

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 24, 2010  
8:08 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**

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION STATE SCHOOL BOARD

- HEARD

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S):

State Board of Education & Early Development

Esther Cox - Anchorage  
James (Jim) Merriner - Anchorage

- CONFIRMATION(S) ADVANCED

HOUSE BILL NO. 206

"An Act establishing a career assessment requirement in public schools; and relating to postsecondary courses for secondary school students."

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

HOUSE BILL NO. 393

"An Act establishing a career assessment requirement in public schools; and relating to postsecondary courses for secondary school students."

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

ESTHER COX, Chair  
State Board of Education and Early Development  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the roundtable discussion.

GERALDINE BENSHOOF, Second Vice-Chair  
State Board of Education and Early Development  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the roundtable discussion.

DONALD HANDELAND, Student Advisor Elect  
State Board of Education and Early Development  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Nome, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the roundtable discussion.

JAMES (JIM) MERRINER, Appointee  
State Board of Education and Early Development  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the roundtable discussion.

BUNNY SCHAEFFER, Member  
State Board of Education and Early Development  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Kotzebue, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the roundtable discussion.

PATRICK SHIER, Member  
State Board of Education and Early Development  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Auke Bay, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the roundtable discussion.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:08:05 AM](#)

**CHAIR PAUL SEATON** called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:08 a.m. Representatives Munoz, P. Wilson, Edgmon, Gardner, Buch, and Seaton were present at the call to order.

**Roundtable Discussion State School Board**

[8:08:14 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the first order of business would be a roundtable discussion with the State Board of Education and Early Development (state board).

CHAIR SEATON introduced the State Board of Education and Early Development members Esther Cox, Geri Benshoof, Bunny Schaeffer, Pat Shier, Dave Handeland, and Jim Merriner. He provided the protocol to be used for the informal discussion.

[8:11:29 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON updated the state board on the recent accomplishments of the House Education Standing Committee, noting the bills addressed, passed, and upcoming for consideration, including HB 317, Education Funding: Basic/Spec Needs/Transport, HB 310, School Construction Debt Reimbursement, HB 350, Public School Funding: Local Contribution, HB 147, Education Funding For Instruction, HB 297, Postsecondary Scholarships. Still under consideration are HB 206, High School Assessment/Postsecondary Class, and HB 393, Charter/Alternative School Funding.

[8:13:16 AM](#)

ESTHER COX, Chair, State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), expressed excitement that the legislature created a standing committee on education. She praised the work being taken up by the chair and the committee.

[8:14:53 AM](#)

GERALDINE BENSHOOF, Second Vice-Chair, State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) provided a brief history of her experience on the state board.

[8:15:38 AM](#)

DONALD HANDELAND, Student Advisor Elect, State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), introduced himself, noting that he attends Mt. Edgecumbe High School.

[8:16:03 AM](#)

JAMES (JIM) MERRINER, Appointee, State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), introduced himself and thanked the committee for its work.

[8:16:18 AM](#)

BUNNY SCHAEFFER, Member, State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), introduced herself. She related her focus is on rural students.

[8:16:44 AM](#)

PATRICK SHIER, Member, State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), introduced himself. He provided a brief history of his experience on the state board for the past three years. He related that he and his wife home-schooled their children. He appreciated the work of the committee. He provided a personal anecdote to illustrate the intent of the state board. He viewed the state board as a facilitator to help school districts.

[8:20:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON requested the state board chair provide an overview of the state board's mission.

MS. COX responded that the state board prepares draft regulations, based on bills the legislature passes, and once promulgated, for the department to implement. Additionally, the state board is working diligently on an Alaska Education Plan in the state. The Commissioner of the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) has recognized the state does not have a pathway for an education plan. Several subcommittees were formed to address education, including quality teaching, career technical education, virtual school and distance education, and working to reduce the high school dropout rate.

[8:22:37 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ introduced herself to the state board and provided her interest in supporting education in the state. She related that her mother and grandmother are teachers. In fact, her grandmother served in the legislature in the 1940s and chaired the education committee, she stated. She said she appreciated the state board's commitment to education.

[8:23:42 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON stated that while she is not an educator, she was a school nurse for about 9 years and taught many classes. Additionally, her husband is also a school superintendent, she said.

[8:24:43 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON introduced himself to the state board and stated his interest in working with the state board. He commented on his interest in the current evolution of education.

[8:25:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER introduced herself to the state board saying she is the only member of her family who is not an educator. She has numerous family members who are teachers, including her grandmother, mother, and three sisters. She related that she is thrilled the legislature established a separate committee for education. She offered her interest in learning the state board's view on the Governor's performance scholarship bill (GPS), in terms of rural Alaska and distance delivery. She said she is currently unconvinced that the bill could work throughout Alaska, but is open to learning how it may work.

[8:26:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH introduced himself to the state board and expressed interest in working with the state board. He posed topics that he would like to discuss, including the state board's views on the difficult topics, particularly as it relates to education in rural Alaska.

[8:27:54 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON praised the efforts of the committee. He stated that given the federal legislation, the state board will need to advise the committee how to make education better in Alaska. He said he hopes for an open ongoing conversation with the state board. He suggested beginning the discussion today with the GPS. He related the bill has had eleven hearings on the bill, as well as a previous bill that was introduced on the topic.

[8:30:31 AM](#)

MR. SHIER observed that forty percent of Alaska's retirees leave the state since most people return to their original state. One thousand teachers are hired in Alaska each year from the Lower 48. He related his personal experiences he attended school in Alaska and remained in Alaska. He mentioned that his friends that attended college in other states tended to obtain jobs in those states. He further related that he convinced his son to spend one year at the University of Alaska Fairbanks instead of attending a Lower 48 college. His son fell in love with the school, graduated, and is currently employed in Alaska. He offered his belief that if children and grandchildren live in Alaska, that it encourages the grandparents to stay, too.

[8:34:36 AM](#)

MS. COX asked the committee what the committee is hearing about delivering the curriculum in rural Alaska, with respect to the Governor's Performance Scholarship (GPS) proposal.

[8:35:09 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER opined that her major interest in the GPS is the requirement for math and science, which she viewed as critical. She offered her belief that this is not about college scholarships, but is about reforming K-12, changing the culture of high school for kids to value effort and hard work. Thus, math and science are an integral aspect. She expressed concern whether small schools in Alaska have meaningful access to provide four years of math and science. Some subjects are more easily taught in distance delivery than other classes. She was unsure how to teach higher level science classes without labs or equipment. She reiterated her concern with the GPS program since students have reported distance delivery courses are viewed as less valuable than an in-person class.

[8:37:10 AM](#)

MS. SCHAEFFER said that she shares the concern over the difficulty in providing four years of math and science with one or two teachers in rural schools. She also expressed concern with teacher turnover and training. She agreed distance classes are not up to the standards that should be required for GPS program. She recalled that some rural students attending the University of Alaska must fly to hubs, such as the Chukchi College in Kotzebue, to take intensive labs, but not all students have the opportunity. The system is not set up for high school students. She suggested demanding opportunities for rural students to take labs at hub high schools if the GPS bill passes.

[8:38:58 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER recalled some prior discussions on rural hubs, which have been effective for vocational education. She commented that students can take a block of classes. She suggested that may be a solution. She thought perhaps the GPS may provide the impetus for families and communities to demand the changes.

[8:39:41 AM](#)

MS. BENSHOOF inquired as to whether jobs will be available in Alaska for students who earn advanced degrees. She further asked whether the state would invest a lot of money in education, only to discover that jobs are not available in their field in Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked for clarification on what fields she is referring to since the legislature hears shortages exist in many fields.

MS. BENSHOOF answered that advanced science and business degrees were the two fields that came to mind since a hundred jobs would not be available in the fields.

[8:41:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ related that she traveled to the North Slope in January. She reported that one of the managers noted that the average age of workers is 53. She recalled that a large percentage of the positions are held by people who live out of state. She offered her belief that opportunities exist to train young people to work in those jobs as the workforce

retires and to fill the positions with local Alaskans rather than by non-residents.

[8:42:06 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON recalled the state reviewed its retirement systems since the difficulty in hiring people to fill the high level jobs was brought to the legislature's attention. He hoped that these things would go "hand in hand" and as more Alaskans are educated with skill sets that jobs will be available. He recalled Mr. Shier's comments on college students finding jobs in their college state. He stated that currently Alaska has a poorly educated workforce per the statistics the committee has reviewed. He said that Alaska is losing a tremendous amount of its skilled workforce since people 55 and above have higher college graduation levels than those in the ages of 24-36. As the older Alaskans move, it has the effect of decreasing the number of college graduates in Alaska's workforce. Thus, it is difficult to be competitive and establish businesses. He said he is extremely hopeful that other businesses will be attracted to the state in the event that this plan goes through with an increase in college graduates and vocational education. It is difficult to establish a business if an educated workforce is not available. At one time Alaska had one of the highest levels of college graduates in the workforce but that trend has reversed over time.

[8:45:24 AM](#)

MR. MERRINER said that he likes many concepts in the GPS. He shared the concern for delivering education to rural Alaskans. He related that he worked in the lower Kuskokwim and knows firsthand some of the challenges. He expressed excitement about the Alaska Virtual Learning Network. Although he grew up in Alaska, he found challenges in Kipnuk in terms of everyday life. He equated some teacher turnover to challenges posed to someone in from the Lower 48. He offered his support for encouraging local young people to enter the teaching arena. He asked about adding a needs-based part to the GPS bill.

CHAIR SEATON answered that the bill passed out of the committee contains a needs-based component. He explained that 50 percent of the unmet need is covered in the scholarship. He offered his belief that the bill provides financial access to a postsecondary education. He recalled that aspect nearly doubled the cost of the program.

8:49:43 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH referred to Mr. Merriner's resume, and his work in the Galena School District. He asked whether his work was in establishing distance learning.

MR. MERRINER replied that Interior Distance Education of Alaska (IDEA) in Galena helped pioneer curriculum choices for homeschool families. He explained that this program is a statewide correspondence school program. He related that about a dozen programs exist. The IDEA program supports homeschool families in their efforts to educate their children. He pointed out that the state must ensure that the funds are not used to purchase religious materials. He characterized the IDEA program as a broker of curriculum, while still providing oversight to families.

8:51:19 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked for comments on whether this was an effective program that enhanced opportunity for education.

MR. MERRINER related the model used with the homeschool community is different from what would be delivered at a brick and mortar school, primarily due to the monthly contact system. The Alaska virtual learning network would use highly qualified teachers will be different. The IDEA allows families to take classes from schools around the nation, such as classes at Brigham Young University or UA classes.

MR. SHIER provided a personal anecdote of growing up in Fairbanks, and how rural students came to Fairbanks for boarding school. He related that he traveled as an auditor. He observed that the skilled work was performed and traditionally brought into rural areas, while local citizens provided the unskilled labor. He explained how this has changed via distance classes provided by visitor industry personnel. He suggested that over time, participation during the distance courses increased. Improvements are needed to meet individual needs, but the barriers are beginning to break down for classes with technical content. He offered the effectiveness and success rate increases when the distance educator travels to the rural sites and meets with students. He said, "I think we'll get better at and I think we must, in terms of distance delivery."

MR. HANDELAND offered that typically students at Mt. Edgecumbe have found attending college in the in the Lower 48 is less

expensive. He thought the GPS program would help college students stay in Alaska.

8:58:47 AM

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON brought up the topic of WorkKeys. She related that the High School exit exam has created anxiety for students. She suggested eliminating the exit exam and initiating WorkKeys as early as possible to allow students time to reach their goals. She asked for the board members' comments on when to offer WorkKeys and on the exit exam.

8:59:55 AM

MS. BENSHOOF returned to a previous topic. She asked whether the intent of the GPS is to provide scholarships for advanced education in college or to improve the high school education. The DEED works diligently on standards for K-12. The GPS adds additional requirements to the high standards already established. She expressed confusion on the purpose of the bill. She offered that high schools have high standards. These two elements are already supported by the high standards in every high school.

9:01:14 AM

CHAIR SEATON said that the high schools currently require two years of math to graduate. It has been determined that these students end up in remedial classes when they attend college. The GPS is an effort to incentivize students to take a more rigorous curriculum in full preparation of college, including four years of math. If a student chooses to earn a high school diploma he/she does not need to reach beyond the current standards. The question remains as to how to encourage students to attend college. However, the GPS standards will better prepare them for postsecondary education, he stated. High schools need to offer the course work for those that desire the more complex math and science.

9:04:52 AM

MS. BENSHOOF observed the GPS has a dual objective.

CHAIR SEATON agreed the bill has a dual objective. One purpose is to eliminate the need for remedial classes in college. He stated that there is concern for rural students, but the process is an evolving process. However, without this stimulus change

may not be forthcoming. The GPS may be the catalyst to effect change in the rural communities, he stated.

[9:07:12 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON offered his belief that the bill in its totality is not just a scholarship program, but is a means for education reform and a way to provide an incentive for students to perform. Many legislators do hold those questions about the GPS. He stated that if the bill does not pass, he would advocate that the committee hold education committee interim meetings in rural areas to gain a fuller understanding of how this reform can occur.

[9:10:01 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON stated that he fully expects the bill to pass this year, but the education committee may still benefit from visiting rural areas. He emphasized the importance of not continuing the status quo. He cautioned that it not become a tug-of-war of rural versus urban educational delivery. He offered that school districts in rural Alaska will find ways to accomplish goals, which may include distance learning. He said that a great math teacher teaching a course through distance learning could teach more than a poor teacher teaching in the classroom. Thus, there are many means to solve what will be needed to bring students the education required to qualify for the GPS, and it will be an ongoing effort even following the passage of the bill.

[9:13:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER suggested specialized teachers, such as a biology teacher, who could travel to communities to provide intensive classes versus having the students travel to hubs. She characterized it as similar to having skilled nurses traveling to communities. Additionally, exiting testimony has come forward that the ACT test scores range from 18-21. In Wyoming, the Hathaway program discovered that 99 percent of the students are taking the ACT exam and the scores are only slightly lower than in Alaska. She said, "That's what this opportunity has done in Wyoming, and to me that is so dramatic." She thought that having 99 percent of the students taking the exam and scoring nearly as high as the best students was tremendous.

[9:15:40 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON brought forward Representative Keller's request to discuss charter schools in the state.

[9:16:35 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON suggested that today's rural parents are beginning to realize the importance of exposure and postsecondary education for their children, which may not have existed in the past. Parents taught their children what they could do with the land and took them to fish camps in the summer. She pointed out that some parents are noticing suicides and the need for change. The GPS could provide the financial ability for educational opportunities for their children. She thought the GPS could provide hope for parents and children at the local level for access to higher education.

CHAIR SEATON pointed out that the GPS would affect every community in Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ noted that distance learning and cyber schooling will be an aspect of the reform, but also local talent is an important resource and should be encouraged. She hoped that flexibility to use community resources will be encouraged as this process goes forward. She recalled a student who attended school with twelve students and one teacher. The teacher brought in a mathematician in the community to tutor the students. That student will be attending UAF in the fall as a physics student.

[9:22:17 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON observed that students have better outcomes when students experience someone in the system who takes a personal interest in their education. The importance of this connection has been a constant throughout the testimony and statistics before the committee. He related several instances in which mentoring or advising students has been the most effective approach. He wondered if this could be integrated into every school for every student to benefit the individual. The personal interest is imperative and perhaps a state board policy should be implemented.

[9:26:07 AM](#)

MS. COX related that in 1995 she was president of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, who wrote a book

book, Breaking Ranks, Changing An American Institution. At that time, one topic illustrated the need to have a personal advocate for every student. She recalled that in Anchorage student in the SAVE program are in the program because they feel a connection with someone and that someone cares. She reported that postsecondary institutions are also experiencing this need, which can be supported in various means, including via e-mail. She commented on her experience at an Anchorage high school, in which she found that calling a student by name made "all the difference in the world" during disciplinary measures. She turned to the term "rigor" and how to apply it, in particular, to rural Alaskan students is challenging. She stated her belief that providing rigor can be brought forth in a creative manner, such as using a community resource. She agreed the program is a statewide program, but felt promoting rigor for rural and urban students is a worthy goal. Students, who might otherwise not have the opportunity, will be provided educational opportunities by the GPS program.

[9:30:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH mentioned that the committee has had complaints that people are not happy with the remedial rate, or the dropout rates, particularly for minorities. Initially hearing the "carrot and stick" approach in the GPS plan was exciting as a means to bring reform and incentivize students. The hope is that the parents recognize the importance of rigor as a pathway for student success. He offered his belief that the committee needs to address opportunities for students to experience success. He recalled that Mr. Hamilton stated that 21 percent of jobs in Alaska require a college education, but 75 percent of the jobs in Alaska do not require an academic degree. He stated that high school graduates need a better way to proceed and have better math and science opportunities. He commented that the committee is working on the delivery system.

[9:33:41 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked the state board to comment on the issue related to application for charter school facility federal funding.

MS. COX deferred to the DEED regarding funding of charter schools.

[9:36:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ asked whether the state board has considered removing the cap on the number of charter schools, which is another part of the bill.

MS. COX answered no.

[9:36:46 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON related his understanding that matter is not a state board issue. He asked whether the state board would like to bring up any issues to the committee at either the state board or student advisor level.

MR. HANDELAND answered no, that he did not have any student issues to raise today.

[9:37:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ asked him to describe what is occurring at Mt. Edgewood High School.

MR. HANDELAND offered that he is currently taking college level calculus at Mt. Edgewood High School. He stated that he has also taken a genetics course and some high level science courses as a junior. He commented that he is also taking some classes at UAS campus.

[9:38:41 AM](#)

MR. SHIER stated that this state board is committed to work on standards that work for rural and urban schools. He suggested that the shift has been from "seat time" to "do you know what you really ought to know." The state board has discussed WorkKeys, "High Stakes" test, accountability, and a willingness to examine alternatives. He offered that many things are moving on parallel tracks and he is excited to be a part of the effort.

[9:40:10 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked whether the state board considering "end of course" exams rather than a single test.

MS. COX replied that the state board has held preliminary discussions. She offered her belief that many questions remain to be answered. She understood some states are moving in that direction.

CHAIR SEATON asked the state board to forward pertinent information to the committee regarding this topic.

MR. SHIER commented that education is about the students and stressed the importance of removing barriers on their behalf.

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON asked for ways to improve communication between the committee and the state board.

MS. COX related that the state board comes to Juneau once a year, which is helpful. She invited the committee members to the state board meetings. Additionally, the state board will provide a forum for the committee members on request. She suggested a mandatory introduction for teachers coming to Alaska from the Lower 48. She commented on HB 206, and offered her belief that 12th grade is too late for the WorkKeys test.

[9:46:27 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON stated that the committee has asked the university to prepare a report regarding teacher education and preparation that is given specifically for teaching in rural areas.

**CONFIRMATION HEARING(S):**  
**State Board of Education & Early Development**

[9:47:23 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the final order of business would be confirmation hearing the candidates

[9:47:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MUNOZ made a motion to advance from committee the nomination of Esther Cox and James (Jim) Merriner to the State Board of Education & Early Development.

[9:48:12 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON hearing no objection, the confirmations were advanced from the House Education Standing Committee.

[9:48:55 AM](#)

MS. COX said she will make the state board meeting and subcommittee meeting schedules available. She urged any member or his/her staff to attend whenever possible.

9:50:09 AM

**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing meeting was adjourned at 9:50:26 AM.