

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 29, 2010

8:04 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Kevin Meyer, Co-Chair  
Senator Joe Thomas, Co-Chair  
Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair  
Senator Charlie Huggins  
Senator Donald Olson  
Senator Gary Stevens

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

School Board Fly-In: Alaska's Public Schools

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record.

**WITNESS REGISTER**

LON GARRISON, President  
Sitka School Board  
Sitka, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Introduced the school districts present and address three main topics of concern for education in Alaska.

JOHN STEINER, President  
Anchorage School Board  
Anchorage, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Expressed concern about the mandatory high school exit exam.

SUNNI HILTS, Board Member  
Kenai School Board  
Soldotna, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Discussed the importance of technology in school and the importance of early childhood education.

SUE HULL, Board Member  
Fairbanks School Board  
Fairbanks, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Discussed the importance of technology in school and the importance of funding for major maintenance repairs in schools.

JEFF FRIEDMAN, Board Member  
Anchorage School Board  
Anchorage, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Expressed his gratitude to the committee for the work that they have done.

ARNOLD BROWER, Board Member  
North Slope School Board  
Barrow, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Discussed the importance of technology for rural education.

CHARLENE ARNESON, President,  
Chugach School Board  
Whittier, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Discussed the need for funding for major maintenance repair and the importance of digital learning in schools.

ANDI STORY, Vice President  
Juneau School Board  
Juneau, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Stressed the importance of early childhood education and her concern on the current high school exit exam.

MR. SHARP, Board Member  
[Indic.]

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Expressed gratitude for the education system in Alaska.

NORM WOOTEN, President  
Kodiak Island School Board  
Kodiak, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Explained how technology has improved student's education in rural areas.

BILL HOLT, Board Member  
Kenai Peninsula School Board  
Soldotna, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Stressed the importance of early childhood education.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:04:33 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR THOMAS** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:04 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Huggins, Stevens, Olson, Davis, Meyer and Thomas.

**SCHOOL BOARD FLY-IN: ALASKA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

[8:04:48 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR THOMAS** announced that the committee would hear from representatives of Alaska school districts.

[8:05:39 AM](#)

**SENATOR STEVENS** welcomed the assembly. He said that this is the first session in which both the House and the Senate have had standing committees on education. He recapped some of the legislation that is currently in process regarding education.

[8:07:13 AM](#)

**LON GARRISON**, President, Sitka School Board, introduced the participants and pointed out the school districts that were represented: Sitka, Anchorage, Kenai, Unalaska, Klawock, Southwest, Kodiak, Chugach, Northwest, Juneau, Fairbanks, Mat-Su, and St. Mary's.

On behalf of the Alaska Association of School Districts (AASD) and the various school districts, he expressed gratitude for the support that education has received over the past three years. They are hopeful that this support continues and having standing education committees is evidence that it has risen to the level of priority that it deserves.

**MR. GARRISON** said the school district representatives today would focus on three points: funding stability, innovation for student success, and early childhood development.

The education task force provided funding stability for the first three years and AASD and school districts are now looking at where they go from here. HB 317 continues that work and they're hopeful that it will continue to move forward because it provides the opportunity for forward funding. This allows school districts to budget and spend money more wisely. And it avoids the problems associated with looking for money on a year-to-year

basis. There is a lot of good work being done on school construction funding (SB 237) and the ability for urban and rural districts to both get something out of that bill. Keeping that partnership together is very important. He noted the continuing backlog in major maintenance for a number of state schools. Anything that can be done to move forward on this concern is something that needs to be done. When major maintenance is deferred, replacement becomes more likely and that may be much more costly.

Innovation for student success, the second topic, is about bringing kids into the 21st century with regard to incorporating technology into the curriculum. The Consortium for Digital Learning (CDL) is a very important program for school districts to take advantage of. Funding for this program is shared and he believes that the state gets good value for the share of money it spends on this program. Technology training is particularly important in order to have a trained and marketable workforce for the state. The Governor's Performance Scholarship [SB 224] is another motivating tool that they strongly support. It is an incentive for kids to take more rigorous coursework while knowing they have the opportunity to receive financial support for college.

The last topic of concern is early childhood development. Young brains are the place where there is the best opportunity to make a difference in children's success. He encouraged legislators to continue to focus on and support programs like Best Beginnings. Hopefully this emphasis will continue and grow because effort on the front end can make a huge difference on the ultimate success of a student in school and in reducing dropout rates.

[8:18:04 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said this committee generally believes that pre-kindergarten through college and technical school is a continuum and they're working hard to close the gaps where this continuum is not aligned. The committee understands that early education is extremely important and key to future success, but they've had difficulty selling the idea that spending money early on makes a difference and saves money later on. He said they appreciate the districts coming to remind them of that.

[8:19:55 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER observed that Mr. Garrison addressed most of the bills in the works this session but he would like to get the group's opinion on a couple that weren't mentioned. One bill,

[SB 109], was to repeal the exit exam and another, [SB 283], lowered the mandatory attendance age from seven to six years old

CO-CHAIR THOMAS referenced the exit exam and emphasized that the committee did not intend to lower standards, but to set a time frame for finding a better alternative. The bill set July 2011 as the deadline to find a replacement or modify the existing exam.

[8:23:11 AM](#)

MR. GARRISON responded that as a group they spent considerable time discussing the current exit exam and there was general agreement that it no longer adequately served the purpose for which it was designed. At their February fly-in they spoke to students about it and were surprised to find that most felt there should be an exit exam, but that this one is not the correct tool. The students also said that many of their peers felt that once they passed the exam, there was no point in continuing in school. It's a tough question, he said, because of the increased pressure to look at the test in terms of national standards even though it's widely recognized that Alaska has trouble fitting in with national standards. We have to do what's best for Alaskan kids and look at the broader perspective as well, he said.

[8:25:40 AM](#)

JOHN STEINER, President, Anchorage School Board, clarified that the students did not want to lose the accountability that's in the current exit exam, but they did not agree with the notion that there should be a high-stakes "be all, end all" exam. There should be other means for students to demonstrate that they are sufficiently proficient to merit a State of Alaska high school diploma.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said the committee felt the same way; it's something that needs to be in place but it needs to be changed.

MR. STEINER said students also mentioned that some students feel that once they pass they've done all they need to do. These students suggested that students who achieve way above the base should receive some notice of distinction or the ability to demonstrate their advanced proficiency. The current system doesn't allow for this.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS welcomed suggestions as to how to do that.

[8:28:50 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS noted that the state is quite fortunate to be able to provide funding for schools and education while the rest of the U.S. is cutting back funding due to the economy. The Legislature is trying to keep its promise to education and he wants to thank the districts for helping to fulfill that responsibility.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said several legislators went over the list of necessary school maintenance projects and they are trying to provide enough money to dramatically reduce the list. He can't guarantee how much will be approved, but they are trying to get as much taken care of as possible.

8:32:04 AM

SUNNI HILTS, Board Member, Kenai School Board, said she appreciates Senator Huggins' comments and is very proud of the work being done by the Education Committee. She said she feels children should be the state's top priority and she feels that the Legislature is moving that along. She is very grateful for the improvements in education that have taken place. However, she is still concerned about the education her great grandchildren will get, particularly her great grandson who is Alaska Native and lives in a rural area. She wants to make sure that he has all of the opportunities afforded to students in the rest of the state. She said the Consortium for Digital Learning is giving tools and opening doors to the state's children. With some of the schools that she represents it is difficult to provide the courses they would like to but digital learning is making a difference and it is changing not only the students in schools but their communities. The challenge is to stay ahead of it and keep it going. She feels the Legislature is doing its part. She appreciates the statement that pre-kindergarten is an integral part; it has to be a comprehensive program. The more aligned the programs are, the better.

8:35:28 AM

SUE HULL, Board Member, Fairbanks School Board, said she really appreciates the committee's work; being able to plan makes a huge difference in the districts. She noted that HB 317 promises that the CDL meshes with that. Special Education eats up most of the block grant and will continue to do so. It is difficult to talk about using this grant money for career and technical programs when there are so many needs within special education, she said. The CDL fits that gap. They frequently have that conversation because their budgets don't provide sufficient funding for purchasing the technological equipment they need. She hopes the Legislature will seriously consider the \$10

million request to keep the CDL going. She also mentioned that major maintenance is a big issue. Many school districts have been prevented from putting all of their major maintenance projects on the list. Fairbanks has several major projects that need to be done. Finally, she thanked the committee for supporting early learning programs, like Best Beginnings.

[8:39:26 AM](#)

JEFF FRIEDMAN, Board Member, Anchorage School Board, thanked the committee and the Legislature for all that has happened in the last two or three years. He has been on the board for seven years and in the past couple of years there has been a major change in attitude. He feels that districts are working as partners with the Legislature and toward a common goal.

[8:40:26 AM](#)

ARNOLD BROWER, Board Member, North Slope School Board, mirrored the previous comments and stressed that, because NSSB is so far north, anything that can bring them closer through digital learning has a lot of merit. Also, technology provides kids a connection and a personal counselor (calling their families via cellular phones) that they need for stability and maintaining support so they can concentrate on education. He commended the committee for its support and having this forum.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS commented that the broadband that is being installed will go all the way up to Barrow and eventually to northern Europe.

[8:43:02 AM](#)

CHARLENE ARNESON, President, Chugach School Board, said she would comment on major repair and maintenance. Schools are a place of security for many students and these places have to be safe. They have had situations in which ceiling tiles were falling on the children. As a district, they can do a very good job educating their children, but their environment has to be safe in order to enhance learning. Digital learning has been very helpful in their school system. Students who were not interested in writing before are now interested in doing their school work because of technology. She is becoming technically savvy herself and the kids are her teachers. She has seen a difference in the cooperation with the Legislature.

[8:45:15 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS commented that he can identify with her struggle to learn technology.

[8:45:59 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said one of the points in favor of the scholarship program is ensuring that both urban and rural schools would be able to provide a rigorous curriculum.

[8:46:47 AM](#)

ANDI STORY, Vice President, Juneau Douglas School Board, thanked the Legislature for the forward funding of education so they can plan and prioritize. One thing that really has helped her with her understanding of early learning is to analogize it as a race. There are some kids, she said, who start two miles behind the starting line and teachers have to try very hard to bring them up to the mark. When she thinks of early learning she thinks of education that gets all of these students up to kindergarten readiness so early learning dollars are important. The taskforce the Legislature is forming made her think about the assessments they are using and the accountability for tests. When students go into the university system they are taking tests for placement, the test that is given in high school needs to be aligned with these placement tests.

[8:48:36 AM](#)

MR. SHARP, Board Member, [indic.], said when he was in school he was afraid to speak in public because he could not speak English; he overcame that and is grateful for the opportunity to learn. He has seen through his wife, who is an educator, that the education system the Legislature is supporting is very important. He has seen his own children and grand children reading and writing. He thanked the committee for forming the taskforce to study educational needs; he could not have made it to where he is in life without the education he has received.

[8:53:17 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS thanked the school board members for running and serving. Although the work is rewarding it's often hard and you're open to lots of criticism.

[8:54:21 AM](#)

NORM WOOTEN, President, Kodiak Island School Board, said he has had the opportunity to visit schools all over the United States and he is constantly impressed with what Alaskan schools have to offer. Much of that is due to legislative support. In response to their question of whether it is possible to provide the rigorous curriculum in rural schools, he said yes it is. There used to be lower expectations in rural areas, but several years ago they standardized the requirements for graduation across the Kodiak School District. This means that they needed to offer the

same opportunities to all the schools in the district. This year, through technology, they are finally close to offering the same opportunities to kids in rural areas. They once cut music programs in order to save the money for other programs; this year they are offering music in every village school. Just recently they had a band concert in which the band leader was leading the bands across the district, all at once, remotely.

[8:58:11 AM](#)

BILL HOLT, Board Member, Kenai Peninsula School Board, said his wife is a teacher at a Montessori school in Soldotna. She often speaks to him about the difference in abilities among her students and she often talks to parents about what their children's experience has been prior to attending Montessori. She finds that very often, parents have not been reading to their kids. He said he thinks early childhood education is an opportunity to engage a family in the child's education.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS thanked the board members for their time.

[9:00:08 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, CO-CHAIR THOMAS adjourned the meeting at 9:00 a.m.