

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 16, 2009
8:03 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): DROP-OUT PREVENTION

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

LARRY LEDOUX, Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development (EED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided an overview of issues related to the dropout prevention.

JENNIFER DOUNAY, Senior Policy Analyst
Education Commission of the States
Denver, Colorado

POSITION STATEMENT: Reviewed the presentation entitled "Dropout Prevention: Recent Research and State Policy Responses."

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:03:08 AM](#)

CHAIR PAUL SEATON called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:03 a.m. Representatives Seaton, Wilson, Edgmon, Buch, Keller, and Gardner were present at the call to order. Representative Munoz arrived as the meeting was in progress.

OVERVIEW(S): DROP-OUT PREVENTION

[8:03:38 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the only order of business would be an overview regarding high school drop-out prevention. He noted that the committee packet should include a PowerPoint entitled "Dropout Prevention: Recent research and state Policy Responses," a Wikipedia document entitled "Education in the Netherlands," and a number of other materials from the SouthEast Alaska Career Center (S.E.A.C.C.). He also noted that members should have a memorandum from him listing topics for consideration, including how to correlate actual criteria and achievement scores with graduation and a diploma in order to be an incentive for continued work. There was also a topic related to the High School Qualifying Exam and how that would be meaningful in order to avoid students believing that passage of the aforementioned exam means that they don't have to work anymore.

[8:06:28 AM](#)

LARRY LEDOUX, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (EED), informed the committee that he has brought with him various documents regarding graduation rates, including research from the National Dropout Prevention Center that address strategies and summary statistics regarding why students don't make it through school.

[8:08:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER recalled the suggestion at a prior hearing to have mandatory attendance begin at age six. She inquired as to Commissioner LeDoux's thoughts on that suggestion.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX said that since the department hasn't researched that suggestion, he couldn't speak to the department's opinion. However, he related his personal belief that every child has access to quality education as early as

possible. He noted that research indicates that quality education should begin at an early age, and six may be an appropriate age.

[8:09:43 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON inquired as to how many children don't attend school until age seven.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX responded that he knew of very few children who don't attend school until age seven. Drawing from his experience as an elementary principal, Commissioner LeDoux opined that most parents send children to school as soon as possible. Those children who aren't attending school at an early age are usually being homeschooled. He said, "So, I don't see it as a problem in Alaska at this point in time."

CHAIR SEATON requested additional information from EED regarding an earlier start age for Alaskan children.

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REPRESENTATIVE BUCH recalled hearing remarks that parents intend to withdraw their junior high/middle school age children from school in order to home school them. He expressed interest in knowing the numbers of students in the aforementioned situation. He questioned how many children who are not attending school are in the care of their parents.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX highlighted that the number of children in Alaska is unknown because parents don't have to register their children with the state. Therefore, the only data available regarding the number of children in the state would be from permanent fund applications and the census. Alaska doesn't have a way in which to keep track of the number of children in the state, save the number of children enrolled in public schools in Alaska. The aforementioned is problematic, he said.

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REPRESENTATIVE BUCH indicated that would seem to be one of the base numbers to acquire.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX noted his agreement, adding that he is concerned with the lack of data on young Alaskans. In Alaska, once a parent says he/she is home schooling their child, there's nothing to be done whether the child is actually homeschooled or

not. Therefore, the attendance log has many holes in it because the state is very supportive of parents' home schooling their children. Still, the aforementioned prevents the state from knowing where these [home schooled] children are and ensuring that these children have the opportunity for an education. In Alaska, once a parent says he/she is home schooling their child, the district stops all attempts to determine what is going on with the child [education-wise] because the district no longer has the authority to investigate whether the child is receiving an education or not.

[8:14:25 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH suggested that the state could work with the federal government, which will be collecting information for the 2010 census, in order to acquire numbers of children. The aforementioned would provide a base number for 2010.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX explained that although the attendance information provides good information, by the time it's available it tends to be old information. He opined that the best information can likely be gathered in conjunction with permanent fund applications for which there is an economic interest for parents to register their children.

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CHAIR SEATON said that although he couldn't recall all the information required on the permanent fund application, he recalled that a sponsor has to fill out an application for a minor. He then highlighted that the legislature controls what data is required, and therefore data important for the state could be required. To that end, he requested that EED review the permanent fund application and determine whether there is a data requirement for a minor's application that would provide needed information.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER interjected that the permanent fund application does require the child's date of birth and residence.

CHAIR SEATON surmised then that the question is whether EED, as a state agency, can obtain the information.

[8:17:17 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER related her understanding that the HSQE was originally a high school level exam, but was ultimately watered down to a 10th grade level because of opposition. Given that the HSQE isn't really an indicator that a child has mastered high school level material and that a lot of information is obtained from the exams required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), she inquired as to the benefit of retaining the HSQE.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX opined that any time a child is assessed it should inform instruction and specify what the student knows and is able to do. Furthermore, an assessment should be diagnostic in order that programs can be redesigned and parents can advocate for their child. Any assessment that doesn't inform takes away from instruction. Commissioner LeDoux informed the committee that the reading and writing components of the HSQE are generally at the sophomore level while 80 percent of the math component is at the 8th grade level. Since the HSQE doesn't necessarily inform parents with regard to what can be done to achieve a higher level of achievement, one would question the validity and usefulness of the HSQE as a diagnostic tool for a parent or student to use to improve the student's achievement. Only about 30 states require high stakes exams for graduation, he noted. He mentioned that the cut score can be set at any level that the state determines. He suggested a review of the purpose of the HSQE and whether it provides good information to parents and students. Commissioner LeDoux opined that he would rather have any type of assessment that teachers, parents, and students could review the students' performance levels in terms of the skills that are necessary to achieve a successful life. He informed the committee that currently schools take six to seven days of instruction to administer the HSQE. Due to the complexity of the exam, some schools essentially shut down school for juniors and seniors. Therefore, that's a tremendous investment statewide in terms of money, instructional time, teachers' salaries, and learning time. If such [an exam] is going to be utilized, it should be determined whether the investment pays off. He indicated that he didn't believe many people believe the HSQE is paying off. Therefore, the HSQE should be reviewed and standards should be raised. Currently, the expectations in Alaska are too low, he opined. He predicted that students will achieve whatever standard that is set for them; the expectations for Alaska's students need to be raised. In conclusion, Commissioner LeDoux related his belief that the HSQE is not a measure of high expectations.

[8:21:26 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER recalled testimony that some students who have passed the three areas of the HSQE feel that they no longer need to attend high school.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX acknowledged hearing such from many principals and parents; and opined that if the parent and student buy into it, so it is. However, he maintained that passage of the HSQE isn't an indicator that they've met the state's high standards for graduation.

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REPRESENTATIVE WILSON opined that the schools are not using the HSQE as a tool, but rather are administering it only because it's a requirement. She further opined that if the HSQE is a graduation exam, it shouldn't test students on 8th and 10th grade level material. She suggested that the WorkKeys program may be more effective than the HSQE. Representative Wilson then turned to the October attendance counts upon which school districts receive their formula funding. She suggested that perhaps the attendance counts should occur in the spring as well in order to create an incentive for schools to make the effort to retain students through the year.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX recalled that when he was the principal of an alternative high school, he received a number of referrals after the October attendance count but never prior. Therefore, the high school was allowed to count that student in their formula fund base. In this case, students become a commodity, which he indicated wasn't appropriate. Commissioner LeDoux said that there is merit to reviewing alternative attendance count dates.

[8:26:54 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON remarked that he believes the committee is in agreement that the [attendance count dates] are an area needing review. He recalled a similar situation with the Student Military Academy when it experienced an extremely high dropout rate after the attendance count period. In order to address the aforementioned, the legislature changed the incentive and the program was realigned in order to avoid a high dropout rate after the attendance count period. He requested that EED prepare a proposal [addressing the effects of the attendance count] for the committee's review.

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REPRESENTATIVE KELLER opined that the HSQE isn't the enemy as there has been much written about the last two years of high school being wasted. The HSQE is providing a tool that wouldn't be very wise to just throw out, he said.

[8:29:39 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON, referring to his memorandum dated March 13, 2009, pointed out that Item 2 specifies [original punctuation provided]:

If students take and pass all three sections of the High School Qualifying Exam prior to graduation, school districts will pay for these students to take college credits or vocational school credits. This could allow students to be on their way to an associate degree or vocational ed. certificate by the time they have graduated high school. The High School Qualifying Exam has been identified as a problem because students interpret that passing exam means they have met their high school qualifying criteria, leading to students losing interest in school afterward.

[8:31:03 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON remarked that it doesn't matter whether a student convinces a parent that [passing the HSQE means he/she has met the high school qualifying criteria], but rather the student's internal motivation to complete the final two years of high school is important. He requested a comment from the commissioner regarding the point at which it's determined that a student should be educated differently or allowed greater opportunity through distance courses from colleges throughout the U.S.

[8:31:59 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX related his belief that the final two years of high school should provide the student with maximum flexibility. "The idea of keeping kids in classrooms and seats for four years is a thing of the past," he remarked. The last two years of high school should provide students with the opportunity for apprenticeships, college courses, distance education, and opportunities to explore their own interests.

The opportunities should be individualized and connect students to a broader vision. He noted that many high schools in Alaska offer opportunities for co-credit for college courses taken while in high school. One school district, for example, offers college courses for free while another offers such courses at a reduced rate. Commissioner LeDoux emphasized the need for high school reform to be at the top of the agenda because the needs of youth today are very complex. To treat every youth exactly the same, is to treat them unfairly, he opined. He related that the main reason a student drops out of high school is because he/she feels disconnected from the system. However, a student who is engaged in and has a vision for his/her future doesn't try to escape school after passing the HSQE. Many who pass the HSQE and leave school are not planning to go to college; rather they just want out of school in order to get on with their lives. Too many schools in Alaska are giving credit for seat time, he said. He further said, "Learning should be the constant and seat time should be the variable." Adding a requirement, such as a civics credit, will decrease the graduation rate in some areas and decrease a student's option to explore areas of interest. High school methods need to be reformed and what is being suggested is a step in the right direction, he opined.

[8:35:46 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX, in further response to Chair Seaton, reiterated his belief that Chair Seaton's suggestion is a step in the right direction. However, Commissioner LeDoux expressed concern with spot zoning [in which reform is done only in spots]. He pointed out that schools today look much like they did 50 years ago and aren't flexible enough. In fact, one of the reasons alternative schools are necessary is because they wrap the program around the needs of the student, rather than expecting the student to fit into a program of instruction. Therefore, Commissioner LeDoux characterized Chair Seaton's idea as one step in what Commissioner LeDoux would rather have occur, a comprehensive plan for high school reform. He opined that a comprehensive plan for high school reform will result in an increase in the graduation rate and produce youth who are ready to work and/or enter college. Furthermore, schools aren't currently tied to the regulation of seat time and have the ability to award credit to those with the understanding of the content desired. Commissioner LeDoux said he wasn't sure all the schools knew the aforementioned.

[8:38:00 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON surmised then that regulations are such that students are allowed to test out of a course and obtain credits for it.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX answered that's the case theoretically. The regulation specifies that the local school board has the ability to establish courses that would give credit to those students who indicate they have mastered the content. School districts aren't restricted to the Carnegie unit of 180 hours of instruction for a credit. Therefore, although there's flexibility, he wasn't sure that everyone knows it's available. Furthermore, it's difficult to reorganize the state's high schools. He pointed out that there are some incredible alternative schools, which should become the state's high schools. The unfortunate reality is that many students aren't passing the HSQE, even set at the 8th grade level, which he characterized as a professional embarrassment. The aforementioned is indicative of the need to do systemic reform.

[8:39:14 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON recalled receiving information that the Chugach School District has a 98 percent graduation rate. He asked if that school district have more resources, or is it a different model of education.

[8:39:44 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX acknowledged that when the Chugach model was first initiated, the [Chugach School District] had lots of funding. However, the most important aspect of the Chugach model is that the entire community stands behind the program. He opined that a standards-based program must have community and teacher support as well as longevity. A number of districts in the state are using the Chugach model in which once a student masters standards in certain content, the student moves on. Part of the problem with such programs is staff development; the teachers require extensive training in the model because most colleges don't train teachers in these models. Therefore, the program doesn't work well in districts with lots of teacher turn over. In fact, some of the state's lowest performing districts utilize standards-based models. "It's not one size fits all," Commissioner LeDoux remarked. Therefore, he believes that across the state schools, such as Kodiak High School, are blending a standards-based program with Carnegie units, college classes, etcetera.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX then turned the committee's attention to the Alaska Education plan, which includes three pages of graduation expectations. "For a moment I could share with you what I would really love to see, at some point, and we're not far off if we had a community and district. Is ... to sit down at the start of a child's 8th grade year, and to give them an option of graduation if they meet all of these standards." He explained that it begins in 8th grade because that's when one really begins to mentally prepare for what you're going to do in high school. Every child has a committee/panel with whom they build a portfolio starting in 8th grade. The child explains how he/she will meet the standards/expectations and present a portfolio to the aforementioned committee/panel for approval to graduate. Such ideas are being reviewed as part of high school reform. Commissioner LeDoux related his belief in the need for the standards-based movement to be incorporated into the graduation portfolio.

[8:42:35 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH surmised that Commissioner LeDoux is describing a model in which every child has an advocate.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX reiterated his earlier comments that the primary need of young people is to feel connected, valued, and visible. He informed the committee that he recently put together a standing committee with the goal of improving the graduation rate. The committee consists of individuals who work with at-risk students. At the first meeting, committee members were asked to specify on a note card the primary reason students do not graduate. Every note card said that the primary reason students don't graduate is because of the lack of connection. Students need an advocate, he said.

[8:43:30 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH then said that perhaps the goal should be addressing how to get the communities involved to provide these advocates.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX confirmed that it's one of the strategies necessary to assist students toward graduation. He reminded the committee that there is no single strategy that will bring education in the state to the desired place, but rather there are many strategies. Therefore, what is known to work has to be considered. He informed the committee that one school has

broken its schedule into an advisor/advisee program in which every teacher in the building meets with a small group of students. Such programs are designed to connect kids with their community and school. Such programs are successful, he remarked. He then directed the committee's attention to the committee packet, which includes information on strategies for dropout prevention. The aforementioned information is derived from the National Dropout Center. The strategies discuss the school and community perspective, early interventions, basic support strategies, and making the best of education. Commissioner LeDoux characterized the aforementioned information as a blue print on which Alaska needs to put its "stamp." He expressed hope that at some point an Alaska dropout prevention plan will be developed.

[8:45:42 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON recalled testimony from students of Juneau's local alternative high school in which the students said that most students drop out due to problems with a specific teacher. The students underscored how a person of authority was a major cause for their decision to drop out. Are there exit interviews of those who drop out to determine the specific reasons for dropping out, he asked.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX said that in his experience some students do drop out because of a conflict with a teacher. However, it's often difficult for students to explain why they're dropping out of school. Often a student has so many things going on in his/her life that a conflict with a teacher may be the final straw. It doesn't take much to cause a student with a lot of stress to drop out of school, and therefore it's important for there to be healthy alternative programs for these students. Commissioner LeDoux recalled his time as an assistant principal when the superintendant told him that there will always be teachers asking for students to be removed because the student is causing trouble. However, the superintendent pointed out there are no "throw away" kids, there are just kids with needs that the school needs to address. If a student left school because of a conflict with a teacher, the real problem should be identified.

[8:49:08 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON related her non-support for charter schools due to the fact that certain students receive an

opportunity that others do not receive. She expressed the need for work to happen in public schools to create a wonderful environment. She then recalled the students from the alternative high school in Juneau who testified that they were invisible at the regular school. Every teacher should take their task seriously in connecting with the students, not just in the alternative or charter settings. Motivation of the teachers may also need to be taken on as a challenge along with the other facets being discussed. She anticipated resistance to change, but emphasized the need to proceed.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX related his understanding that charter schools were initially opened because the [public education] system itself was unable to change itself. The same is true of the alternative schools. In his experience, the best place for students is the mainstream school due to the many resources. However, for those students who are unable to perform in that setting, alternative environments such as charter schools are important. In fact, he recalled President Obama saying that he wanted to eliminate the cap on charter schools and desired more charter schools throughout the nation.

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REPRESENTATIVE WILSON surmised then that public education won't be changed, which she characterized as a shame.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX clarified his intent to utilize the Alaska Education Plan to reform and reconstruct high schools. He opined that there are a very powerful group of principal leaders and teachers in the state who want to do take on [reform and reconstruction]. "I believe that Alaska is ready to go," he said.

[8:53:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER, referring to the document entitled "Why Students Drop Out," pointed out that parental involvement is last on the list of why students drop out. However, it seems that reason should be at the top of the list because without parental involvement everything is an uphill battle. She suggested that parental involvement affords the student more resilience for say the teacher with whom he/she has a conflict. Representative Gardner opined that the document seems to understate the role of parents in student success.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX noted his agreement that parental support for education and teachers is critical to success. However, it's the area in which the education system has the least ability to control in terms of changing the graduation rate.

[8:55:28 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX, in response to Representative Buch, clarified that national research indicates that about 50 percent of students come from single parent or broken homes. He said he would provide the committee data on that statistic.

[8:56:09 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON, referring to his memorandum dated March 13, 2009, pointed out that Item 1 proposes the following [original punctuation provided]:

As we have discussed, there is a disconnect between seat-time and competency for purposes of high school graduation. The Department of Education and Early Development currently has a requirement that all 11th graders take the WorkKeys Assessment. We could build on this by requiring that the WorkKeys Assessment be taken before exiting high school, and having those competency evaluations be placed on the graduation certificate. This would be an attempt to not just base a diploma on seat time, but would be a measure of competency as well.

CHAIR SEATON offered that the aforementioned would also provide an additional incentive to complete high school. He asked if the diploma having additional meaning from the WorkKeys Assessment would be valuable. He further asked if the WorkKeys Assessment would be an appropriate assessment.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX noted his agreement that there should be assessment information attached to the graduation certificate. The WorkKeys Assessment, which is respected throughout the nation, is the current vehicle being used. However, most employers don't ask to review a high school transcript. He opined that providing solid assessment data that has meaning to employers would be appropriate. Furthermore, it adds another layer of accountability to the student. Commissioner LeDoux echoed his earlier comment that students will meet the standards, even if they are raised. Furthermore, when the

WorkKeys Assessment is taken early enough it informs the student and the parent regarding the skills the student needs.

[8:59:38 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked if the WorkKeys Assessment has to be paid for each time it's taken or can it be made available on the Internet for 8th graders. He then asked at what grade the WorkKeys Assessment would be beneficial to implement.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX explained that the WorkKeys Assessment has an 8th grade component that is web-based. At the highest level, the WorkKeys Assessment is a rigorous and informative exam. He said that he is concerned about informing students and parents, which he characterized as critical. Commissioner LeDoux related his belief that a standard at the graduation level will work backwards and thus prepare children for the exam. He opined that the WorkKeys Assessment is a vehicle [for graduation]. In fact, some states are using the WorkKeys Assessment in conjunction with academic assessments in order to perform a final evaluation of students. At this point, the state is only using the math, reading, and locating information skills components of the WorkKeys Assessment. The formula component of WorkKeys Assessment isn't be used. Commissioner LeDoux noted there have been some problems with the pilot implementation, which is mainly attributable to inadequate technology. At this point, Commissioner LeDoux expressed interest in using the written model because it works, is reliable, and the only worry is losing it in the mail.

[9:02:01 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked if the test can be sent by disc to be used on a local computer, or does it have to be used on the web.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX informed the committee that assessments such as these are very proprietary. If the expansion of broad band is successful, the existing technology problems will be eliminated. Commissioner LeDoux expressed frustration with the technical difficulties that get in the way of the quality of the pilot. Therefore, the WorkKeys Assessment is being done on paper due to the technology issues.

[9:03:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON asked if the stimulus package for schools includes funds for expanding bandwidth.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX informed the committee that the broad band component of the stimulus package is not located in the EED section. The University of Alaska and others, including EED, is exploring [the broad band component] and the discussions have been collaborative. He related the hope that at some point there will be a comprehensive broad band initiative in Alaska, even without the stimulus package, to ensure that all communities have access for education as well as medical and commercial uses.

[9:04:32 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked whether using the WorkKeys Assessment would be premature.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX explained that EED has a regulation that will require districts to administer the WorkKeys Assessment program. With regard to the HSQE and developing quality assessments that inform teachers, students, and parents, [the state] needs to take a comprehensive review of how to assess success in Alaska's schools. Therefore, it would be premature to say that the WorkKeys Assessment will be the principle method for assessment. Commissioner LeDoux related his hope to have quality discussions about this topic rather than react to topics, which costs money.

[9:06:54 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON indicated that legislation could be introduced in order to illustrate the legislature's intent of accomplishing achievement.

[9:07:42 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER directed attention to the dropout statistics encompassed in the March 9, 2009, handout, entitled "Graduation Rates in Alaska Fact Sheet." The data illustrates that from 2004-2008 the drop-out rates are consistently falling, albeit slightly. However, the dropout rates for students identified for special education services are climbing. She requested discussion on the aforementioned.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX pointed out that the document entitled "What do we know about Dropouts and Why" includes predictors and factors associated with dropouts for students with disabilities. While many of the alterable variables of students with

disabilities and those without disabilities are the same, more time for the student to become mainstreamed, a provision for tutoring services, training for competitive employment, and attending schools that maintain high expectations of special education students are associated with a greater likelihood of graduation. Special education students need special care, attention, as well as the same things as other students. Commissioner LeDoux opined that special education students need more attention given to the skills necessary to obtain jobs; these are transitioning skills that are required by law. It may be, he remarked, that the HSQE for special education students is causing problems in Alaska.

The committee was at ease from 9:10 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.

[Although there were technical difficulties, the recording was not impacted.]

[9:30:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER readdressed the increasing rate of special education dropouts versus the decrease in the overall dropout rate. She then turned to the packet entitled "Why Students Drop Out," in which one document entitled "TWENTY QUESTIONS TO END THE DROPOUT CRISIS IN YOUR COMMUNITY" asks the following question: "Does your community not expel primary students nor over-identify students for special education services?" She remarked that this is the first she's ever heard about over-identifying students receiving special education services. However, if students receiving special education services are being over-identified, that should bring rates down, she surmised.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX opined that schools make every attempt to identify students who qualify for special education services. He pointed out that many students enter school lacking some of the necessary skills and quickly fall behind. As those students fall behind it can become cumulative. Furthermore, these students are sometimes referred to special education services due to deficiencies in reading and other skills. He opined that sometimes there's a subtle push to qualify students for special education services because it allows extra help. However, the decision regarding whether a student qualifies for special education services is decided by a team. Regarding the graduation rate for those students with special needs, Commission LeDoux explained that often one of the criteria is already at least two years behind. Therefore, he expressed the

need to review the assessment system and performance over time to determine whether there's a steady increase in the performance of the state's special education students. Although the special education students aren't graduating, they may be improving, he suggested. He pointed out that special education students can attend [public] school until age 21. He explained that the cohort, from which graduation and dropout rates are determined, is based on those students that were to graduate in four years and doesn't take into consideration that a special education student may need to attend high school for five to six years. A fifth-year senior isn't counted as graduating, he said. Commissioner LeDoux informed the committee that if the data of how many freshmen ultimately receive a diploma, GED, or a school completion certificate is included, the rate is higher, in the 80-90 percent range. Last year Anchorage reported a steady increase in the performance of their special education students, which he opined would be the case in many districts throughout the state.

[9:35:08 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON, also referring to the document entitled "TWENTY QUESTIONS TO END THE DROPOUT CRISIS IN YOUR COMMUNITY," directed attention to the first question, which includes the question: "Which middle schools send students to high schools with low graduation rates?" She asked whether EED reviews whether students are lacking in areas by the time those students arrive at middle schools and intervene [at the middle school level] or wait until the crisis arises

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX answered that NCLB allows EED to intervene in districts that aren't meeting average yearly progress (AYP). Through Senate Bill 285 of 2008, the State of Alaska allows EED to intervene in individual schools. Commissioner LeDoux emphasized that schools closely review their school-based assessment data, which is used as the basis for individual school improvement plans. Therefore, Commissioner LeDoux related his belief that every school has a plan to improve the success of their student body based on the SBAs. He said that the SBAs can be plotted out and provided to the committee.

[9:37:13 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX, in response to Representative Wilson, related that students are more successful when they have quality teachers. Furthermore, all high performance schools have quality principals and have districts that have an

administrative structure that provides support for teachers and principals. He acknowledged that in Alaska there is a leadership problem in some cases. One of the core areas the district is seeking to address in order to increase the success of students is to improve the leadership in school districts and schools. The weakness in leadership is often found in chronically low-performing schools.

[9:38:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH opined that reform and systemic problems in Alaska's schools will take time. He then pointed out that one of the components that may need to be addressed is the public awareness and involvement in these discussions.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX related that EED has worked hard to expand the involvement of the public with regard to developing a comprehensive plan. The department's first step toward improving public education was to expand public involvement in developing a comprehensive plan. Therefore, the first step of the educational summit was to bring together 450 people across the state to publicly discuss the challenges that Alaska faces from early learning to obtaining a successful job. The aforementioned was a very public process and as the results were analyzed, the Alaska Education Plan was published. Comments have been solicited and integrated in the action plan. That plan will be brought before the Alaska School Board for approval. Once approved by the board, it will be published and sent out statewide. The process defined in the education plan also involves the public in that specific work groups have been brought together to develop specific action plans to achieve the specified goals. The aforementioned is being done now. He informed the committee that by this summer, all of the actions of the Alaska Education Plan will have specific actions specified. Additionally, Commissioner LeDoux related that he has been traveling throughout the state to talk with Alaskans regarding educational issues. He characterized the Alaska Education Plan as an invite to anyone who would like to become involved in improving education in the state. He mentioned his hope to work more with principal associations because they need to be involved in their own leadership development. He then noted that he has worked closely with the Alaska Association of School Boards and the Alaska Council of School Administrators and has met with representatives of the state Parent Teacher Association.

[9:43:07 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ related that many of the strategies discussed to [address the dropout rate] have been implemented in Juneau. Strategies such as alternative high schools, career academies, and vocational education have been successful. However, in the Juneau School District one of four to five students don't graduate. Furthermore, 54 percent of the Native students aren't graduating. Therefore, she expressed the need for a bold step to turn around the aforementioned. She recalled that the former principal of the alternative high school has expressed the need to strengthen the state's compulsory attendance laws.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX related his agreement that the existing compulsory attendance law should be strengthened. He explained that around the state parents aren't being sued for their children not attending school because the parents can just say that they're homeschooling their child. He clarified that this has nothing to do with the outstanding home school programs that are available. He expressed the need to know how many children are in Alaska and how many aren't attending school.

[9:47:34 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON inquired as to the commissioner's thoughts on raising the compulsory attendance age to 18.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX clarified that EED doesn't have an opinion on the legislation proposing to raise the compulsory attendance age. However, he characterized raising the compulsory attendance age as having pros and cons. If students don't want to attend, it becomes an administrative difficulty. If raising the compulsory attendance age is used to develop a plan to allow a child to graduate, it could be a good thing, he surmised. Still, using a higher compulsory age to force students who don't want to attend school to do so could be negative, he said. He noted that raising the compulsory attendance age could also be used to bring students to crisis so that they are expelled or forced to leave in some other way. There is research, he related, that indicates raising the compulsory attendance age improve the graduation rate nationally. Commissioner LeDoux said that he didn't know how raising the compulsory attendance age would play out in Alaska. He noted that other states have more stringent compulsory attendance laws, and therefore he questioned what would be accomplished with raising the compulsory attendance age, but not providing any [enforcement] teeth to the entire spectrum of compulsory attendance.

[9:50:41 AM](#)

JENNIFER DOUNAY, Senior Policy Analyst, Education Commission of the States, referring to her presentation entitled "Dropout Prevention: Recent Research and State Policy Responses," directed the committee's attention to the slide entitled "Middle grades." The aforementioned slide relates the findings of a 2007 Johns Hopkins study. The study found that 60 percent of the students who eventually dropout can be identified by one or more of the following grade 6 indicators: failing English, failing math, attendance 80 percent or less, or receiving at least one out-of-school suspension. When a student, for example, failed English and had the behavior or attendance indicator, the likelihood of that student dropping out increased. The study also found that most students positively responded to general interventions, such as getting the message to parents and students that English and math grades matter as does attendance and behavior. Ms. Dounay further related that 15-20 percent didn't respond to the aforementioned intervention. Therefore, if the student doesn't attend school one day, a phone call to the student's parents and talking one-on-one with the student on a daily basis could be helpful. Only 5-10 percent of students didn't respond to the aforementioned intervention and social services and/or counseling had to be utilized for the student and/or family. Ms. Dounay said that she likes this research because it utilizes information that school districts already have, and therefore it's relatively low cost. She then related that Mississippi has developed a middle grade dropout prevention program that is modeled on a successful Maine program. Directing attention to the slide entitled "State policy responses," Ms. Dounay highlighted that in Georgia graduation coaches are used in middle schools, which have proven to have some positive results so far. Rhode Island and Louisiana enacted legislation requiring the state board to identify interventions for districts with graduation rates below a certain threshold. One of the options the boards in these states can choose for a district is supplemental education programs or coaching for middle grade students who are below grade level in reading or math.

[9:54:10 AM](#)

MS. DOUNAY, referring to the slide entitled "Rigor and Relevance," related that many studies have found that students who are held to higher expectations typically have higher graduation rates. In fact, in 2006 there was a survey of

dropouts between the age of 16-24 that were asked why they dropped out and what would've made them stay in school. Although there were a number of responses, one of the common messages was that teachers didn't expect much out of the students. There are several different approaches in terms of rigor and relevance. She highlighted dual enrollment. She informed the committee that ECS has launched a state database on dual enrollment policies based on a review of statutes and regulations in the 50 states. Although ECS didn't identify a statewide program in Alaska, she said she understood that there are some local programs. She related that there are some key issues when establishing a statewide policy that are likely to increase access, including students who have been disengaged from high school.

[9:55:23 AM](#)

MS. DOUNAY continued with the slide entitled "Rigor: Higher expectations (and supports)." Based on research performed by ACP and private researchers, ECS has defined a college and work-ready core as the following: 4 units of English, Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II, 3 lab sciences, and 3 social studies. While most of the unit requirements are in place in Alaska, most of Alaska's rules don't have specificity in terms of the type of courses students can complete to earn Carnegie units.

[9:55:56 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON, returning attention to the slide entitled "Rigor and relevance," pointed out that it mentions proficiency-based credit. He requested that Ms. Dounay relate the proficiency-based requirement to the rigor requirements.

MS. DOUNAY explained that in a number of states a student may complete Carnegie units by demonstrating proficiency versus seat time. She offered to provide the committee with copies of policy briefs of this matter. When discussing how to make high school more meaningful, one must realize that a growing number of states are moving to a proficiency based policy in which students who demonstrate proficiency can move on rather than have to fulfill seat-time requirements. She offered to provide the committee with ECS's forthcoming policy brief on these types of state policies.

[9:57:29 AM](#)

MS. DOUNAY moved on to the slide entitled "College/work-ready core." She related that raising the Carnegie unit requirements, even when there's a proficiency piece in place, isn't necessarily enough. Many other considerations need to be addressed, including end-of-course or other means to demonstrate attainment of standards, which are often end of course exams that are a statewide assessment. Ms. Dounay said that one must also consider the need for high quality, targeted remediation. The ECS compiled a 50-state database on remediation policies in 2007. The study found that many states don't actually require a student who isn't meeting a certain threshold to go through remediation, which is something that Alaska may want to review. There is research that suggests when career technical education (CTE) teachers team with a traditional math teacher who integrates the traditional component into the CTE program, students who participate in the aforementioned score about as well as traditional academic students on math assessments and better than CTE students without the integrated approach. The aforementioned has no impact on the skills acquired in CTE. Just within the last week or two, Kansas has announced that it is going to utilize math and CTE grants statewide.

[9:59:55 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked if integrated means that there is a practical means for the math to be introduced and that it is displayed in different ways.

MS. DOUNAY replied yes. For example, a drafting course could integrate traditional Algebra or geometry components rather than the student being required to complete the traditional Carnegie unit for the math course.

[10:00:47 AM](#)

MS. DOUNAY, continuing with the slide entitled "College/work-ready core," highlighted the need to backmap from high school to the earlier grades. Therefore, to accommodate the higher expectations at the high school level, the curriculum at the elementary and middle grade levels should be "beefed up."

CHAIR SEATON offered to have Ms. Dounay continue her presentation at a future meeting, to which she agreed.

[10:01:20 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:02 a.m.