

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 28, 2011
8:02 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
Representative Scott Kawasaki

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT

- HEARD

OVERVIEW(S): UPDATE ON THE GRADUATION WORKING GROUP -
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT (EED)

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

ROBERT THOMASON, EdD, Superintendent
Petersburg City Schools
Petersburg, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented an overview of the Petersburg
city schools.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview update on the graduation working group, for the Department of Education and Early Development (EED).

ERIC MCCORMICK, Director
Assessment and Accountability
Department of Education and Early Development (EED)

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview update on the graduation working group, for the Department of Education and Early Development (EED).

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:47 AM](#)

CHAIR ALAN DICK called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Present at the call to order were Representatives Dick, Wilson, Seaton, Feige, Kawasaki, and Pruitt. Representative Cissna arrived while the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION(S): SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT

[8:04:26 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK announced that the first order of business would be a presentation from the Petersburg school superintendent.

[8:05:11 AM](#)

ROBERT THOMASON, EdD, Superintendent, Petersburg City Schools, indicated that the Petersburg school system serves an island community with a population base of approximately 3,000; 500 are students, and 46 are teachers. The schools serve as cultural hubs, hosting the majority of community events that occur, and receiving widespread support for student related activities. The high school has won a variety of academic awards, he reported. In 2010, U.S. News and World Report named 561 top performing high schools, and Petersburg High School was among those recognized; receiving a silver medal. It was also included in the 40 schools which received an exemplary program award from Apple Computer Company; acknowledged for the emphasis given to digital learning and the one-to-one laptop initiative providing high school students with personal computers. Additionally, in 2010, the elementary school was recognized as a Blue Ribbon School in Alaska. The high school offers many

advance placement (AP) classes, as well as many digitally supported programs. He said the days of sitting at a chair in rows are no longer the norm in a classroom, due to the diversity of interactive technical programs offered. In response to a committee question, he stated his belief that the key to the success experienced in Petersburg has been the ability of the district to be "light on its feet," remaining flexible and responsive and able to implement fast changing technical approaches in the realm of digital literacy.

[8:13:43 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON recalled that broadband access in the Petersburg area was an issue at one time, and asked whether that has been resolved.

DR. THOMASON said the issues have been completely resolved, with the implementation of fiber optics technology by the local internet service agency.

[8:14:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON asked whether every high school student is provided with a computer.

DR. THOMASON said yes, and explained that each ninth grade student receives an Apple laptop computer, which they retain through graduation. To a follow-up question, he said that the students can elect to purchase the laptop, at a nominal cost, when they graduate; however, being four years old the devices are outdated.

CHAIR DICK stated his belief that Petersburg City School District offers a model for success.

[8:17:25 AM](#)

OVERVIEW: UPDATE ON THE GRADUATION WORKING GROUP - DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT (EED)

CHAIR DICK announced that the final order of business would be an update on the graduation working group from the Department of Education and Early Development (EED).

[8:18:18 AM](#)

ERIC MCCORMICK, Director, Assessment and Accountability, Department of Education and Early Development (EED), directed attention to the committee packet and the document titled "Alaska Department of Education and Early Development Graduation Working Group," and explained that, in 2009, the former commissioner of education, brought together interested parties from across the state to assemble an education plan; a system blueprint. One of the topics was exploring the ways and means for producing world class high school graduates. It was determined that a graduation working group was necessary to provide focus on graduation goals. Exploring the topic, it became evident that it was not only about high school but a student's entire experience, beginning in kindergarten. One of the primary keys discovered, for maintaining student engagement, was the importance for students to have a connection to a caring adult.

[8:20:49 AM](#)

MR. MCCORMICK addressed the handout titled "Graduation Rates and Dropout Rates Definitions and Data," and explained that the graduation figure is a measure of the percentage of students that graduate within a four year window, and does not incorporate the students who return for a fifth or six year. In the six year data report, the rate has improved from 61.4 percent, 6,905 graduates, in 2005, to 67.7 percent, 8,245 graduates, in 2010. Thus, in five years the graduation rate increased by 1,300 even though the enrollment remained flat.

[8:21:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA requested further information regarding the total enrollment that was used as a basis for the numbers being reported.

MR. MCCORMICK said the information would be made available.

[8:22:23 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE asked whether the percentages include students who have relocated.

MR. MCCORMICK explained that the numbers are adjusted to reflect district transfer students.

[8:23:42 AM](#)

MR. MCCORMICK moved on to the dropout rate, explaining that it is counted as a single year event, and the total is adjusted if a student returns; approximately 25 percent of dropouts have multiple occurrences.

[8:25:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA asked whether dropout students are being tracked to a final destination. Further, she noted that the reported dropout rates appear to be improving, however, if the school attendance is down then the rate may not be indicative of dropout incidences being curbed.

MR. MCCORMICK responded that the dropouts are being closely tracked through student management efforts.

CYNDY CURRAN, Director, Teaching and Learning Support, Department of Education and Early Development (EED), interjected that the Department of Labor (DOL) is involved "to do a match between the students that dropout and those that may come back and get their general equivalency diploma (GED)."

[8:27:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON requested that the Anchorage School District Memorandum Number 96 be made available to the committee. The memorandum is a detailed cohort study of dropout students over a five year period.

MR. MCCORMICK agreed to provide the memo to the committee. He explained that federal reporting does not allow GED students to be counted in the statistics; thus, they are not counted in the data contained in the handout.

[8:29:10 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN explained that at the Alaska Education Plan summit, November 2009, attending members formed a number of committees, which organized into focus groups; one being the graduation working group. To provide meaningful input, the group sought out a broad range of representatives, which included: a cross section of scholastically diverse student attending schools in the Anchorage, Sitka, and Bering Strait areas; members of the governor's council on disabilities; high school principals; district superintendents; members of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC); members from Anchorage's Promise - a group in league with America's Promise which focuses on increasing

graduation rates and dropout prevention; representatives from Communities in Schools - an organization no longer funded; the University of Alaska Statewide - bringing a perspective of what occurs between high school and college; various state agency representatives from EED, Department of Health and Social Services, and the Department of Corrections; members of the House Education Standing Committee; and members of the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development. These entities provided a broad base of support and information.

[8:32:22 AM](#)

MR. MCCORMICK added that the students members were engaged in the process, contributed readily, and were amazed that a panel was assembled on their behalf. The students provided input regarding their experiences from traditional and alternative high school approaches. Community, student, school, and family relationships were fundamental to the discussions, as well as the cultural uniqueness of students. Three districts are utilizing an early warning data base system and provided the group with an analysis of identified characteristics of a dropout. He paraphrased the working groups goals listed in the committee handout: to improve the connectedness/flexibility of our schools to meet the needs of all students; increase community partnerships and build relationships, which eliminate barriers to learning; increase involvement among culturally unique families and communities in Alaskan schools; and evaluate current pre-service and certification course work requirements on multi-cultural and Alaska studies to assist staff in meeting the unique culturally responsive needs of our changing student populations. Elaborating on these points he emphasized how important it is for a student to receive adult recognition on a daily basis, such as a door greeter who calls them by name.

[8:36:18 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN continued with the accomplishments, and reported that, at each meeting, a highlight was when the group members shared the positive steps being taken throughout the state to increase graduation rates; which are many and varied. Additionally, the group began examination/analysis of policies and procedures that disenfranchise students. Reasons cited by students for dropping out included: building design/aesthetics, course availability, transportation, prohibitive school activity participation fees, attendance policies, and teacher turnover. The group also provided suggestions to the teacher quality working group, regarding the need to review and update the

Alaska studies and multicultural requirements for teacher certification. She reported that a middle school partnership program has been established through the department, in league with RuralCap, and is being implemented in six middle schools in three districts: Lower Yukon, Bering Strait, and Fairbanks. The program conducts a series of community cafes, providing a discussion forum focused on middle school issues, and enlists broad public support. She held up the EED produced poster titled "Raising a Graduate," which has received wide distribution. Additionally, the department is developing a website link labeled "Every Student a Graduate." The link will provide: resources for students, families, teachers, and others interested in increasing student success and increasing graduation rates; ideas for resolving issues that disenfranchise students and lead to dropping out of school; and information regarding early warning signs for students at risk of dropping out.

[8:41:42 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN drew attention to the handout titled "Dropout Prevention Information", to describe the six recommendations, identified by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), and indicating what steps the state and districts are implementing. The first recommendation is to utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis for the number of students who dropout and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out. In response to this recommendation, she reported, Fairbanks has developed a dropout indicator system, and Anchorage is able to generate reports from data on at-risk students. The next recommendation is to assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out. She said this aspect has been taken up in Kodiak and Kenai through advisory programs, Fairbanks has implemented a program called advisories for interventions, and Anchorage has funded the hire of graduation coaches. Additionally, she speculated that many of the lower schools have focused on this need and are taking meaningful action. She read the third recommendation, "provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance," and said EED is working on a response to instruction/intervention (RTI) program; supporting a student to formulate appropriate response to instruction and to grasp course content. The fourth recommendation is to implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills. She said RTI is an aspect of this component, and in addition a pilot program is being launched in six schools, through the Special Education Service Agency (SESA), called Positive Behavior Interventions and

Supports (PBIS). The fifth recommendation is to personalize the learning environment and instructional process. She said the school-within-a-school program addresses this point and it will also be met through the development of a statewide virtual learning network. Ms. Curran read the final recommendation: provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school. She reported that three approaches are being taken on this point: the department contracts with content coaches who avail themselves to schools and districts to develop methods for students to access curriculum content; departmental review has begun on the content standards and grade level expectations (GLE's); and the department is building tools to integrate cultural standards into instruction.

[8:45:47 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK commented on the pause that is characteristic of Native speakers in conversation and provided an anthropological explanation for the evolution of the practice. He noted that the phenomena is practiced subconsciously among the people of the land and suggested that the principles of its origin could be applied to another common occurrence in the Native culture. The reluctance to form personal goals may stem from Native ancestral roots, as well, resulting in a subconscious response to avoid planning for the future. At one time it would have been considered inappropriate to plan to be alive from one season to the next, where as today it is prudent to look ahead. Understanding innate cultural characteristics is essential when educating Native students. It would be important he urged, to solicit village elders for support in encouraging the formation of personal visions by the young tribal members of today.

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE concurred, stating that the examples reflect his experience also, and added that planning for the future is sometimes held in a superstitious realm, as a harbinger of bad luck. The buy-in of the Native elders is important, he stressed.

[8:50:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA pondered that the only way to effect change is to have a long term plan that reaches beyond four or five years. The elders do need to be included, she agreed, as they are the traditional educators in their communities, and she

asked whether elders were involved in the graduation working group.

MR. MCCORMICK said no. However, the need to locate cultural experts was discussed.

[8:52:31 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON agreed that elder support is essential, and underscored the need to approach the topic with some caution. She recounted an anecdote regarding the trauma that occurred among the Native population, during an influenza epidemic, when "half the earth" died, and offered that repercussions from that time are still prevalent in the culture.

MR. MCCORMICK recalled that one student, having had a transient school career, reported how learning values vary from village to village.

[8:58:56 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN in closing said the next step is to meet with the new commissioner and receive appropriate direction.

[8:59:19 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK asked for a prioritized list of reasons that students dropout.

[9:01:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA stated her belief that problems related to education are persistent in the state system, and suggested that to affect change the committee should establish a policy for sustainability and continuity; dependable support groups for students to access. She asked what has been considered regarding sustainability.

MS. CURRAN offered that the group discussed the need to continue the work, the possibility of involving more members, and methods for staying in contact. The effort will be sustained by the group, she predicted.

[9:06:08 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE reviewed the dynamics of working groups to note how some groups are able to accomplish goals while others

are not. He suggested the pivot point is the inspiration that is brought through the leadership. He directed attention to the poster "Raising a Graduate," and noted that each bullet point relates to leadership qualities. He asked what EED is doing to help raise the leadership skills of the teachers.

MR. MCCORMICK responded that the teacher mentoring program provides first year teachers with leadership support.

MS. CURRAN added that the institutions preparing teachers and providing professional development are the primary sources for honing these skills, as well as the follow-up mentoring support the state offers new teachers. Additionally, the principal coaching project assists administrators to become educational leaders.

9:12:26 AM

CHAIR DICK asked whether the working group drew any conclusions and was there closure on the subject of dropout.

MS. CURRAN suggested that there may never be closure on this topic, and said she looks forward to receiving direction from the incoming commissioner.

CHAIR DICK opined that the graduation group meetings should continue. Further, he said an optimal strategy needs to be identified, and he expounded on the importance of role models, particularly for children in remote locations. The Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP) utilizes role models extensively to provide inspiration. He suggested expanding on this approach and offered several examples.

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA agreed and suggested that the technology exists to support a distance program; teleconferencing being one available tool.

9:19:49 AM

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON remarked that individual student engagement has been intently scrutinized. Another area of concern is that some districts are experiencing loss of expert teachers due to certification requirements. He pointed out that a retired teacher, whose certification has lapsed, may find it difficult to continue contributing to the educational field. The Natural Resources classes have been cancelled in his district for lack of a qualified teacher. He asked if some of

the certification requirements are limiting and whether the committee needs to address statutory requirements which may hobble a districts ability to cultivate a source of career and vocational/technical educators. The loss of this type of expertise may be widespread, he opined.

MS. CURRAN answered that a type M certificate is available for specific areas; vocational/technical, as well as Native language and culture. She said further information would be provided regarding teachers with lapsed certificates, as a classroom resource.

[9:23:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON inquired whether the working group included representatives from the university.

MS. CURRAN replied yes, an administrator of the university system contributed; however, no faculty members were present.

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON qualified her question, stating that it is possible for a long standing university teacher to lose touch with demands in a classroom, and she stressed the need to ensure that teachers trained in Alaska have the appropriate skills emphasized.

MS. CURRAN assured the committee that the teacher quality committee has a subtopic to review teacher preparation programs, hence these conversations are occurring.

[9:25:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE opined that that certain subjects may not require fully certified teachers, such as industrial arts. It may also be prohibitive to provide school based shop facilities in a small community. However, a local mechanic, carpenter, or heavy equipment operator, might be drawn upon to introduce students to these fields.

MS. CURRAN indicated that the type M certification allows a skilled person to teach; having content area knowledge but without baccalaureate teacher preparation. She said it is important to recognize that many people who have not attended college can certainly teach students, and statute and regulation provide for this opportunity.

[9:28:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON noted the importance of recognizing the cultural differences, as previously mentioned, and asked whether EED has formulated an integrated strategy for working, engaging, and educating within the Native culture.

CHAIR DICK interjected that the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative and the Alaska Native Knowledge Network are resources for Native cultural information. Unfortunately, due to teacher retention issues, maintaining a trained workforce is a continuous effort; however, the information is available. Helping the 7,000 teachers, who enter Alaskan classrooms every day, to maintain cultural awareness is a challenge, he finished.

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON added that Anchorage classrooms report over 100 languages represented, from various cultural backgrounds, indicating that it is not only an issue in the villages. Figuring out every culture present in Alaskan schools is a challenge for educators.

MR. MCCORMICK pointed out that EED employs a Rural Education director, who is charged with addresses these issues. He said further information, regarding department strategies, would be provided to the committee.

[9:35:46 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:35 a.m. to 9:38 a.m.

[9:38:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA responding to the chairman's request of January 21, 2011, began with a brief biography. She said that having been born with health issues, personal health has always been a priority and reigning interest in her life. She was not expected to live to be a year old, but providence intervened. She said that her school experience was affected by her health issues, and attaining good grades was a struggle. With a well educated father, family expectations were for her to succeed scholastically. She attended a business school, at age 12, and a finishing school was considered, but her grades did not allow entrance. It was not until her senior year in high school that she took an interest in attending college, and managed to improve her grades and attend Washington State University. Returning to business school she gained skills to enter the work force, and over the course of 12 years, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree. Continuing for two more years, she earned a Master

of Arts in psychology. Additionally, she said she has operated a successful publication business, and expressed her belief that experience is as important as formal education and that timing is critical; social and employment issues take time to identify and address, but sticking with something is imperative.

[9:51:11 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK reviewed the upcoming meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:51 a.m.