

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 21, 2011

8:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Alan Dick, Chair
Representative Lance Pruitt
Representative Paul Seaton
Representative Peggy Wilson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Eric Feige
Representative Sharon Cissna
Representative Scott Kawasaki

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:04:25 AM](#)

CHAIR ALAN DICK called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:04 a.m. Representatives Dick, Wilson, Seaton, and Pruitt were present at the call to order.

OVERVIEW: ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING

[8:04:53 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK announced the appointment of Representative Pruitt as Vice Chair of the House Education Standing Committee.

The committee took an at-ease from 8:05 a.m. to 8:08 a.m.

8:08:37 AM

CHAIR DICK introduced the committee staff and visitors of note in the gallery.

8:09:12 AM

CHAIR DICK noted that approximately 129,000 K-12 students, guided by roughly 7,000 teachers, attend schools each day in Alaska. He stated his belief that the committee can work to reshape the focus of education in the state, a future benefit to everyone involved, by employing creative, cooperative, and energetic means. Further, he explained that each committee member would be responding to a series of questions.

8:12:39 AM

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON proceeded to provide a brief biography and history of his educational experience, including attendance at a junior college, followed by enrollment in the University of California (UC) Santa Barbara, eventually transferring to the University of Alaska (UA) to complete a bachelors of science (BS) degree, and a master's degree (MS) for teaching the biological sciences. He elaborated on his continued experience of teaching marine zoology in California, post graduate classes at UC San Diego, and pursuing, without completion, a PhD at UC Santa Barbara, prior to becoming a commercial fisherman in Alaska. As an extension of being a fisherman, he obtained a certificate in diesel mechanics from the Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTEC). Representative Seaton opined that he sees the Education Committee as one of the most important committees in the legislature, given the possibility for significant long term influences over the young residents of the state. Responding to the question regarding personal educational philosophy, he stated his belief in the need to engage each student in a manner which addresses individual learning styles appropriately, establishes high goals, and sets forth a clear path for achievement. As the former chair of the committee, he stated that he is pleased to be back on the panel to provide continuity to the process of bills under consideration. One of the best things that is happening in education in Alaska today, he said, is the [governor's] scholarship program, which requires schools to provide classes and necessary support in order for students to qualify. A quality education is a priority regardless of the direction a student chooses, he opined; a path of continued education or

technical training. Representative Seaton observed that problems arise when students are not engaged, and when focus is lost due to attention being diverted from individual student learning needs to the satisfaction of testing requirements. He said he is looking forward to gaining firsthand knowledge regarding schools in the Bush, and addressing the issues that will be brought before the committee as the session unfolds.

8:19:04 AM

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON provided her background of growing up on a farm and attending a one room grade school, prior to attendance at an urban high school, and entering a community college to earn a nursing degree. She pointed out that she set a precedent for the community college she attended, by earning a dual degree: an associate's degree in nursing, as well as science. In pursuit of higher education she also attended college in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to earn her credentials to be a national school nurse. Through enrollment at UAF, she gained emergency medical training (EMT) certificates I, II, and III, and eventually taught the first two levels. Addressing the question of why she chose the Education Committee, Representative Wilson cited her background as a school nurse and the classroom teaching that she carried in that position. Additionally, she said her husband is a school superintendent, which heightens her interest in the school system. Philosophically, she stated her belief that every child counts, and emphasized the needs of quiet children, as well as those labeled as trouble makers, to have a caring teacher. Furthermore, teacher education is extremely important. The universities are "behind the eight-ball," to provide teachers with the latest information regarding student learning differences, and to appropriately prepare educators for the classroom. She said, "Shame on us for graduating kids that are [considered to be] within the normal realm and still can't [comprehend or complete a job application form]." She reviewed the skills that she brings to the committee: 15 years on the education committee, including her tenure as an Education Committee member of the North Carolina legislature, 9 years in the classroom, as well as her rural background. Regarding good things that are happening in education in Alaska today, she cited increased funding to schools, and the career assessments that students receive to assist them in focusing their educational efforts towards a chosen goal. Additionally, she expects the increased funding, in the areas of exceptional children and vocational education, to prove a benefit. Acknowledging that not all students desire a college education,

she indicated that the [governor's] scholarship program will provide options and support for students to strive for individual goals. The dropout rate is a problem, she said. Additionally, the practice of teaching to tests, rather than the basics, creates a dumbing down situation. She emphasized the need for teachers to be better prepared for the classroom, and teaching experience, particularly those destined for rural Alaska. Addressing the question of what she would like to learn, she said, "as much as I can, about it all." Goals for the Education Committee, she opined, should include implementing what has been proven scientifically to help students achieve. Finally, she stated her belief that the high school exit exam is no longer necessary.

The committee took an at-ease from 8:28 a.m. to 8:29 a.m.

8:29:44 AM

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON, at the request of the chair, introduced Bruce Johnson, in the gallery, as the new head of the Alaska Council of School Administrators.

8:30:13 AM

REPRESENTATIVE PRUITT said he is a lifelong Alaskan from the east Anchorage district; the area which he now represents. He reported that he graduated from UAA, with a BA in history, and earned a masters degree in business administration (MBA) through the [on-line] Kaplan University. The technology used in the Kaplan program, he said, was an exciting learning experience; putting him in league, and concert, with students on a global scale. He chose the Education Committee as a paramount means to serve the future of the state; the children. Additionally, as a father of two young children, he said he expects to have them enter a well directed state system. Speaking philosophically, he said that no single avenue can provide a well rounded education for each student. He stated his understanding that Anchorage has a 70 percent dropout rate, and said that speaking to the children individually, has revealed engagement to be an issue. Additionally, he stressed the importance of parent involvement. Referring to the skills that he brings to the committee he cited his background as an Alaskan business manager, where he has gained firsthand knowledge of the workers being produced. He also brings to the committee experience of sitting on the Anchorage school budget advisory commission; charged with a \$787 million dollar budget. He said he was immersed in the budgeting process, and gained a working

understanding of serving 45,000 students. Addressing the question of what good things he sees happening in education in Alaska, he cited virtual learning as a huge plus; not only for rural areas but also in large, urban school districts. The dropout rate is a concern, he said, as well as the inability of students arriving at college without reading skills, and the need to produce a better prepared work force. The issues he would like to learn about, as a committee member, include: the complexity of the funding formula, testing options/effectiveness for students, and means to embed workforce skills. Regarding expectations for the committee, he envisions providing teachers with the tools to be successful, possibly via funding, and removing barriers that hinder educators from reaching students.

[8:41:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRUITT, in response to a committee member, amended his previous statement by correcting the dropout rate, in the Anchorage school district, to be approximately 30 percent, with a completion rate of 70 percent.

[8:42:34 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK said that he enjoyed a secure lower school environment, in Massachusetts, for 13 years. Although he did not always enjoy school, he recounted how he fostered an interest in becoming a teacher, as a means to improve the educational experience for future children. After finishing two years of college, one in Maine and one in Massachusetts, he hitchhiked to Alaska, where he honed his outdoor skills and learned many technical skills in order to remain a viable resident. Eventually, through encouragement from peers he attended the University of Fairbanks (UAF) extension school at Aniak to become a certified teacher. Teaching allowed him to remain in the Bush, where he has resided for 44 years. Regarding why he chose the Education Committee, he opined that it may be the best place for him to leave his mark. Philosophically, he said: "We are the temporary stewards of other people's greatest treasure, and we need to keep that in mind." Additionally, he stated that educators are charged with preparing today's students for a future that is difficult to envision and challenges the imagination. One word encapsulates his philosophy on education, and that is relevance. Presenting education in a relevant, and applicable manner, is the best means for engaging a student, he opined, and provided a personal story to underscore this belief. Relevance and connectivity also provides motivation to learn, he continued, and underscored

how versatility is a necessity in today's work place. The skills and abilities that he brings to the committee include a teaching career in the Bush, which included work in the classroom as well as administrative work in the district office. Serving the large, sparsely populated Iditarod School District, he reported that his tenure there included serving as the vocational education coordinator, developing curriculum, and acting as the correspondence school principal. He offered words of praise for the discipline that home schooling instills, but warned that accountability be viewed as an important requirement of home programs. The background that he brings to the committee includes: working eight years for the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (ARSI); assisting in the writing of standards for culturally responsive schools; and traveling all reaches of the state, and Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Canada, in conjunction with science and culture camps. While in charge of the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) science fair, he reported that the students from Circle, Alaska, competed nationally and received a first place physics award. Additionally, he has held a contract with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council to write curriculum for Native students in the Alaska Native Science & Engineering Program (ANSEP) where he produced a series of videos illustrating the applicability of Native culture to a modern life style. Additionally, he created videos dealing with environmental science curriculum in relation to oceans. These local, culturally relevant, science projects have proven to be effective learning tools. This brought him to author a book titled DEALING WITH EXCELLERATING CHANGE, which prompts young people to perform relevant science projects related primarily to oceans, rivers, and climate change. He participated in developing the state science standards, and confessed to assisting in writing the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) standards; a flawed but probably redeemable effort. Responding to what is positive in Alaskan education today, he cited the efforts to employ and retain good teachers. He also supports the technical approach to training over the internet, employing the use of e-books, and developing other technical approaches.

The committee took an at-ease from 8:58 a.m. to 9:14 a.m.

[9:14:31 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK returned to the question of problems in the field of education and opined that, although drop out and achievement levels are an issue, he views these as symptoms of the system. Further, college readiness must be addressed. He anticipates

that many solutions may become self evident through the process of scrutinizing the big picture. Regional, or magnate schools, technological advances, and other possibilities can be used to provide students an excellent education. Principal turnover is a contributing factor to student failure, and he expressed concern for other hardships that occur in the Bush. Further, he expressed interest in gaining knowledge regarding charter schools, education on a systemic level, and the collective educational philosophies of the state educators. He challenged the committee to grasp the big picture of education, understand what needs to happen, and set aside any personal sense of ego around the issues. Remaining sensitive to the needs of teachers, will allow educators to serve the students better, he opined, and said the curiosity and motivation that is inherent in every student may be dispelled by a poor school experience. He stressed the need to cultivate the innate drive, and instinct, of every child to learn. Today's teachers can be observed giving over 80 percent of their time to classroom management and motivation; a serious loss of teaching time. Implementing change will not provide instant success; however, he stated his believe that creative solutions will eventually penetrate the system.

The committee took an at-ease at 9:24 a.m.

9:24:18 AM

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON reminded the committee that the 26th Alaska State Legislature established two task forces: one for the governor's scholarship program, and one on higher education and career readiness. The recommendations from these two task forces will be forthcoming to the current legislature. Being seated on both task forces, he reported that a common concern arose around the band width available to implement technological advances in education. He suggested that the committee begin to consider alternatives that can be supported, independent of band width requirements, and he made suggestions that would involve downloaded discs being delivered via mail service. Obtaining the necessary band width to accommodate testing needs, the compilation of student scores at the state level, and distance learning resides somewhere in the future. Additionally, he shared that data from the Anchorage area indicates how completion rates were increased by 5 percent when students received graduation coaching. Graduation coaching has also occurred in the Kenai School District, with good results. The difference between the Anchorage and Kenai districts, he noted, is that Anchorage hired coaches, and Kenai hired teachers with

the understanding that coaching/advising would be part of the job and serve every student; requiring no additional positions in the school district and the related budget burdens. Incorporating advisory programs into the hiring process is an important approach to take, he opined. The task force heard testimony that UAF has experienced a 25 percent graduation rate, in a five year period, since implementing a mandatory advisor program. He compared that to the optional advisory program, at UAA, and the corresponding statistic of only 16 1/2 percent. Schools across the nation have acknowledged this co-relation and taken up the task of hiring teachers with the understanding that they will also be serving as mentors and advocates. He questioned the wisdom, and efficiency, of awarding state scholarships, to students who only have a 16-25 percent chance of completing a degree.

[9:30:49 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON interjected that state funding for schools remained flat for 20 years, allowing for little growth. She observed that the legislature has worked, in the last 10 years, to improve funding levels and ease this hobbling factor. However, she opined, money is not the only answer to the situation, and stated that other solutions must be addressed along with budgetary increases. Additional funding is certainly required to meet the inflationary costs associated with operating schools; such as utilities and insurance. She suggested that improving student performance does not necessarily require additional funding.

[9:33:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON, in response to Representative Pruitt, said that one task force calendar has been completed, and the second one will have a final meeting and provide a report by April 1, 2011. Given the two year legislative session, this timeline should allow appropriate time for review and introduction of any necessary bills.

[9:34:53 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK expressed a desire to have interviews with superintendants, at the beginning of each committee meeting. He opined that the committee would gain a better perspective of what is occurring across the state by hearing directly from the school representatives. He referred to six questions that the Department of Education will respond to at the next regular

meeting of the committee, which read [original punctuation provided]:

What is DEED, and how is it structured?

What is the overarching educational philosophy of DEED?

Give a brief history of education in Alaska. BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs), SOS (State Operated Schools), AUBSD (Alaska Unorganized Borough School District), REAA's (Regional Educational Attendance Areas) and contemporary.

What are the differences and similarities between and among the rural, bush and urban schools?

Give an overview of the DEED budget and how it works.

What does DEED perceive to be the problems in Education, and what would DEED like this session of the legislature to address?

[9:37:37 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK reviewed the remainder of the week's meeting schedule.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:38 a.m.