

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 24, 2011

8:03 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Alan Dick, Chair  
Representative Lance Pruitt, Vice Chair  
Representative Eric Feige  
Representative Paul Seaton  
Representative Peggy Wilson  
Representative Sharon Cissna (via teleconference)  
Representative Scott Kawasaki

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT**

Representative Tammy Wilson

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

OVERVIEW(S): DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

ACTING COMMISSIONER LES MORSE  
Department of Education and Early Development  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided the overview from the Department of Education and Early Development (EED).

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:03:34 AM](#)

**CHAIR ALAN DICK** called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:03 a.m. Present at the call to order were Representatives Dick, Pruitt, Feige, Seaton, Wilson, Kawasaki, and Cissna (via teleconference).

**OVERVIEW(S): Department of Education and Early Development**

[8:05:53 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK announced that the first order of business would be an overview from the Department of Education and Early Development (EED). He reviewed the six questions to be addressed in the overview, 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?

[8:06:59 AM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER LES MORSE, Department of Education and Early Development (EED), offered a personal overview of the experience that he brings to this position beginning with his experience as an educator in Alaska. Arriving in Alaska, in 1986, he taught in the Lower Yukon School District, moved, in 1990, to teach at Juneau Douglas High School, and worked for six years as a middle school principal in Juneau. He reported that he began with EED, in 2003, as the director of Assessment and Accountability, and, since 2008, has served as Deputy Commissioner.

8:09:14 AM

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE described the three components to be presented in response to the prepared questions. He then drew attention to the committee packet to offer the EED mission statement, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Alaska's education system fosters creativity and curiosity, and embraces diversity. Alaska's students have the skills and knowledge to contribute to local, state, national and global communities by understanding the past and present, and they are prepared to create the future.

8:13:14 AM

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE said the language of the mission statement was carefully scrutinized to provide the most applicable and relevant syntax. He continued, citing AS 14.03.105 State Education Policy, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

It is the policy of this state that the purpose of education is to help ensure that all students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE stressed the importance of having policy that serves the public and can be implemented in a meaningful way, and he stated his belief that the department does strive to uphold the mission and policy statements.

8:15:08 AM

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE directed attention to the organizational chart illustrating the five divisions serving under the offices of the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner. He began with Mt. Edgecumbe High School, a state boarding school in Sitka, Alaska, and the only school for which the commissioner's office is directly responsible. The staff of 53, headed up by the division director, who is commonly referred to as a superintendant, serves approximately 400 students; a number maintained utilizing a waitlist system. The second division is

Administrative Services where the staff of 16 supports the entire department in the areas of accounts payable, preparing legislative presentations, and all technical services. He continued with the third section, Libraries, Archives and Museums. Manned by a staff of 67, this section includes the Sheldon Jackson Museum, in Sitka. The fourth division, School Finance and Facilities, employs a staff of 13 to provide budget review at the district level, as well as handle the components associated with facilities development and maintenance. Finally, he introduced, the fifth and largest division, Teaching and Learning Support (TLS), and suggested that an in-depth understanding of educational directives would prove helpful in order to grasp the full scope of this section.

[8:21:33 AM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE said one of the largest federal programs, that the department implements, is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), first introduced in 1965, it has been amended several times and was most recently amended in 2001 by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. Many programs fall within ESEA, including federal and state assessments. One of the largest components is Title I; education of economically disadvantaged students. Schools which meet particular enrollment criteria qualify for Title I status, and receive funding accordingly. Title III addresses language acquisition, and supports student efforts to gain knowledge of the English language. He said components of this law ensure education for homeless and migrant students. Further, other major aspects under the purview of TLS include special education and pre-school. The state must ensure appropriateness of funding for all programs, teacher certification, teacher quality, child nutrition services, career technical and vocational education, charter and correspondence schools, health and safety, and assessment and accountability systems. Also, TLS staff provides district support for underperforming schools, as well as assistance regarding the content areas of the curriculum for math, science, and literacy. The majority of the TLS staff of 94, he reported, is focused on implementing federal programs. Acting Commissioner Morse named three commissions which are also included under the EED structure: the Professional Teaching Practices Commission, a body of 2; the Alaska State Council on the Arts, a staff of 6 located in Anchorage; and the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, with a staff of 97.

[8:30:24 AM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE directed attention to the committee packet document titled "FY2012 Operating & Capital Budget, December 15, 2010 - Agency Budget," to review the pie charts contained on page 1. The first pie chart, illustrated how 5 percent of the budget represents agency funded interests and the remaining 95 percent are formula funded programs. Moving to the pie chart labeled "FY2012 Agency Operations by Fund Source," he pointed out that the 5 percent agency funding is divided into a trio of sources: 73 percent federal, 19 percent general fund [state], and 8 percent other.

[8:32:32 AM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE continued to page two of the document and established how the Agency Operations section [lower half of page], delineated in the organizational chart, is accounted for in the budget document. Responding to a committee question, he clarified that the position heading of NP represents a non-permanent position, which are often associated with positions assigned to work on grants. To a follow-up question, he explained that it may constitute a full time position as an employee may complete one appointment and transfer into another.

[8:38:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON recalled that three positions were added, via the governor's budget in the previous year, and asked whether they are included in the current budget.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE said yes, and identified them under the TLS line item of State System of Support; three of the seven positions indicated.

[8:39:22 AM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE, returning to the top of the same page, addressed the budget items under the heading K-12 Formula Programs. The list includes the programs funded by the previously referenced 95 percent share of the budget. He pointed out that the largest component is the Foundation Program, formulated on the base student allocation (BSA), and followed by the remaining formula programs: Boarding Home Grants, Youth in Detention, Special Schools, Pupil Transportation, Alaska Challenge Youth Academy, and School Debt Reimbursement. The line item titled School Performance Incentive Program is no longer funded and shown as zeroed out.

8:41:02 AM

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked for a classification of special schools.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE responded that it includes the Special Education Service Agency (SESA), a school at the Alaska Psychiatric Hospital, the Alaska School for the Deaf, as well as identified students who reside in foster care or group homes. To a follow-up question, he clarified that this covers a foster child specifically identified to be in need of particular educational needs not otherwise being addressed.

8:43:09 AM

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE inquired about the program listed with a zero balance: School Performance Incentive Program.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE indicated that the program contained a sunset date and the department did not request a renewal, hence the legislature did not authorize funding. To a follow-up question he said it was a controversial program, which rewarded schools for attaining, and maintaining, a high level of achievement. He stated his belief that the program performed the way in which it was intended, but opinions were not in favor of having it continue.

8:45:46 AM

REPRESENTATIVE KAWASAKI requested information regarding the pilot program for pre-kindergarten.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE indicated that the authorized funding figures are located under the early learning aspect, in the base budget. He reported that the program is in its second year and the participating sites are being evaluated. He offered to provide a full report to the committee. Generally speaking, he said the first year review indicates that the program has been working well, and further evaluation will determine not only where it works well but where it works well in the most efficient manner, in order to attain a maximum cost effective benefit. The pilot program was to ascertain what approaches made the most sense, specific to Alaska, and where dollars should be directed. Styles of programs can now be compared and honed for the best results. In response to a committee member, he said each participating student has been assigned a state

student identification, which allows EED to track progress and assess a student's school career.

8:49:45 AM

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON asked for clarification on the difference between SESA and SERRC [Southeast Regional Resource Center].

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE said SESA is a contract agency that provides assistance for students in need of special education. The Southeast Regional Resource Center is also a contract agency that provides business support to districts.

The committee took an at-ease from 8:52 a.m. to 8:57 a.m.

8:57:33 AM

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE directed attention to the committee packet and the handout titled "Historical Overview of Education History in Alaska." He reported that beginning in the early 1900's a dual system of education was developed to serve the contrasting situations in the state; the rural Bush versus the town, community, or city location. Near the turn of the century, the U.S. Congress granted authority to individual communities in Alaska to incorporate and establish schools, and maintain them through taxation; a system that continues to this day in cities and boroughs. In 1905, the Nelson Act was passed, which affected schools established outside of incorporated towns. The governor of the Territory of Alaska was named the ex-officio superintendent. Thus, a dual system of education existed; federal and territorial, later state. The Johnson O'Malley Act was passed, in 1934, which allowed the Secretary of the Interior to establish contracts for educational services. Throughout this period, there was a national movement for states, as well as within the Territory of Alaska, to gain local control of schools from the purview of the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs). By 1965 the Alaska State Department of Education had been established, with an extensive Division of State Operated Schools (SOS), responsible for rural and on-base military schools. A governor's committee was established to explore merging BIA and state schools. He said historical information did not indicate that progress was made by the committee. However, the mounting pressures surrounding the situation continued to build, and in 1974 a lawsuit was filed. As a result of the Molly Hootch case, SOSs were abolished and separate rural school districts called Regional Education Attendance Areas (REAs) were established. The transition

period was overseen by the Alaska Unorganized Borough School District (AUBSD), prior to the establishment of the REAA school boards. He noted that in 1976 the governor signed a consent decree, related to the Molly Hootch case, agreeing to have the state establish a high school program in any community with an elementary school, serving a minimum enrollment of eight students, and having one or more secondary students, unless the community specifically declined.

[9:06:26 AM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE continuing to the second page of the handout, titled "School Accountability," said 1991 was the beginning of a reform movement, known as Alaska 2000. The governor appointed a Blue Ribbon Commission on education, whose duties included developing student academic standards. In 1992 the State Board of Education passed regulations requiring local schools to provide students a working knowledge of English, mathematics, science, geography, history, skills for a healthy life, government and citizenship, fine arts, technology, and world languages; effective June 1993. During the two year period of 1995 through 1996, content standards were established for each of the named curriculum areas, and a working knowledge base line was set. Refinement of instruction requirements and assessment programs were forthcoming. He pointed out that it was not until the year 2000 that the first benchmark assessments were administered to students in the third, sixth and eighth grades; indicating that the testing history related to the state developed content standards, is fairly recent. Until that time, nationally based reference tests were utilized. The first year students were held accountable for passing the High School Graduation Qualifying Examination to earn a diploma occurred in 2004, followed by the 2005 adoption of Grade Level Expectations. The expectations are defined standards for each grade level, and the inception of Standards Based Assessments administered to students from third to tenth grade, was implemented. The department is required to review the standards every ten years; currently in progress.

[9:11:17 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KAWASAKI asked whether kindergarten students are administered benchmark assessments.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE said a standardized assessment is administered whenever a student enters the system, called the Developmental Profile, to ascertain readiness skills, i.e., can

a student orient a book appropriately for reading. Additionally, individual districts may administer assessments to gain more detailed information.

[9:12:33 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON referred to the agreement signed in 1976, and asked if the minimum of eight students conflicts with the ten students that the current formula requires.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE clarified that the current statute takes precedent in regards to the funding formula.

[9:13:55 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK noted the importance of understanding the transitions in education, particularly regarding specific adjustments that have been made to relate to community needs.

[9:15:00 AM](#)

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE agreed, and pointed out that the timeline from 1991 on, is especially of note, and relates directly to Chair Dick's interest. Prior to that time, BIA schools were under pressure, on a national scale, regarding the relevancy of the curriculum being taught and included such points as the use of the indigenous first languages. Content standards continue to be an issue, which may be due to a misperception. He pointed out that requiring a student to understand math could be construed as being more important than understanding the local culture, and opined that this is a leadership problem. He said,

There is no reason that when you learn to read ... or write well, you can't learn to read ... and write well about your own local geography, ... customs, and ... culture. There is no reason those things cannot be integrated in very thoughtful ways.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE assured the committee that the department has a program coordinator, Phyllis Carlson, who is charged with incorporating cultural standards into the appropriate curriculum standards. He suggested having her come before the committee.

[9:19:37 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA expressed her interest in hearing directly from students, as well as educators, throughout the various communities, via teleconference or video conference, during the current session.

[9:22:06 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK said he has observed an interest in the educational leaders to involve an aspect of the local culture, but it usually is presented as an "add on" activity. The ability to incorporate cultural references directly into the curriculum continues to be missing, he opined, and said: "That's exactly what needs to happen."

[9:22:25 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE referred to the difficulty of teacher retention, particularly in the Bush, and how the transient nature negates the ability to grasp and apply the local culture to teaching techniques. He suggested focusing on teacher retention as a means to incorporate cultural aspects in the curriculum.

ACTING COMMISSIONER MORSE noted that the annual retention report would be forthcoming in February, and agreed that teacher retention issues are a concern; here and throughout the nation. Districts are taking steps to better prepare and support teachers. Through those efforts, and given the downturn in the economy, retention has increased, but when the economy recoups, those gains may be lost. Alaska education programs produce 25-30 percent of the teachers hired, thus districts are continually working to prepare teachers who are new to the state. He provided an example of one district which invites in-coming teachers to visit the village for a three week orientation period. If, at the end of the three weeks, a teacher chooses not to continue, the district allows them to cancel their contract without penalty. Another district solicits mid-year education graduates to come to the school and provide tutoring, experience life in the village, and, if interested, make application to the employment pool. He reminded the committee that statute requires that Alaskan educators complete multi-cultural and Alaskan history course work. Those courses are being reviewed by the teacher quality group to provide specific focus and ensure that the intent for the requirement is being satisfied in the syllabus.

[9:28:56 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK suggested bringing the issue of teacher recruitment and retention to a future meeting.

The committee took an at-ease from 9:29 a.m. to 9:33 a.m.

9:33:19 AM

CHAIR DICK requested Representatives Feige and Kawasaki to respond to the series of background questions previously posed to committee members [January 21, 2011].

9:34:10 AM

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE provided a brief biography beginning with attendance at a lower school in up-state New York. He explained that the public school he attended had its own board, taxing authority, and was not under union purview. He characterized it as a well run school and a focal point of the local community. Further, he reported that 87 percent of his graduating class, of 252 students, went on to college. Representative Feige said he accepted a four year appointment to the military academy at West Point, New York, and earned a master's degree (MA) in geography from Pennsylvania State University. The MA allowed him to teach at West Point, in his final year. He characterized his teaching experience to be an anomaly as the students are mandated to appear in class, do the homework, and pass the course. He chose the education committee as a means to further the future of the state via education of the youth. Sharing his philosophy on education, he said:

It's a competitive world out there. Students will have to compete at one level or another ... in all aspects. Those who choose not to compete will end up falling by the way side. It's our job as a state, and as a state educational system, to ensure that they have the tools that they can use to compete. ... The teachers have to be able to compete as well. They're competing against other teachers to put out a product that is able to accomplish the mission that we give them, which is to educate the students.

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE said the skills he brings to the committee include his skills as a classroom teacher and flight instructor. Through these teaching endeavors, he explained that he has gained an ability to teach to the background of the students and has learned to exercise a variety of approaches to a given

topic. The good things that are happening in Alaskan education today include the cultural preparation that is being afforded to the teachers who are recruited from out of state. One problem, he noted, is the diffusion of effort that occurs when attempts are made to be "everything to everybody." He suggested that the committee remain focused and proceed accordingly.

[9:42:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KAWASAKI explained that his parents arrived in Alaska to attend graduate school at UAF in the 1960's. Thus, he attended primary and high school in Fairbanks and went on to graduate from UAF with a degree in bio medicine. Despite the possibilities of continuing in the medical field, he chose a public career, beginning with two terms on the Fairbanks City council. Further, he said:

I really wanted to ... focus on education as an equalizer. It is a way for people to become better citizens ... better workers. It's a cure for so many economic and social skills that a person can ... rise by finding education and doing a good job.

REPRESENTATIVE KAWASAKI addressed the question regarding problems, stating that significant issues exist regarding the practice of teaching to the test. He characterized himself as an over achieving high school student who, despite his best efforts and advanced placement classes, did poorly in college. When the discussion regarding state scholarships comes to the committee, he said, he would like members to bear in mind that it is not always the straight "A" student who does the best in college. He is an advocate for pre-kindergarten assessments in order to identify problem areas that can be addressed early and get students off to a good start. Supporting this approach could mean allocating more than the current one percent of the school budget in the area of pre-kindergarten. He noted that there are many good things occurring in Alaskan schools including the lap top computers being provided to students, and stressed the importance of technological investments. He reminded the committee that education is part of the constitution; one of the four guaranteed principles. He stated his belief that keeping this in mind will help members provide the legislature with a good direction for education.

[9:47:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON offered a personal anecdote regarding her husband taking a teaching position in Alaska. During his application period, in 1993, the school district interviewed her as well, to ensure a successful appointment.

[9:48:56 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK reviewed the upcoming joint meeting, to be held in the Barnes committee room 124.

**ADJOURNMENT**

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