

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 14, 2010

8:05 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Cathy Engstrom Munoz, Vice Chair

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Bob Lynn
Senator Bettye Davis
Senator Kevin Meyer

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: ADVISORY AND ADVOCATE PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

EDDY JEANS, Director
School Finance and Facilities Section
Department of Education and Early Development (EED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Received a citation from the Alaska State
Legislature.

CASADY HERDING, Language Arts Teacher
Thunder Mountain High School
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed the advisory program at Thunder Mountain High School.

SEAN DUSEK, Assistant Superintendent of Instruction
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD)
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed advisory programs in the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District.

BILL WATKINS, Principal
Kodiak High School
Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed advisory programs at Kodiak High School.

CYNTHIA CURRAN, Director
Teaching and Learning Support
Department of Education and Early Development (EED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented testimony regarding advisory programs on behalf of the Department of Education and Early Development (EED).

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:05:30 AM](#)

CHAIR PAUL SEATON called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:05 a.m. Representatives Seaton, Peggy Wilson, Edgmon, Buch, and Keller were present at the call to order. Representative Gardner arrived as the meeting was in progress. Representative Lynn and Senators Davis and Meyer were also in attendance.

OVERVIEW: Advisory and Advocate Programs in Schools

[8:05:39 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON announced that the only order of business would be a discussion about advisory and advocate programs in schools.

[8:07:12 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON, on behalf of the Alaska State Legislature, presented Eddy Jeans, Director, School Finance and Facilities Section, Department of Education and Early Development (EED), with a citation in honor of 30 years of service to the State of

Alaska. He then expressed his personal appreciation for Mr. Jeans' work that was of great benefit to the committee.

[8:10:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON offered his personal thanks to Mr. Jeans for his exemplary service.

[8:11:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON added her compliments to Mr. Jeans.

[8:12:11 AM](#)

SENATOR MEYER especially appreciated Mr. Jeans' pleasant manner.

[8:13:43 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS noted Mr. Jeans' service over 30 years.

[8:14:36 AM](#)

EDDY JEANS, Director, School Finance and Facilities Section, Department of Education and Early Development, introduced his daughters and stated that he plans to retire this summer.

[8:16:32 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON turned attention to the discussion on advisory and advocate programs in schools. He stated that advisory programs have been identified as the most effective means for increasing graduation rates in high schools.

[8:18:53 AM](#)

CASADY HERDING, Language Arts Teacher, Thunder Mountain High School (Thunder Mountain), informed the committee that the staff at Thunder Mountain is invested in the advisory program and is devising school-wide agreements on goals for the program during professional development time. She stated that the structures of advisory programs can vary and have different goals. At Thunder Mountain, the primary goals are: building relationships among students; building relationships between teachers and students; academic enrichment; active mentors with personalized connections to students; career mentoring. Last year five teachers worked as advisors and during a ten-week period students rotated among the teachers, connecting with each

teacher for two weeks and learning future goal-setting skills, such as writing resumes, and other job-seeking skills. Ms. Herding described various projects completed by students in their advisory groups. Next year she anticipated a more cohesive role for the advisories as they will concentrate on team building in freshman small learning communities (SLCs) to ensure that freshman connect with staff and are comfortable in the high school environment.

[8:24:48 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON surmised the Thunder Mountain program is a restructuring of the learning environment into small learning communities.

[8:25:26 AM](#)

MS. HERDING observed that advisories align with academies and small learning communities; in fact, they focus on personalization, and can be set up in many different ways. At Thunder Mountain, students meet for a 45-minute advisory period each week. She related several activities that were made possible by the unique structure of the program. In response to Chair Seaton, she clarified that the program is available to every student, although activities can be specific to grade levels.

[8:27:10 AM](#)

MS. HERDING, in response to Representative P. Wilson, gave an example of how the advisory teachers worked together on a job readiness lab. After ten weeks, the students "had a thorough idea and understanding of what they would need to be presenting themselves to the community as job candidates."

[8:28:39 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON observed the goal was to prepare students for the workforce.

MS. HERDING pointed out that during the first year of Thunder Mountain there were only freshmen and sophomores in attendance. However, with the growth of the student population, teachers will not see every student in class, and the advisory models are successful when there is a commitment from all staff to certain expectations and goals. Ms. Herding opined advisories will be part of the school culture at Thunder Mountain High School.

8:30:40 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked for the normal order of the school day and week, and how the advisory program fits.

MS. HERDING explained advisories are scheduled in class period time. She described how the structure developed and stressed that the current schedule may change, as the school transitions into its permanent phase. Advisory class time allows for ungraded enrichment activities chosen by the students.

8:34:46 AM

CHAIR SEATON asked what effect providing this enrichment time has had on students, or on the atmosphere at the school.

MS. HERDING said students report having a positive energy at school and feel safe; however, there is no way to quantify the results of the program at this time.

8:36:40 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked for more information on the academy.

MS. HERDING related that at Thunder Mountain, the traditional model of education is being restructured to allow each student to be known by adults, and to improve relationships among students. The goal is to improve school climate and eliminate disenfranchised, isolated, and alienated groups. Through the small learning communities, teachers get to know students quickly in their freshman year, and make sure none "fall through the cracks." At the end of the freshman year, students enroll in one of two academies that best fits their interest and goals. Most careers will fall into one of two categories: hard sciences or creative areas. The academy Ms. Herding is part of is in the category of science, math, and technology, thus, as an English teacher, she has altered her American literature curriculum to capture the interest of future scientists and computer programmers. The academy model and small learning communities also support collaboration with other teachers to develop and expand curriculum.

8:42:27 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked for further comments on team teaching.

MS. HERDING said team teaching is similar to what the academy teachers do. One challenge is the scheduling of shared planning time, and a certain school structure has to be in place to support that.

[8:44:51 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked whether all of the teachers support this model.

MS. HERDING said it is a dynamic and powerful teaching experience, and the teachers came to Thunder Mountain to bring about change.

[8:46:16 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON asked about the logistics of the school day.

[8:46:36 AM](#)

MS. HERDING advised the students move among the classes but, within each academy, "you see the same familiar faces."

[8:47:21 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON expressed his interest in visiting the advisory model.

MS. HERDING encouraged committee members to visit Thunder Mountain. In response to Chair Seaton, she explained that "next generation schools" is the district plan developed about five years ago to anticipate the transition to three high schools in Juneau, and was the result of research that recognized antiquated school systems are "detrimental to everybody, all of the stakeholders."

[8:48:57 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON further asked whether the academy structure was developed at Thunder Mountain, or was part of next generation schools.

MS. HERDING affirmed that the academy was part of next generation schools, and pointed out complete information on that plan is available at the district website.

8:49:28 AM

SEAN DUSEK, Assistant Superintendent of Instruction, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD), in response to Chair Seaton, informed the committee that three high schools in his district implement a personalization advisory program in which a teacher and a student meet for 15-20 minutes every day to help the student set personal goals, and so a staff member can get to know the student well. Advisors can also help students understand assessments, and some contact parents on a regular basis "just to check and see how things are going." This program follows the National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASSP) recommendations of personalization and advocacy in schools. Mr. Dusek offered to provide the committee with copies of NASSP recommendations and research. Activities for the advisories that meet daily follow themes from a uniform activity book-set up by grade level-to help students prepare for life after high school, whether post-secondary plans or a job apprenticeship is the next step. He noted that school staff work hard to make this program successful and the activities are constantly refined. Mr. Dusek continued to explain that three other high schools have advisory programs that meet on a rotating basis two or three times per week. Again, the program is geared to allow students to explore their areas of interest in a classroom setting. Specific remedial help, if needed, is also offered during this time. In addition, outside experts from various vocations work with students, and necessary "soft" employment skills are addressed, such as arriving to work on time, being respectful, problem solving, and drug testing at the work site. At this time, Homer High School is conducting an extensive study on the impact of its program, called Focus on Learning (FOL). Furthermore, advisory programs have been established at middle schools to assist in the transition from elementary school. Mr. Dusek said two middle schools in his district have daily advisory programs in place with a focus on the students' academic strengths and weaknesses, and how to handle peer pressure.

8:58:51 AM

CHAIR SEATON asked about staff acceptance of the personalization or academic-focus model programs.

MR. DUSEK affirmed that training and ease of implementation facilitates acceptance of the programs by staff members. The more successful programs take a tremendous amount of effort by staff in order to establish the goal of personalization for

students. The advisories are a vehicle to meet the original vision that "every student will be known and cared for at our school." In addition, advisories are a vehicle for the board of education goal of individual learning plans for each student. He stressed the skills and work required of teachers for the success of the advisory programs.

9:02:38 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked how long advisory programs have been in place.

MR. DUSEK said all of the high schools have had an advisory-type of program for at least three years. Soldotna High School has had a program for about six years; however, the program has been modified over time. The district is striving for standardization of programs across the district, with individual learning plans for every student, and the capability for electronic transfer of information.

9:04:48 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked for Mr. Dusak's observations on the longer running programs.

MR. DUSEK explained that students are comfortable with the programs because of the personal connection. Furthermore, the academic-type focus programs are especially successful because they are student-driven. An additional benefit of the programs is the increase in communication with parents. He opined that the key factor is always the facilitation by the adult.

9:06:48 AM

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON observed that the influence of the teacher is critical.

MR. DUSEK added that the comfort level of a teacher may not include topics outside of their subject matter; for example, a math teacher may have difficulty discussing drug use. Training and role playing has helped teachers expand their ability to help students on a personal level.

9:09:01 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked whether there are optional applications for team teaching.

MR. DUSEK stated that the district is working toward a collaboration initiative to help teachers work together; in fact, a group of teachers from three schools is video-conferencing World History joint lessons. In addition, there are other cross-curricular projects underway.

[9:11:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH pointed out that parental involvement is important, and asked whether the district is increasing its involvement with parents.

MR. DUSEK noted that elementary school staff expends a great effort to welcome parents into schools, and advisors can step into the role of making positive home contacts to encourage participation in parent-teacher conferences at the high schools.

[9:13:58 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked whether skills relating to advisory programs are included in teacher hiring policies.

MR. DUSEK confirmed that every teacher interviewed is asked how they will make a personal connection with each student beyond the student's academic strengths and weaknesses.

[9:15:49 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON reported that Seward High School found two contacts per week more helpful than one contact per week.

[9:17:06 AM](#)

BILL WATKINS, Principal, Kodiak High School, informed the committee he has been the principal of Kodiak High School for three years. At the beginning of his term, the school was participating in an accreditation process which allowed him to review data on students and successful school programs. The data compared seniors who graduated with a plan, at-risk students, as well the results from a school survey. To address problems identified by the data, an advisory program was implemented that provides at least one adult for every student to turn to for support. Ideally, every student should have five caring adults in their lives. Mr. Watkins related that because the school only had three counselors for eight hundred students, a plan was established to present career-interest course

offerings to freshmen so they can begin to build a career portfolio, and graduate with a well-defined plan. Kodiak High School counselors are responsible for the initial four-year plan for a group of students. The advisors meet individually with ten to twelve students on a weekly basis during the students' high school years. In addition, advisors constantly review each student's four-year plan, check on graduation requirements and grades, discuss careers, personal relationships, employment skills, and plan for the four years following high school. Furthermore, course request surveys are provided to ensure that the school can provide the courses a student needs to pursue his/her goals. Mr. Watkins noted that the school retains flexibility, and student leadership is encouraged. Although the advisories now meet once per week, the program will be modified as required. He opined that the program is stable and beneficial to students, and "students are feeling more connected to our school and they're leaving more prepared for careers beyond high school." In addition, the advisories are implementing Career Ready 101, which is a program associated with KeyTrain and WorkKeys academic assessments. He referred to "the academy approach" at Thunder Mountain High School and noted that his school may adopt academies in the future.

[9:26:40 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked whether additional skills are necessary for the teachers hired at Kodiak High School.

MR. WATKINS affirmed that the interview process identifies how incoming teachers develop positive relationships with students.

CHAIR SEATON assumed there is an emphasis placed on the advisory program during the hiring process. In response to Mr. Watkins' request for clarification, Chair Seaton noted that teachers have historically taken up extra-curricular assignments with enthusiasm or not, and asked how a teacher's expertise as an advisor is identified in the hiring process.

MR. WATKINS pointed out that professional development opportunities are provided which help teachers create positive relationships with students, and staff counselors are available for support. Moreover, the advisors make efforts to connect with students whenever they can.

[9:31:13 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON observed that advisors and students are matched throughout the four years of high school and the groups are comprised of mixed grade levels.

MR. WATKINS clarified that the advisory teachers begin with freshman and advance grade levels along with their students.

[9:32:16 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON asked what occurs when personalities between an advisor and a student do not mesh.

MR. WATKINS acknowledged that counselors make adjustments in applicable situations.

[9:32:58 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked whether there is interest to incorporate volunteers such as senior citizens and other community members, as advisors, or to work with a group of students.

MR. WATKINS explained that parents and others are welcome to participate.

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH further asked whether volunteers are solicited, or just welcomed.

[9:34:46 AM](#)

MR. WATKINS said there is not solicitation or outreach at this time, as the advisory program is fairly new. However, partnerships with the local job service and the hospital are established.

[9:35:48 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON informed the committee and witnesses there will be an interim project around this topic that will coordinate information for presentation to the legislature.

[9:36:58 AM](#)

CYNTHIA CURRAN, Director, Teaching and Learning Support, EED, stated that upcoming meetings by the graduation working group will discuss, in depth, the critical transition between middle and high school. Different transition models from around the

country will be researched and shared with school district personnel in Alaska. Ms. Curran agreed that the success of advisory programs is determined by whether the staff shares the mission, or if the program is "laid upon the staff." She stressed the importance of hiring staff with the responsibilities of advisory programs in mind, and that there is also a plan for implementing advisory programs. Ms. Curran explained that models for advisory programs vary from school-based to those that encourage community participation. She reminded the committee that advisory programs originated in middle schools with the purpose of creating a smaller community for students; in fact, the National Middle School Association and the American Student Achievement Institute can provide models for the advisory process.

[9:42:17 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked for the most recent recommendations for the structure of middle school, especially pertaining to sixth grade.

MS. CURRAN advised that sixth grade is commonly split between two teachers for core courses, and other teachers for "specials." Students in seventh and eighth grade typically move into a "junior high school model." However, the philosophy of the building determines the model at this point in time.

[9:45:05 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH has seen the successful development of a model for elementary schools in Anchorage, but he warned that changes in the grade levels of the middle schools would lead to remodeling of new schools ten or twelve years from now.

MS. CURRAN recalled some middle schools were built in Alaska specifically to allow for team teaching. The state provides local control of schools, thus the footprint of a new school is determined by its community. In fact, Palmer Jr. Middle School was built as a junior high school and functions as a middle school.

[9:48:02 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON stated there is a problem with the transfer of student information as a student advances to another school. This also causes a lack of continuity for each student. He asked whether advisor programs will also "have these barriers,

these walls, so that there's no transfer of knowledge, or are we going to integrate transfer of this knowledge base that is probably way more important than the, what grade the student got in ... on a certain subject."

[9:50:01 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN explained that teachers from the elementary "feeder" schools meet with the staff from the middle schools receiving their incoming sixth grade students. She offered to discuss this matter with the graduation working group, and added that at a recent middle school partnership meeting, the idea of placing AmeriCorps mentors in middle schools was supported, and grants may be available for this purpose.

[9:53:14 AM](#)

CHAIR SEATON offered to provide a letter of support from the House Education Standing Committee.

MS. CURRAN also reminded the committee that the Career Technical Educational plan provides for annual benchmarks to inform students of the achievements in high school necessary to meet their goals.

[9:53:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH asked when conversations with students and parents, regarding students' future goals, begin.

MS. CURRAN said sixth grade. In further response to Representative Buch, she said that teachers "spend a lot of time talking about what you want to be when you grow up" throughout elementary school. In fact, that theme must be carried forward all through school in order for students to meet their goals. Students who wait until high school to determine what to do, miss opportunities along the way.

[9:55:25 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BUCH concluded that in pre-K, and the years prior to sixth grade, schools must introduce information about careers so students learn what is available and how to get there. He emphasized that schools must introduce information during the early grades about all careers, academia or technical, along with core skills, in order for Alaska graduates to stay in the state.

9:56:49 AM

CHAIR SEATON advised that additional feedback on this topic, received via e-mail, is available in the committee packet. In response to Representative Buch, he affirmed that committee meetings during the interim will be noticed at his office and through the usual public sources.

9:57:32 AM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:57 a.m.