

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 27, 2010

8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Wes Keller

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION WITH EED COMMISSIONER LARRY LEDOUX ON HOW CRITERIA RELATE TO GOALS OF A POTENTIAL SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM.

- HEARD

OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT VIRTUAL SCHOOL CONCEPT; DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE ONLINE VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL; ALASKA SCHOOL DISTRICT ONLINE COURSE OFFERINGS.

- 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 information and answered questions during the round table discussion with EED on how criteria relate to goals of a potential scholarship program. Provided information and answered questions during the overviews related to the EED Virtual School Concept, the Department of Defense Online Virtual High School, and the Alaska School District Online Course Offerings.

MICHAEL HENRY, Executive Director of High Schools
Anchorage School District (ASD)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on behalf of ASD during the overviews related to the Department of Education and Early Development Virtual School Concept, the Department of Defense Online Virtual High School, and the Alaska School District Online Course Offerings.

JANICE M. KOCH-CARTER
Military, Federal, Pentagon
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the overviews related to the Department of Education and Early Development Virtual School Concept, the Department of Defense Online Virtual High School, and the Alaska School District Online Course Offerings.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:34 AM](#)

CHAIR PAUL SEATON called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Representatives Wilson, Edgmon, Buch, Gardner, and Seaton were present at the call to order. Representative Munoz arrived as the meeting was in progress.

OVERVIEW: Round Table Discussion with EED Commissioner Larry LeDoux on how criteria relate to goals of a potential scholarship program.

[8:02:48 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the first order of business would be a round table discussion with Commissioner Larry LeDoux of the Department of Education and Early Development, regarding how criteria relate to goals of a potential scholarship program.

[8:04:49 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON emphasized the need to understand the criteria and target for the upcoming scholarship funding proposals. He indicated that the Governor's Performance Scholarship (GPS) bill is not yet scheduled to be heard by the committee, but will be forthcoming.

[8:07:14 AM](#)

LARRY LEDOUX, Commissioner, stated that he has come today to address committee questions and concerns, and to clarify department actions. In response to Representative Gardner, he said that if given the latitude, he would emphasize developing an attitude of success in every child beginning in kindergarten. He stated his belief that if this occurred it would eliminate the need for scholarships and the programs now being introduced. If a child were to work to their full potential he/she would be successful. Failure begins early, he related, and affects success in high school and college. He said if he were governor, he would implement a plan that did not implement any particular program as the key constant for success. He said assessments often give children the message that they have done something wrong. He related that he does not use the term drop-out.

[8:11:36 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX, in response to Representative Gardner, said in order to [develop an attitude of success in every child], he would implement the state education plan, which he opined is consistent with research and knowledge. The state's plan has a statement that success will not come from any single program directed at any single age, but will be a continuum. He underscored the ability of the young child to explore and discover. Commissioner LeDoux stated that a question gives relevance to the information or answer, and without relevance there is no meaning or application. He referred to "the brain theory" and said the same part of the brain that is used for emotion is also used for learning; deep memory and emotion are the same. He said his comments are based upon a book called, A Whole New Mind, by Daniel H. Pink.

[8:13:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER requested steps that could be taken to promote what the commissioner is proposing. She asked if, for example, a policy change would be necessary.

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COMMISSIONER LEDOUX responded that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) defined success as a test score; it judged students, teachers, principals, and superintendents based on a how a student performed on a test. Because of accountability, NCLB dropped some of the things children need to develop - the

part of the system where children can apply their knowledge and see success instantly by what they do. Commissioner LeDoux said teachers are afraid to carry on deep discussions with students because they are worried about meeting performance levels. He reiterated that the system does not honor questions or curiosity. He said the Internet is an important resource today for students, but students do not know how to use it as a data base, how to ask questions and validate the information gleaned.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX stated that students are being trained for jobs that do not exist. Years ago, a person would train for a career and remain in that career, but young people today change jobs an average of seven times. Vocational education has been stressed: welding, woodshop, mechanics. He asked the committee members what they think a student gains by taking a vocational class.

[8:18:57 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH said he thinks vocational education gives students a way in which to use the right side of their brains, because it offers both the practical and visual side of learning.

[8:19:37 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON said not everyone is going to attend and finish college, and those who do not could be better prepared for blue collar careers through vocational education. She suggested that vocational classes may give students a peek into their future, help them identify their abilities, and focus on what other classes they may need to take to reach their goals.

[8:21:15 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON added that students learn in various ways. Classes which require a student to sit in a seat to learn may not provide enough stimuli or engage certain students.

[8:22:29 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX stated that one reason to allow students to use their hands is that that provides an opportunity for them to experience immediate success between what they are doing and the creation of something. Furthermore, working as a team and making decisions is a benefit in these courses. He stated,

"Career technology is applied common sense, and I would suggest that every child needs it, whether they are going to college or not." He said the key component of any vocational course that makes it worthwhile is that it allows students to face a problem, design a strategy, implement that strategy, evaluate the results, and revise the process as necessary, which is a reflection of life.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX stated that traditionally public schools have measured success by letter grades to denote benchmarks; the school system has never really valued a system where children learn to "apply." He shared his belief that a person needs knowledge and the opportunity to apply that knowledge in order to build wisdom. He related that although students who get good grades deserve the acknowledgement they receive, there is a study, which shows that there is only about a 7 percent correlation between grades and achieving ones goal in high school. He indicated that the correlation is 10 times higher between children who participate in activities of any kind and success. He said the question is why grades are not a predictor. He stated, "With young people, it's a battle of attitudes." He asked the committee members why they think there is a difference between participation in activities and success in life.

[8:27:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON said she thinks students learn, through the process of doing something, that success may come after initial failure, and the feeling achieved through success motivates students to strive to succeed again. She said there is a lack of discipline and students don't experience [success] in life very much; therefore, "somebody's got to help them do it."

[8:28:58 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ offered her understanding that children are given assessments as early as kindergarten or first grade, and she asked if those assessments are left-brain or right-brain dominated. She asked if other types of assessments exist that would be more appropriate, and whether those being given are adequately assessing the creative thinking and skills of children in the early grades.

[8:29:55 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX responded that most assessments used in early learning are skill-based in order to measure what young children can do and what they can recognize. He indicated that it is how those assessments are applied that is of concern. He talked about children who are singled out. He stated that children assess themselves much more acutely than the school system ever will. He said, "Every child knows where they fit in that hierarchy, and if it's not high enough, they build their entire self-esteem ... on where they perceive they fit within that system."

[8:31:14 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ agreed that skills-based assessments are necessary for young children; however, she said schools need to find a way to honor students who are more right-brained and do not do as well with left-brain focused testing.

[8:31:38 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON said the committee needs to consider the criteria for a broad-based scholarship and decide if the focus of that criterion needs to be changed.

[8:32:52 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON said all the best intentions and best efforts of the legislature will not accomplish the goal if teachers are not re-schooled regarding right- and left-brained activities.

[8:34:38 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX stated that there is a direct correlation between scores on assessment tests and college success. Furthermore, an even more rigorous curriculum increases that correlation of success in college. He said the human brain, the school system, and the assessments used are not right- or left-brained; the entire brain is utilized.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX said teaching is both craft and art. The craft can be taught, while the art pertains to how to make knowledge alive in the minds of children - an aptitude rather than a taught skill. He said an English teacher can actually "teach the same things that you would learn in a vocational class," but not as easily.

[8:37:00 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON requested the research comparing the effects of a rigorous curriculum with success in college. He disagreed that the education system is unresponsive. He said the system and the teachers did respond to NCLB, and if the committee sets clear values and goals and establishes criteria that can be taught, the system will respond.

[8:39:22 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX said grades are important as a relationship between a teacher and a student, and to say otherwise is to undermine that relationship. The "A" student is working to his/her potential. The message to young people should be that what they do in school does matter. Commissioner LeDoux related an anecdote illustrating how his own change of attitude in school changed his grade.

[8:41:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH said advances in detection of special needs such as autism and dyslexia have resulted in more sophisticated ways of dealing with students and have brought attention and financial concentration on a small populace within the school community. He asked Commissioner LeDoux what he thinks this has done for the average student.

[8:43:22 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX responded that depending on the learning disability, the earlier it can be identified and dealt with the larger the effect will be in the years to come. He stated that proactive intervention done at an early age is costly; however, reactive interventions done later are very expensive. He offered further details. He said he is a strong proponent of intense interventions.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX said he believes every child is different and to treat them all the same is to treat them unfairly.

[8:46:02 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON directed the discussion to how the scholarship criteria are to be targeted.

[8:47:12 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH said he thinks what happens early in a child's education affects what is done later on, which could affect the scholarship issue.

[8:47:48 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER reported that teachers and parents in her district have shared with her their belief that the school district stalls when it comes to identifying or labeling students such that those students would then be eligible for special education services. She said this may be due to the cost of the programs. She questioned whether the early intervention about which Commissioner LeDoux discussed is actually happening.

[8:49:17 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON suggested that this question be answered in a subsequent discussion.

[8:49:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON asked how many schools have "graduation coaches" throughout the state.

[8:51:42 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX answered that graduation coaches are rare. He said in larger schools it is more imperative to have coaches or advisors, while in smaller schools, with a lower ratio of students to teachers, the teacher is the coach. Anyone who has the time to sit down with a student and discuss his/her future, has the ability to help that student, he said. A child needs to feel connected, he related.

[8:53:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON question if, given no encumbrances, there is a need to have scholarships that are not merit based.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX responded yes. He stated his belief that there are students who are creative, find their own paths, and are maturing outside of the system, and who should also be honored in some way, whether it is called a scholarship or not. However, accountability would still play a part, and the student

must understand that he/she would be required to follow the rules of the school.

8:56:08 AM

CHAIR SEATON mentioned a district which tests its students out of classes in order to help those students focus on other subjects which will challenge them. He asked a question pertaining to the grade point average (GPA) system and ensuring students will be challenged.

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COMMISSIONER LEDOUX said he thinks there is a movement nationally where schools will emphasize competency-based education versus a letter grade.

8:59:27 AM

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX, in response to Chair Seaton, offered his belief that state regulations provide the opportunity for schools to award credit based on any criteria that the state feels will ensure that the students have learned the subject content. Most schools that have competency-based systems also have the ability to translate that into a letter grade, because many colleges require a transcript with letter grades. He indicated that the flexibility exists in Alaska's system and in a potential scholarship program to work within a [competency-based system]. Commissioner LeDoux related that many courses in "the traditional distance" measure only whether or not a person has attained knowledge; they don't measure well the application - the creativity. The teacher can engage in dialog with the student to create a circle joining knowledge with meaning, he said. He concluded, "I don't believe the GPS ... scholarship will have any problem accommodating those changes; our regulations already do."

9:01:53 AM

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX, in response to Representative Gardner, said it is true [that students' behavior and choices may be molded based on the criteria for scholarship]. He said it is also true that many young people will avoid courses that may challenge their GPA. Consequently, some schools have introduced "weighted grades," so that a "B" will still count as an "A." However, under that system, an "A" earned will garner an extra point. The easy road is often more appealing, and "this won't change

that at all," he said. The standards for an "A" differ between schools. Commissioner LeDoux stated that the GPS is an invitation for students to work harder; it's "a direct assault on creating a positive attitude very, very early - at middle school." He said he likes to use the word "contract" rather than "scholarship." He explained that a scholarship is a gift for doing well, while the GPS is earned, which affects the attitude of a child and results in a winning situation. He stated his belief that the invitation [to earn the GPS] will have a ripple effect that will catalyze teachers to work harder to engage students to take on a rigorous curriculum.

COMMISSOINER LEDOUX said children cannot be taught if they are not in class. He spoke of math and science requirements, and the need to increase the years those subjects are taken in high school in order not to be in remedial levels of the subjects in college. He stated:

If you were to do an exam for science, what would you ask them to tell you? If you were to give a graduation exam in science, what do you want them to know, the Krebs cycle, the classification of an amoeba ...? No. What you're going to want to know is problem solving: how they look at the world; how it's divided up; the disciplines. You're not going to get into the specifics.

[9:05:53 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON said which criteria to use is what needs to be identified. He said it may be a Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) or specific knowledge-based test. The criteria may prove to be different from what is rewarded. He noted that on Wednesday, February 3, 2010, there would be a joint meeting which might bring this issue to the fore.

[9:08:26 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER expressed appreciation for the effect the GPS program would have in creating a culture in schools where students work toward a goal and families participate and apply pressure to school districts to "make things possible" for students. However, she warned that the state may end up paying for things that many families would have paid for anyway, which may result in lost opportunities. She asked Commissioner LeDoux if he can picture other ways to work for the same end, but where money is "distributed differently in the end."

[9:10:11 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX responded that the idea is to change a student's attitude and to keep graduates in Alaska. He said his experience as a school principal has shown that students with bad attitudes come from all strata of demographics. He opined that every child should step forward and take accountability, no matter their economic status, because that is what will determine their success. Commissioner LeDoux stated his belief that with the GPS program there would have to be mandatory annual meetings, beginning in 7th grade, between the students, parents, and a school official, to monitor the student's plan.

[9:12:15 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ related that a recent battle of the books program was won by a juvenile detention facility team, which she said illustrates that given opportunities children will succeed irrespective of being in difficult situations. She said she would be looking for ways to provide opportunities for scholarships to children who typically do not succeed in a traditional school setting.

[9:12:59 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX stated that success is "the best motivator drug in the world."

**OVERVIEW(S): DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT
VIRTUAL SCHOOL CONCEPT; DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE ONLINE VIRTUAL
HIGH SCHOOL; ALASKA SCHOOL DISTRICT ONLINE COURSE OFFERINGS**

[9:13:13 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the final order of business would be an overview related to: the Department of Education and Early Development Virtual School Concept, the Department of Defense Online Virtual High School, and the Alaska School District Online Course Offerings.

[9:13:56 AM](#)

LARRY LEDOUX, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (EED), stated that with the size of the state, it is a challenge to teach diverse content programs; the smaller the school, the fewer the opportunities. Additionally, the small

school may not have the expertise in their teachers to provide certain courses. The Alyeska School District implemented a correspondence course program at one point, which he described as "nothing more than credit by exam." The failure rate of traditional correspondence classes was very high - approaching 80-90 percent in some cases. Alternative schools would use correspondence courses set up in learning centers, but it was still not effective. With the advent of the Internet, things changed, but there was still no connection between a student and a teacher. Recently the sophistication of on-line classes has increased and a teacher may come on-line to interact with a student. However, the actual ability to speak and interact with teachers or other students improves the rate of success.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX related that the advent of social networking was a step forward and encouraged peer teaching. In synchronous technology, he said, a two-way video is utilized in "real time." It works well when the technology is working, but has a failure rate that makes it inconsistent. Ultimately, he said, districts together could build a synchronous network. He offered an illustration of how that would work. The schools would establish the schedule and students would choose from the consortium. He stated that the ability to do this is limited by bandwidth, and the technology is not necessarily dependable, but the synchronous class does work well and the interactive ability is successful.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX indicated that asynchronous technology uses software programs, such as "Blackboard" and "Illuminate," which are fully interactive in "real time," but are all Internet-based and use low bandwidth. He stated that the purpose of the virtual learning being developed now is not to try to emulate what is currently being done with technology, but to try to change education in a way so that students can learn in real time, are not restricted to seat time, and, thus, can manage their own instruction. The potential for this technology is huge in both rural and urban schools where students can choose high quality classes from across the nation, as well as the state. A number of districts are pioneering this technology in Alaska. Nationwide other states are creating virtual school programs that are incredible. The department is bringing together leaders and innovators in this technology to discuss how Alaska can develop a district-owned and -operated virtual school in the state, which would bring down the cost of the courses. Currently courses run approximately \$1,000 each.

[9:26:32 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX, in response to Representative Buch, said synchronous technology is expensive and in high demand, and is not really an option for Alaska right now. He said broadband, fiber optic capability is needed in every community in Alaska for a variety of reasons, not just education; however, until that becomes a reality, he is instructing the committee working on the virtual school to develop a system that will operate on what technology is currently available in Alaska. He stated his belief that the reliability of broadband throughout the state is improving, and he expressed his hope that developing a system that will "shrink" Alaska will "push the decisions necessary to connect every community in the state to broadband."

[9:29:12 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX, in response to questions from Chair Seaton, said virtual school would not be another bureaucracy. He confirmed that all the virtual courses would qualify for any scholarship and meet qualifications required by the districts and the state for graduation. Furthermore, virtual school would include college classes, as well as classes developed in Alaska and Outside.

[9:31:45 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON noted that the U.S. Department of Defense has an on-line virtual high school, and he asked Commissioner LeDoux if the state needs to ensure those classes align with state standards.

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX offered his belief that the districts currently using distance education take on the responsibility to carry out that evaluation. In response to a follow-up question, he said courses taught in Alaska should be aligned with Alaska's content standards. Standards are similar across the nation, so this is not usually an issue. Companies that design distance courses carefully ensure that what they deliver fits "the broadest possible representation across the states."

[9:34:47 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX, in response to Representative Edgmon, said he envisions that districts will pay a fee to join the consortium. He said there will need to be some people who manage the servers, but they could be stationed anywhere in the state. The system would be owned by a cooperative of districts.

He said Title II D provides approximately \$1 million of federal money to begin this program.

[9:36:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON asked if this system could help keep a school going that may no longer qualify for state funding.

[9:36:47 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX answered yes. He said he thinks the sky is the limit in innovation and a concentration of vision will help bring this to fruition. Every district should be able to participate. He stated that virtual high schools exist elsewhere, but are not part of the current vision for Alaska; however, changes will occur as the program evolves.

[9:37:52 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON directed attention to a letter from the Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District, and he noted that their [virtual] courses cost \$120-\$130 per semester, plus district staff time to proctor tests. He named some of the classes available. He then pointed to an e-mail from the Wrangell School District that raises a question regarding the requirement for highly qualified teachers and how that would be addressed in the virtual classroom. He asked if the legislature needs to take up this concern.

[9:40:09 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX said there will be concerns with each new opportunity and they will be addressed by the competent people on the planning committee, one of whom is the superintendent of the Wrangell School District.

CHAIR SEATON offered the assistance of the committee.

[9:41:00 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX concluded that the department is well underway in the developmental process, the end product is not clearly drawn, and there may be the need for legislative support.

[9:42:00 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON noted that a bill had been introduced related to virtual schools which could be used as a vehicle for any changes requested by the department.

[9:42:31 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER LEDOUX offered to provide a demonstration of the aforementioned Illuminate software program.

[9:43:08 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON said that may be scheduled.

[9:43:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH expressed appreciation for the work that Commissioner LeDoux has done with the Department of Labor. He opined that it is important in the future synchronization of this system for various departments to work together.

[9:44:36 AM](#)

MICHAEL HENRY, Executive Director of High Schools, Anchorage School District (ASD), testifying on behalf of the Anchorage School District, expressed support of the leadership and vision of Commissioner LeDoux. He said ASD has been involved in on-line instruction for approximately the past seven years and has uncovered problems, some of which have been solved. Mr. Henry said one thing that makes on-line education so important for children is that it equalizes the opportunity for students to take advanced placement courses. The district has used on-line courses significantly for credit recovery. Furthermore, he indicated that on-line courses provide the opportunity for juniors and seniors involved in fine arts to fulfill other course work necessary to continue to college.

MR. HENRY noted that last semester on-line courses were opened up for anyone to use versus the approach of limiting them to those who had a specific reason. He said ASD is proud of its teacher trainer program, which helps outstanding classroom teachers to also be great on-line teachers. He said ASD is excited that Commissioner LeDoux is taking a part in this. In response to Chair Seaton, he indicated there are approximately 125 juniors and seniors that have taken advantage of taking on-line classes for reasons other than the aforementioned limited reasons, or for no reason at all. He predicted that by the end of the school year, 1,200 students will have participated in on-

line classes. Mr. Henry emphasized the importance of on-line education to ASD's summer school program. He noted that technology has changed so much, that now just about every student in the ASD has access to a computer. He noted that there is a new grant that is making computers and "web books" available to students. Web books allow students to access their on-line course wherever they are, including fish camp, he said.

[9:50:19 AM](#)

MR. HENRY, in response to Representative Buch, explained that ASD began with an on-line government course to replace a correspondence course in government, as a means to offer an improved course. In response to Chair Seaton, he said ASD currently offers on-line any course that is offered in the ASD's program of studies. In response to Representative Edgmon, he explained what his job entails.

[9:52:53 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON, on behalf of Commissioner LeDoux, extended an invitation to a representative of the Military Youth Academy for that entity to be involved with EED's working group.

[9:55:46 AM](#)

JANICE M. KOCH-CARTER, Military, Federal, Pentagon, spoke of a research grant regarding post traumatic stress disorder. She indicated that the grant covers education, college funds, and scholarships, as well as mental health issues. She indicated that her goal is to help others understand politics, what brings on war, and how that can be stopped. She described the scope of her grant and how it reaches to other nations as well. She indicated that the grant was approved in 2002.

[9:59:01 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON requested literature on the program.

GENERAL KOCH-CARTER said she would provide that literature to the committee.

[9:59:40 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.