

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT MEETING
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 18, 2011

8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Senator Kevin Meyer, Co-Chair
Senator Joe Thomas, Co-Chair
Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair
Senator Hollis French
Senator Gary Stevens

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative Lance Pruitt, Vice Chair
Representative Eric Feige
Representative Paul Seaton
Representative Peggy Wilson
Representative Scott Kawasaki

MEMBERS ABSENT

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

All members present

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative Alan Dick, Chair
Representative Sharon Cissna

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: ALASKA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION AND EARLY
DEVELOPMENT

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

ESTHER COX, Chair
Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Reviewed the role of the board and various topics at issue including the implication of funding cuts to DEED and the continuation of the high school exit exam and answered questions from the committee regarding the Alaska Performance Scholarship program and the process of selecting the current commissioner of education.

GERALDINE BENSHOOF, First Vice-Chair
Public/Fourth Judicial District
Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
North Pole, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions from the committee regarding the state's pilot prekindergarten program.

BUNNY SCHAEFFER, Member
Second Judicial District
Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Kotzebue, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions from the committee regarding the Alaska Performance Scholarship program and the effectiveness of distance delivery options for rural schools and districts.

DONALD HANDELAND, Student Representative
Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Nome, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions of the committee regarding his education at Mt. Edgecombe High School and distance education.

TIARNA FICHLER, Incoming Student Representative
Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Manokotak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions of the committee regarding distance education.

PATRICK SHIER, Member
First Judicial District
Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced himself and gave an overview of the board's perspective on alternative delivery methods.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:58 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR KEVIN MEYER called the joint meeting of the Senate and House Education Standing Committees to order at 8:02 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Davis, French, Stevens, Co-Chair Thomas and Co-Chair Meyer and Representatives Seaton, Kawasaki, Feige, P. Wilson and Vice-Chair Pruitt.

VICE CHAIR PRUITT noted that Chair Dick is at the Tanana Chiefs Conference and Representative Cissna has also been excused.

PRESENTATION: ALASKA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

[8:04:13 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced that the order of business would be to hear a presentation by the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development.

He noted the presence of Commissioner Mike Hanley.

[8:04:38 AM](#)

ESTHER COX, Chair, Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED, said the board meets in Juneau in March in order to have the opportunity to interact with the Senate and House Education Standing Committees. She reminded the committee that the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development is a voluntary board appointed by the governor. A full term for a member is five years and no more than four members of the board can be of the same political party as the governor. She noted that there should be one member representing each of the four judicial districts in the state of Alaska and at least one member should come from a REAA [Regional Education Attendance Areas]. She noted that the board also has two advisory board members. There is one student representative, in addition to an incoming student representative or "student in waiting." The board also

has a military advisor, Colonel Grant Sullivan. She noted that Senator Davis has served on the board with distinction.

8:09:18 AM

She asked the board members to introduce themselves and the districts they represent:

- Patrick Shier: First Judicial District
- Geraldine Benshoof: Fourth Judicial District
- Bunny Schaeffer: Second Judicial District
- Jim Merriner: Public-at-large
- Donald Handeland: Student Representative
- Phillip Schneider: Third Judicial District
- Tiarna Fischler: Incoming Student Representative

MS. COX noted that Janel Keplinger [representing the public-at-large] was unable to attend the committee meeting.

She continued that it was startling to understand that the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) had been cut \$4 million this year. She explained that this funding decrease means the cut of a couple of programs: the pre-K program and the Teacher Mentor Program. She opined that the Teacher Mentor Program has done amazing things, with 68 to 80 percent of teachers who were mentored in this program retained. She noted that, statistics show that between seasoned teachers and new teachers, seasoned teachers' students score 20 to 30 percent higher than new teachers' student. The exception to this is if a new teacher has been mentored. This proves that the Teacher Mentor Program is working.

8:13:03 AM

MS. COX added that the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) has had a \$1 million cut which goes towards career technology. She said that there is currently a bill on the table regarding the increase in compulsory school age from 16 to 18 years old [SB 9]. She said that there are arguments on both sides of this issue; however, it is important to have alternative options other than just the standard delivery option. She said one of the best alternative options is hands-on career education. She explained that this keeps students in school who may want to drop out in order to get this "hands-on experience." She noted that the board's Career and Technical Education Plan, which came directly out of the board's summit for the Alaska Education Plan, is in the process of being implemented and also carries a fiscal note.

She said that the board has included for the committees a list of topics that it has discussed this year and are ready to speak to any of the topics the committees would like to address.

MS. COX said the high school exit exam is an accountability factor and the board is not willing to give that factor up. However, she explained that the board recognizes the need for some revitalization of the exam and standards and will be revisiting and redesigning Alaska's standards immediately. She explained that the board has not adopted the national standards because it is using Alaska's standards. The board will be looking into a number of subjects at its June meeting involving these standards and will then come to the legislature with recommendations.

8:19:40 AM

CO-CHAIR MEYER noted that Ms. Cox served on the scholarship funding task force over the last interim. He said with 30 days left in the session the legislature will have to make some decisions on the Alaska Performance Scholarship [APS] program. He asked if Ms. Cox has any comments to share with the committee on the program.

MS. COX referred the committee to a resolution from the Board of Education which supported the APS being a merit-based scholarship. She recognized that the House and Senate Education committees were struggling with the needs-based component. She said that when she was on the task force committee she had hoped that the needs-based component would file through the AlaskAdvantage program and the merit-based scholarship would remain separate. She said that the way she views the merit-based scholarship is that every student can do it, because all students start at the same point. She stressed that she is confident that this will place more rigor into high school curriculums.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said that the Senate Education Standing Committee passed out the APS program leaving the merit-based component intact; but also including a component that would allow a certain percentage of the funding to go to the AlaskAdvantage program.

He said that there has been a lot of discussion on various pre-K programs. There has also been a lot of discussion on an academy for students after they graduate in order to avoid taking remedial classes in college. He said that he recognizes that

these two topics are intertwined. He asked if she has any comments on this.

[8:23:45 AM](#)

GERALDINE BENSHOOF, First Vice-Chair, Public/Fourth Judicial District, Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), said that the board feels the pilot pre-K program should continue and one year of data is not efficient in order to make a decision on it. She said that a pilot program is meant to get concrete data in order to know what a good program should be and whether it should continue. She noted that the board was pleased with the data it received from the first year of the program. She said that she recognizes that funding is in question for the pre-K pilot program this year and the board would like to see the funding continue.

She recognized that there are many individuals in Alaska that see this program as something that will become universal. At some point the legislature will have to make a decision on whether this will occur and will need to recognize that doing so will be costly. She noted that the pre-K pilot program was on a grant basis. Many of the pre-K pilots were run in conjunction with Head Start programs and this funding helped expand the number of children that were in the program. She noted that the data from the first year of the program is in the board's packet.

[8:27:04 AM](#)

SENATOR FRENCH said he had read that some individuals believe that the services provided through the pilot were duplicative to what Head Start is already doing. He asked for confirmation that, in her view, the pilot program differs in what it has been doing.

MS. BENSHOOF replied that in her understanding the program was expanded from the Head Start program.

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON said one of the grant programs for the pilot pre-K program was home school based. He asked if she is familiar with this particular set of data.

MS. BENSHOOF replied that the programs were evaluated, however with regard to what exactly each program was like she could not comment.

[8:28:49 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said he appreciates Senator Davis' bill that establishes better communication with the board [SB 1]. He noted that he has the greatest respect for Commissioner Hanley. However, the commissioner of the Department of Education and Early Development is the only one that the legislature does not confirm. The process of selecting a commissioner is extremely important to the legislature and there were questions that arose as to how the current commissioner of DEED was chosen. He explained that his understanding of the rules is that the board selects several names that are sent to the governor for a final selection. He said that he is not sure that this happened this time. He asked what the rules are under which the board and the governor select the commissioner and how this happened this time.

MS. COX replied that the statute is fairly specific. The board selects and sends a name to the governor's office, which is then approved by the governor. She explained that, in this particular instance, she had a conversation with the governor's office who gave her a name, which she took to the board. She explained that the board examined the resume and interviewed the candidate and she did not make up or assign questions for the board to direct towards the candidate. After the interview the board could have done one of two things: send the name to the governor or screen and interview alternative candidates if the board did not believe that individual could represent the students in the state. She explained that after the board's interview with Mike Hanley the board came to the conclusion that he had the characteristics, people and communication skills, and the administrative background to be commissioner of DEED. She recognized that this is a different process than the legislature normally goes through. She asked if there is another board that selects a commissioner.

SENATOR STEVENS replied that the Department of Fish and Game's board does select the commissioner. However, that legislature reviews and confirms the commissioner.

MS. COX said "the bottom line is the governor is still in charge; because the governor can accept or turn down that name and the board then has to go back to the drawing board." She noted that this has happened in the past.

SENATOR STEVENS stressed that he means no disrespect to anyone in the process. However, this is such an important issue to Alaska and education. He asked if she is convinced that the independence of the Board of Education was respected.

MS. COX replied yes; the board still had the option to say "yes" or "no." She noted that, in her opinion, the way the commissioner of education is chosen is a different system. However, the system does work and it is a respect to the board to have them involved in choosing the commissioner. She said that the statute states that the commissioner serves at the pleasure of the board.

SENATOR STEVENS said he appreciates her explanation.

SENATOR DAVIS asked for confirmation that Ms. Cox went to the governor who gave her a name, which she then brought back to the board.

MS. COX replied that she did not go the governor; the governor's office contacted her.

SENATOR DAVIS asked for confirmation that she did go to the governor to get the name.

MS. COX reiterated that the governor's office contacted her and gave her a name.

SENATOR DAVIS asked if this is the standard procedure for the board when looking for a candidate.

MS. COX replied that she has been a part of selecting three commissioners and each time has been different. She said with the first governor, there was no communication. With the second governor it was a very long and involved process, involving several different names. She noted that there has always been communication between the existing commissioner and the governor's office. She explained that the board wants to make sure that the commissioner is someone that the governor can work with.

[8:38:21 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS asked for confirmation that the board did not interview anyone else for the commissioner's job.

MS. COX replied yes.

SENATOR DAVIS commented that the statute clearly states that the Board of Education has the responsibility to select and interview candidates for this position. She asked for confirmation that this is the board's role.

MS. COX replied yes. She noted that she checked with the attorney general's office to make sure that the board was doing everything according to the statute.

SENATOR STEVENS said he appreciates Ms. Cox's years of service. He asked if she feels the obligation to discharge the commissioner if they are not performing in a way that the board feels is right.

MS. COX answered that, according to the statute, the board does have that right. She noted that she has thought about that when selecting and choosing a candidate so that issue will not have to come up later. She said that if the issue did arise, the board would go forth with its obligation.

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON said that the committees' concern is with the process. The statute is written in order to take politics as far away from education as possible. The concern from a number of members of the House Education Standing Committee is whether the board is setting a precedent that allows the governor the ability to select the commissioner of DEED rather than the board. He said that the legislature has gone as far as it can to insulate education from politics. He added that he believes this is one of the reasons why this position is not confirmable. The substitution for this is that the board interviews and forwards names, rather than have it be a political request or decision. He said he wanted to express concern for the process going forward in the future.

MS. COX replied that she understands wanting to divorce the selection of the commissioner from politics as much as possible. She reminded the committee that the board has had names rejected in the past. She stressed that the board does the work as the statute states, but the final approval is from the governor.

CO-CHAIR MEYER noted that the committees may want to visit the statute at another time.

[8:43:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked what the board's stance is on counseling and advising in high school and how districts are addressing this issue.

MS. COX replied that the board has not taken a stance on this issue. She noted that she is delighted to see that there is a provision in the scholarship bill on counseling and advising.

She continued that there are three basic tenets for middle schools: intramural sports, teaming, and advisory programs. She said that incorporating all three of these tenets is a training and professional growth issue for teachers. Many of the state's high schools have moved to smaller learning communities to allow for more personalized interactions between teachers and students. She said that this is much easier and more malleable at a middle school age, rather than high school.

[8:47:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if the board were to take this issue up, whether advising would arise as something that should be taught during teacher preparedness education at the University of Alaska.

MS. COX replied that how to deal with small groups of young people is an excellent suggestion. She noted that as president of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, they wrote a treatise called *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*. She explained that one of the concepts in that treatise was that education needs to be personalized. She said that part of the reason that alternative programs are successful with young people is because there are fewer students in the program and they get closer to an adult. She agreed that the board should be talking about this.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said one concern that he has about the Senate Education Standing Committee is that all of the members namely represent urban areas. He noted that there is a rural student representative on the board, in addition to a committee member. He asked for feedback on how the rural areas can be better reached with regard to long-distance learning and getting all schools up-to-speed with the high standards set by the APS program.

MS. COX replied that Kotzebue, Nome, and Manokotak are represented on the board.

[8:50:58 AM](#)

BUNNY SCHAEFFER, Member, Second Judicial District, Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), replied that the Virtual School Network currently being developed includes 11 networks, which is being led by SERRC [Southeast Regional Resource Center]. She opined that the most effective way to learn is with direct contact with a highly qualified teacher. Distance

delivery should not be the end-all to the scholarship program and more work is needed.

8:52:40 AM

DONALD HANDELAND, Student Advisor, Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), said he attends Mt. Edgecombe High School, which is a boarding school that includes a lot of rural students. He noted that this boarding school is an example of students who want to get a different kind of education. The best way to reach rural students is through distance education, but it needs to be integrated with educated individuals coming to the villages to work with students.

8:53:39 AM

TIARNA FISCHLER, Incoming Student Representative, Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), said that she does not have a lot of experience with distance-delivery programs and she agrees with Ms. Schaeffer on the importance of face-to-face time.

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON asked whether the legislature should wait on the Alaska Performance Scholarship program until "things are set up better."

MS. SCHAEFFER replied, in her opinion, it is a disservice to rural students if the system is not set up to offer the necessary classes in order for rural students to be eligible for the program.

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON asked for confirmation that the legislature should wait on the scholarship program until the system has been set up to accommodate all students.

MS. SCHAEFFER replied yes; in order for the program to be successful for all students.

SENATOR STEVENS noted that this is a serious comment. He explained that his understanding was that the individual aiding the student with a distance delivered class would be a teacher's aide. He noted that in the Joint Higher Education Task Force, the NEA [National Education Association] representative's expectation was that there would be a qualified teacher on both ends. This becomes enormously expensive. He asked, with regard to distance education, if there is a highly qualified teacher

delivering a course from a centralized location, who should be helping the student on the other end.

MS. SCHAEFFER replied that in order for distance education to be successful it is important to have a certified teacher on the student's end. She explained that instructional aides do not have the educational background that a certified teacher has.

She said that the other area of concern is on the SAT and ACT testing requirements. In urban areas there are centers for training and test preparation, which rural students do not have.

SENATOR STEVENS said he respects what she and the NEA representative have said. He explained that having a certified teacher on both ends for a distance education course is enormously expensive.

[8:57:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said he shares Ms. Schaeffer's concerns on this issue. He said "if we seek perfection we will never do anything." He noted that recently a regional corporation leader indicated that schools such as Mt. Edgecombe may be an interim solution. He asked Mr. Handeland if this has been a better education for him in comparison to where he initially went to school.

MR. HANDELAND replied that most of the students that attend Mt. Edgecombe High School enjoy it, because they have to apply for the school and it gives students more responsibility. He explained that those who go to Mt. Edgecombe want to be there and this is a large reason why this high school is successful. He noted that Mt. Edgecombe offers many opportunities that he would never have received in his home community.

SENATOR FRENCH asked the student representatives if they have had any experiences with distance delivery.

MR. HANDELAND replied no.

MS. FISCHLER replied no.

SENATOR FRENCH commented that at a previous committee meeting the committee had asked DEED for a list of schools who either offered the full curriculum necessary for the scholarship program or provided broadband access in order to receive distance delivery courses.

CO-CHAIR MEYER replied that there should be a list available of all the schools and includes this information.

9:02:05 AM

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE said he understands why the union would want to have a highly qualified teacher on both ends. He asked if there is a need to have a highly qualified teacher in that particular subject present or could it be a teacher in any subject to assist with the teaching.

MS. SCHAEFFER replied, in her opinion, the teacher wouldn't have to be qualified in that particular subject.

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE asked why an aide would not be sufficient in assisting a student with a distance education class.

MS. SCHAEFFER replied that, in her district, most of the aides are in the elementary level, not high school. She said that as far as being able to assist students, she has seen some poor-quality instructional aides. She said "if I was a parent I wouldn't want them being responsible for my children's education."

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON said the House Education Standing Committee has had a superintendent from different areas of the state speak during the first part of the committee's meetings. He noted that it was interesting to discover that urban districts are identifying the importance of students taking a distance delivered course as a tool for future preparation and community involvement. He questioned why rural areas would deny that if this is something that the urban districts are saying is vital to learning. He asked whether the board has been looking into theme-based and project-based education as opposed to single class subjects.

MS. SCHAEFFER replied no. Typically the board does not delve that deep into the school systems in regards to the different types of curriculums offered.

9:08:16 AM

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON asked whether the board has thought ahead of ways to make education more relevant to children in a way that doesn't necessarily cost money. She noted that the changes and results that some schools have seen don't always cost money, such as theme-based and project-based education.

CO-CHAIR MEYER commented that, overall, the committee would welcome any creative ideas that are working for particular schools and districts.

MS. SCHAEFFER replied that the board has developed, through the Education Summit, the Alaska Education Plan. This plan includes working groups, which try to develop these types of ideas within particular areas (such as graduation, early childhood, and literacy). She noted that curriculum is adopted by local school boards; the state board does not come up with what the curriculum must be for the entire state.

CO-CHAIR MEYER noted that the committee would love to hear the board's ideas and thoughts later on as well.

[9:15:23 AM](#)

PATRICK SHIER, Member, First Judicial District, Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), noted that the board is attempting to challenge the traditional delivery method. He said that Dr. Bryan Ray of the National Home Educators Research Institute published a pamphlet titled *Home Education on the Threshold*. This research shows that if a child is outside of school, teacher certification and economic factors do not correlate with student success. DEED is very interested in achievement based matriculation, however, No Child Left Behind has "sucked up all the oxygen" for many years. He noted that DEED has been working to improve alternative delivery methods and is trying to help districts who are doing different things to meet the needs of its students. The board is examining alternative delivery and evaluation methods, improving graduation rates, teacher quality, and the teacher mentor program. He noted that the state is hiring 1,000 new teachers per year, many of which are not from Alaska. He recommended that the committee view the UTube video, *Did you know 4.0*, produced by ShiftHappens.

[9:22:12 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER encouraged the board to continue this communication.

[9:22:47 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Meyer adjourned the meeting at 9:22 a.m.