elements may be built into the program, such as early commitment. If the desire is to provide immediate impact to those students who are currently in postsecondary education, then a combination of needs and merits would be most appropriate. Ms. Barrans posed the question as to how an individual, with a GED, who is in the workforce, could demonstrate competencies in order to qualify for the [needs-based] scholarship program from the outset. Although there may be a way in which to qualify for a grant once an individual is in college, there is no clear trigger as to when. Therefore, it would be critical to develop some manner in which to assess that an individual can succeed at the college level in order determine the return on investment.

[10:02:17 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON polled the committee to ascertain whether members preferred that the assessment not necessarily be tied to high school graduation, but rather a merit-based assessment.

[10:02:42 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER remarked that he would need to review the criteria prior to agreeing with Chair Seaton's statement.

10:03:09 AM

CHAIR SEATON pointed out that the legislation sponsored by Representative Guttenberg required a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or better in high school. She asked Ms. Barrans for a suggestion.

MS. BARRANS informed the committee that the American College Testing Organization has an on-line assessment tool called WorkKeys. Currently, Michigan is using WorkKeys as one means to determine if an individual has the capacity to enter at the college level successfully without remediation and perform adequately. The Department of Education and Early Development is encouraging use of the WorkKeys assessment, but isn't mandating it. This competency testing is proving to be a more attractive alternative than a GPA, which may be based on one set of curricula that is very different student-to-student.

10:05:02 AM

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON said that the department is trying to get the WorkKeys installed in the [secondary] schools. She expressed interest in the WorkKeys assessment tool.

10:05:27 AM

CHAIR SEATON stated that further input be provided to the committee.

10:06:05 AM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:06 a.m.