

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 25, 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
Representative Scott Kawasaki

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Senator Fred Dyson

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): SUPERINTENDENT~ UNALASKA CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

- HEARD

HOUSE BILL NO. 145

"An Act establishing the parental choice scholarship program to be administered by school districts for the purpose of paying the cost of attending grades kindergarten through 12 at public and private schools; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 16

Proposing amendments to the Constitution of the State of Alaska relating to state aid for education.

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 145

SHORT TITLE: K-12 SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) KELLER

02/09/11 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/09/11 (H) EDC, FIN
03/25/11 (H) EDC AT 8:00 AM CAPITOL 106

BILL: HJR 16

SHORT TITLE: CONST. AM: EDUCATION FUNDING
SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) KELLER

02/09/11 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/09/11 (H) EDC, JUD, FIN
03/25/11 (H) EDC AT 8:00 AM CAPITOL 106

WITNESS REGISTER

JOHN CONWELL, Superintendent
Unalaska City School District
Unalaska, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint overview of the Unalaska City School District.

REPRESENTATIVE WES KELLER
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced the committee substitute (CS) as the sponsor of HB 145.

TOM FINK, Board Member
Private School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145 and HJR 16.

MIKE DUNLEAVY, Parent
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145 and HJR 16.

SARAH WELTON
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 145 and HJR 16.

LYNN GATTIS
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

DR. JESS ELLIS
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

BETHANY MARCUM
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

MARY ROWLEY, Principal
Cook Inlet Academy
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

DREW BAKER
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

JENNIE HAMMOND
Nikiski, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

KATHLEEN BALLENGER, Board Member
St. Mary's School Board
Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

JON ROSS
Chugiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

JEFF MCDONALD
(No address provided)

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

ANNA BOUTWELL
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

MARY BARR
(No address provided)

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145 and HJR 16.

DAVE BRONSON
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

JIM MINNERY, President
Alaska Family Council
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

LORI BERRIGAN, Chair
Academic Policy Committee
Birchtree Charter School
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

JODI TAYLOR

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during discussion on HB 145.

NATE DAVIS, Superintendent

Grace Christian School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

BILL NOLL

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

DAVID BOYLE

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145 and HJR 16.

DENNIS BRADLEY

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

SID HEIDERSDORF

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

RICHARD GIESSEL

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145.

KATHERINE HICKS

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 145 and HJR 16.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:03:39 AM](#)

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

[8:04:25 AM](#)

PRESENTATION(S): Superintendent, Unalaska City School District

[8:04:39 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK announced that the first order of business would be a presentation from the superintendent of the Unalaska City School District.

[8:05:00 AM](#)

JOHN CONWELL, Superintendent, Unalaska City School District, presented a PowerPoint entitled "Unalaska City School District." He stated that Unalaska was located about 800 air miles Southwest of Anchorage and was the last stop on the Alaska Marine Highway's run out to the Aleutians. He reported that the Port of Dutch Harbor was a year round ice-free port located in the shipping lanes between the West Coast and Pacific Rim nations and was ranked the number one port in the United States for the volume of seafood landed. He stated that, as of the most recent Census, the Unalaska population was 4,376, but that during the fishing seasons three fish processing plants brought in another 5-6 thousand people. He pointed out that the local economy relied heavily on the fishing industry and the businesses that supported the fishing industry, and that there was virtually no unemployment in Unalaska.

Referring to the two schools in Unalaska City School District, he reported that Eagle's View Elementary School had been open 10 years, and had 265 students in grades pre-K - 6 with 15 teachers, 7 instructional aides, and a principal. He pointed out that Unalaska City School had 200 students in grades 7-12, with 18 teachers, 5 instructional aides, and a principal. He spoke about the recent \$4.5 million renovation, funded through the Debt Reimbursement Program, and reported that these renovations modernized many of the building's systems and had included many energy saving upgrades.

He stated that the students had access to three computer labs and seven mobile computer carts. He declared that stimulus dollars were used to install interactive white boards in 75

percent of the classrooms, although bandwidth issues still limited the distance education opportunities. He expressed optimism that a fiber optic cable would one day link Unalaska to the mainland.

He proudly declared that Unalaska City Junior/Senior High School was awarded a 2010 US News and World Report Bronze Medal, one of only 6 bronze medalists in Alaska, and that Unalaska City School was nominated for the 2011 Blue Ribbon Schools Award.

He reported that both schools enjoyed tremendous support from the City of Unalaska, community members, and parents, and that participation in the Parent-Teacher conferences was close to 100 percent in the elementary school and above 70 percent in the Junior/Senior High School.

He described the ethnically diverse student body as one of the district's greatest strengths, as students learned to respect and appreciate one another's cultures. He indicated that 32 percent of the students qualified for English as a Second Language (ESL) services, which was down from 42 percent in the prior year. He announced that the teachers were trained in the Sheltered Instruction and Observation Protocol (SIOP), with the goal for all teachers to become experts in ESL instructional methods: "Meeting the educational needs of our non-English speaking students continues to be a challenge that we strive to get better at each year."

He observed that the preschool program was critical for school readiness, especially for children learning English as a second language and for children with disabilities, and that the District had 40 families enrolled in the Imagination Library.

He noted that the remoteness of Unalaska afforded many local educational resources, which included the hatchery located just across the street from the high school, and with the Marine Advisory Program office in the same facility. He directed attention to the Museum of the Aleutians, a world-class facility that provided educational programs in the schools and was a popular field trip destination.

He spoke about the school district partnerships with local entities to provide educational opportunities for students, which included: Iliuliuk Clinic, and the school nurse; the aforementioned Museum of the Aleutians; the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, and the Behavioral Health counselor; Ounalashka Corporation, and the Unangan Language and Culture

Program; the Qawalangin Tribal Council, and the Camp Qungaayux Summer Culture Program; and the City of Unalaska, which consistently funded the schools to the allowable cap.

He reported that the average number of graduates for the past five years had been 25 students, and that each school had consistently made AYP (adequate yearly progress) since the passage of NCLB (No Child Left Behind). He pointed out that, as the Annual Measurable Objective continued to climb toward 100 percent in 2014, it would be exceedingly difficult for the district to make AYP. He declared that the school district encouraged students to pass as many of the HSGQE (High School Graduation Qualifying Exams) on their first try as possible, as those who did not pass were assigned an additional math or English class specifically designed to prepare them for the exams. He explained that the students were motivated to pass in order to free up their schedules for advanced courses, vocational courses, music, foreign language, and art.

He observed that, beginning in 2008, the school district began asking graduating seniors to participate in a comprehensive survey. Graduates were surveyed just before graduation, again after 18 months, and again in 5 years, with the hope to collect data from these surveys to see how effective the programs were for preparing students for their post-high school goals.

He indicated that the school district required all high school students to develop a plan for post-high school. Beginning in the 9th grade, students would work with the counseling department to develop their plans. He stated that the important thing was that when they walked out the door with a diploma, they also had a plan with a portfolio to back it up.

He spoke about the access to a variety of programs, courses, and co-curricular activities for students, which included: Math, English, Social Studies, Science, Vocational Education (Welding, Carpentry, CADD, Principals of Technology, Office Procedures, and Personal Finance), World Languages (Russian, Spanish, and German), Music, Art, and Physical Education & Health.

He noted that the District also had an alternative high school program, LIFE (Learning Is For Everyone), which served students who may have struggled in a traditional classroom setting, students who had fallen behind in credits, and older students who were new to the country and may need a place to improve their English skills before entering the regular classroom.

He pointed out the co-curricular sports and academic activities, which included: Varsity sports in swimming, cross country, basketball, volleyball, and wrestling, foreign language club, pep club, spelling bee, geography bee, pep band, Poetry Out Loud, Battle of the Books, and Letters about Literature.

He spoke about the educational achievements of the faculty members as more than 50 percent had Master's Degrees.

He touted the fantastic students, as they were eager and motivated learners, and it was "cool to be smart." The students had recently distinguished themselves in many statewide academic competitions, including: Poetry Out Loud, Letters about Literature, and the Alaska Science and Engineering Fair.

[8:16:09 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KAWASAKI asked for more information on the funding for the early childhood pre-K program.

MR. CONWELL, in response, relayed that the city appropriation was \$118,000, and that tuition accounted for an additional \$50,000.

REPRESENTATIVE KAWASAKI asked if there were any measurements of student performance upon entry into kindergarten from the pre-K program.

MR. CONWELL reported that pre-assessments and post assessments were administered for the pre-K program, and he offered to send the results to the committee. He noted that the kindergarten teacher confirmed a "huge difference in students who have attended our pre-school program prior to coming to kindergarten and those that don't, just in their readiness for school, their ability to recognize colors and letters and numbers."

[8:18:05 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked if there was any use of technology in the early learning programs.

MR. CONWELL indicated that Imagination Library was a primary tool, and that the pre-school philosophy was "learning through play." He declared that, at this early age, students did not use computers or i-pads and were encouraged to play, to sing, and to socialize.

[8:19:26 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON, noting that 50 percent of the teachers had additional certification, asked about the teacher turnover rate.

[8:19:47 AM](#)

MR. CONWELL replied that the turnover average was about 20 percent. He shared that for the current school year there would be 3 teaching positions available from a staff of 33 teachers.

[8:20:39 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK observed that there was a strong work ethic in the community that carried into the schools.

[8:21:00 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA recalled that there were many community youth activities while adults were working.

MR. CONWELL agreed that the community provided many student opportunities, and that it was a good place to raise children.

HB 145-K-12 SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM
HJR 16-CONST. AM: EDUCATION FUNDING

[8:23:10 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK announced that the next order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 145, "An Act establishing the parental choice scholarship program to be administered by school districts for the purpose of paying the cost of attending grades kindergarten through 12 at public and private schools; and providing for an effective date", and HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 16, Proposing amendments to the Constitution of the State of Alaska relating to state aid for education. He pointed out that these two bills would be heard together. [In front of the committee was Version I of HB 145.]

[8:23:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRUITT moved to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 145, Version 27-LS0223\D, Mischel, 3/24/11, as the working document.

[8:24:10 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON objected for discussion.

[8:24:21 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WES KELLER, Alaska State Legislature, explained that a coalition had worked to build the language of the bill, and that it would be difficult to list a point by point of the changes to Version D. He stated that the intent of the bill would be understood.

[8:25:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE asked if the proposed committee substitute, Version D, mirrored proposed SB 106.

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER agreed that the house and senate versions mirrored each other.

[8:25:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON removed his objection.

[There being no further objection, Version D was adopted as the work draft.]

[8:25:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER explained that HB 145 would provide parents with more control over the education of their children, as parents were the most likely to make decisions about the appropriate learning environment for their children. He directed attention to Version D, Page 1, line [7-10], which stated: "The parental choice scholarship program is established for the purpose of providing public funding of the cost of attending grades [kindergarten] through 12 at a public or private school selected by the student's parent or legal guardian." He declared that the research clearly revealed that private education cost half of the cost for publicly funded schools, and provided superior results. He declared that it was "intuitively obvious to me that the people paying the bills, the taxes, ought to have some level of choice on where the children go to school." He stated that the funding formula for students would simply pass the revenue to a participating public or private school. He agreed that the Alaska State Constitution declared that the legislature shall establish and maintain a

system of public schools open to all children of the state and that no money shall be paid from public funds for the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institution. He directed attention to HJR 16, which was being discussed in conjunction with HB 145 as a means to change the Alaska State Constitution, and noted that these bills would be moved together.

[8:29:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON asked how this bill would work with regard to the various school funding.

[8:29:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER replied that the Department of Education and Early Development (EED) would address the regulations, and that the funds would be paid to a school based on a "similarly positioned student."

[8:30:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON asked to define the use of the word "scholarship."

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER replied that the check would be written to the selected private school, and not the parents, as would be the case in a voucher program. He pointed out that this system necessitated passage of HJR 16.

[8:31:38 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK pointed out that Senator Dyson, sponsor of SB 106, was present and available for questions.

[8:31:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE indicated concern for the state investment in the school facilities, which were separate from classroom education costs. He asked how HB 145 would separate these costs. He projected a scenario whereby a school could lose sufficient students to no longer have operational funding.

[8:33:09 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER replied that proposed HB 145 made no distinction. He stated that it was based on the ADM (average

daily membership) formula. He stated: "I personally think that the good public schools will have no problem because they can also be a participating school and so, they are in the game, like you say, for the competition."

[8:34:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE directed attention to "the reasonable costs of transporting the student" and he asked for a definition to reasonable. He pointed to the rural areas with greater distances between schools, and the potential for significant cost.

[8:35:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER replied "I'd be afraid to guess how reasonable would be defined, but to me, the emphasis on this is that it is definitely left up to the district." He stated that each local district was different and this would need to be addressed by the local school board.

[8:35:50 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK emphasized that HB 145 "would be disruptive to the current paradigm."

[8:36:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA reflected on the already existing financial challenges facing Alaska, and asked how HB 145 would achieve the access to equality in education.

[8:38:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER suggested that this might be better answered by other testifiers, as this bill was supported by a coalition.

[8:38:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON asked that the witnesses identify the school situation for their student.

[8:38:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRUITT asked if there was a fiscal note.

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER replied that he assumed there would be a fiscal note forthcoming.

REPRESENTATIVE PRUITT asked if this would supplement those currently paying for private schools.

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER replied that HB 145 merely addressed that the money would be sent to the private school. He offered his belief that parents would no longer be required to pay for their children to attend private schools.

[8:40:34 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRUITT asked if there was concern by existing private schools that entering into a public process would sacrifice their independence from public guidelines.

REPRESENTATIVE KELLER replied that the language of the bill clarified that schools would administer their own programs.

[8:41:45 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK opened public testimony.

[8:42:33 AM](#)

TOM FINK, Board Member, Private School, said that parents should have the absolute choice for what school their child attends and that "the government money will follow that child and the government will have no restrictions beyond health and safety." He opined that there was a lot of national dissatisfaction with public education, with a variety of ideas for improvement. He said that the local school district should provide money to the participating schools, which would not exceed what was already being paid for students. He said this would be limited to local and state money, with no federal money. He offered his belief that it would improve the level of education, as one type of school was not best for everyone. He opined that the parent would make the better decision for a child than the government. He declared that it would enable more innovative schools. He stated his support for HJR 16 and HB 145.

[8:46:48 AM](#)

MIKE DUNLEAVY, Parent, declared that he was "a lifelong educator in the State of Alaska" and the parent of three school age children. He stated his support of HB 145 and SB 106. He said

that HB 145 would assist the public education in Alaska, as there was a current monopoly on education, with almost no competition. He declared that the scholarship program would have multiple positive impacts. He allowed that there may "a little bit of chaos as this firms up, but in the long run, I think it's going to help the state education system because there is going to be competition and there's going to be choice models for parents."

[8:50:03 AM](#)

SARAH WELTON read from the Alaska State Constitution: "no money shall be paid from public funds to the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institution." She stated that she was adamantly opposed to this change in the constitution. She declared that the protection afforded was necessary to ensure that support was not given to any specific philosophies. In response to an earlier question from Representative P. Wilson, she said that her two children, her foster children, and her grandchildren had attended or would attend public schools. She affirmed that she was an American Baptist pastor, and that HB 145 was an affront to both her and her congregation. She opined that it would be "a nightmare for bureaucracy" to move students out of their home districts. She stated her belief that it was necessary to increase and improve the funding for all schools.

[8:52:54 AM](#)

LYNN GATTIS said that she was a lifelong Alaskan with two children, one enrolled in home school and one in a neighborhood school. She declared her support for HB 145 as "I know that monopolies do not produce the best. Our present public school systems are just that, monopolies." She stated that competition in the schools would bring about change.

[8:54:51 AM](#)

DR. JESS ELLIS offered his belief that the public schools were "the educational equivalent of the old Soviet collective farms." He reminisced about the breakup of "Ma Bell" and reflected that innovation was its result, despite the fears that communication would crumble. He endorsed an end to the public school monopoly, to allow parents to choose for the needs of their children. He opined that this would better meet the needs of lower income families which could not currently afford private schools.

[8:58:18 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked to have the witnesses respond to whether the current statewide education standards should apply to the private schools.

[8:59:18 AM](#)

BETHANY MARCUM said that, although she was not a parent, she was aware of students who had concerns for the options to a quality education. She questioned the odds of finding a neighborhood school which fit each student's needs. She endorsed HB 145.

[9:02:32 AM](#)

MARY ROWLEY, Principal, Cook Inlet Academy, detailed that Cook Inlet Academy was a private, Christian school, with an enrollment of 165 students. She advocated that it was the responsibility of the parent for the education of a child. She opined that parents of children in private schools had to pay both taxes and tuition. She stated that parents should have the educational choice for their children. She reported that her school partnered with parents to educate the children and that the school had a 100 percent graduation rate. She endorsed curriculum standards and accountability. She opined that HB 145 would allow schools to maintain identity. She expressed support for HB 145.

[9:05:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked if the private schools could reject applicants.

MS. ROWLEY replied that private school would need the ability to screen applicants, as many private schools did not have the facilities for special needs students, and there was a limited capacity. She relayed that Cook Inlet Academy did not compromise on its curriculum, and she pointed to the statement of faith which was required of the parents to sign.

[9:07:23 AM](#)

DREW BAKER said that he agreed with choice and that monopolies were not good. He offered his belief that schools should be rewarded for doing well. He shared that one of his children was in a private school, and one was in the public school, with the

decision based on each of their needs. He opined that public school did have a philosophy of education and social upbringing. He stated that although HB 145 was a departure from the Alaska State Constitution, no bill was perfect, and the current situation was not perfect.

[9:10:30 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE P. WILSON, acknowledging that many parents would like their child to attend private school, asked Ms. Rowley how the students would be chosen.

[9:11:51 AM](#)

MS. ROWLEY explained that every family was interviewed, the school philosophy was explained, and a determination was made whether the school would meet the needs of the child. She noted that students were often allowed to enroll for a probationary period if there was any question. She declared that the interview process was designed to be as thorough as possible.

[9:13:08 AM](#)

JENNIE HAMMOND said that her two children attended the private Cook Inlet Academy, as she had observed that the public school system was not working for her "special needs child" with "a learning issue". She opined that many children would benefit from smaller schools with smaller classrooms. She suggested that the charter school was the only other current option in her area. She stated her support for HB 145.

[9:15:24 AM](#)

KATHLEEN BALLENGER, Board Member, St. Mary's Catholic School Board in Kodiak, stated her "wholehearted support for HB 145." She said that Alaska was behind on the school choice issue. She stated that the request was simple, "that each parent or guardian of a school age child gets to choose the school where they want their child to be educated." She declared that this would offer opportunities to many parents who could not consider private schools because of the cost. She predicted that this would allow private and public schools to compete for students, and that everyone would benefit. She lauded her education, and that of her grandchildren, at a private catholic school.

[9:17:55 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked if all of the teachers at the school were certified by the state.

MS. BALLENGER replied that they were all certified.

CHAIR DICK asked about the drop out and graduation rates.

MS. BALLENGER replied that there was a 100 percent graduation rate.

[9:18:32 AM](#)

JON ROSS stated his support for HB 145. He offered his belief that the public school system was broken, failing many students across the state, and that it was time to make systemic changes to the school system. In Anchorage, the public schools were failing the Alaska Native students, their graduation rate was 43 percent, and their proficiency scores were 30 points lower than Caucasian students. He reported that Native students had stated that "they don't feel comfortable in [the] schools and that there's a lot of discrimination." He declared that Alaska Native student proficiency scores were worsening, the environment was not safe, the schools were not culturally responsive, and that the system was antiquated. He stated his support for HB 145, to allow parents the choice of schools for their children.

[9:23:49 AM](#)

JEFF MCDONALD said that he was the parent of a student who had attended public school. He expressed his frustration with the public school experience for his child, so she was enrolled in a small private school. He compared that the cost for the private school was \$3,000 annually versus \$12,000 annually for the public school. He said that he supported the school standards for curriculum.

[9:26:43 AM](#)

ANNA BOUTWELL stated her support for HB 145, that the bill was about choice and that parents should be allowed to decide what was best for their children. She offered her belief that HB 145 would allow a continuum of the values that were taught in the home.

[9:30:14 AM](#)

MARY BARR shared that she was a grandparent, and she stated her support for HB 145 and HJR 16, as HB 145 would provide accountability by the local school system.

[9:31:04 AM](#)

DAVE BRONSON said that he had two students in private school, and he opined that the Anchorage public schools were failing the students, as only 69 percent were graduating, even though there was payment of \$17,000 per student annually. He spoke of the "lottery" for admission to charter, optional and immersion schools, and that this system was unacceptable. Replying to an earlier comment by Representative Cissna, he said that students were assigned to schools by their zip code, with no choice. He stated his support for HB 145.

[9:33:22 AM](#)

JIM MINNERY, President, Alaska Family Council, said that he had attended Anchorage public schools, but that his three children were enrolled in a private Christian school. He stated that attendance in this private school was only possible with financial support from the grandparents of the children. He noted that this private school did not provide a socio economic or cultural diversity, and he opined that this was because of cost. He pointed to available information which indicated that school choice programs improved public school performance and created healthy competition, and he read from the conclusion of one study: "Our result suggests that policies that introduce competition to public schools spur improvements in public school student test scores." He implored the House Education Standing Committee to move HB 145 out of committee. He stated that the proposed bill was not an attack on the public school, but was an opportunity for choice and for improvement in the public schools.

[9:37:42 AM](#)

LORI BERRIGAN, Chair, Academic Policy Committee, Birchtree Charter School, shared that she had two school age children and that she was a founding parent of Birchtree Charter School. She stated her belief of choice in education. She declared that HB 145 allowed parents to become involved in their child's education. She encouraged passage of HB 145.

[9:39:24 AM](#)

JODI TAYLOR expressed her concern that the belief of competition in the public school system would not make our schools better. She opined that private universities in the United States were the best in the world.

[9:40:33 AM](#)

NATE DAVIS, Superintendent, Grace Christian School, stated his support for HB 145, paraphrasing from a prepared statement, which read [original punctuation provided]:

I am a 43-year Alaskan who has been educated in both public and private K-12 schools in Alaska. I graduated from the University of Alaska Anchorage with degrees in Math and Education. I have taught for seven years in the public schools of Alaska and have been educating students for the last fifteen years at Grace Christian School in Anchorage and now serve as its Superintendent. My wife and I have four children and have educated them in public school, home school and private school.

I am in full support of HB 145.

The question on this bill that must remain the priority is, "What is best for Alaskan children?" And the answer to that most significant question is, "Only the parent knows best."

The state has long held that parents have the God-given right and responsibility to provide what is best for the child: food, clothing, housing, discipline, and education.

Should the state ever decide to aid parents in providing what is best for the child, it should do so in an equitable manner for all citizens of the state. Obviously, this state has long ago decided to give financial assistance to parents to educate their own children.

However, the current system provides 100 percent funding for some parents, partial funding for parents who choose charter schools, only a fraction for those who choose to home-school, and 0 percent for those parents who know that a private school is the best answer for their child. This partiality and

discrimination by the state in funding education is finally addressed in HB 145, which allows the state to help all parents bear the full and reasonable cost of educating their child.

This reminds me of The American's Creed which my private school made me memorize in 5th or 6th grade. More than 90 years ago, William Tyler Page won a national contest sponsored by the Commissioner of Education of New York when he authored this brief document that captures the essence of America's most significant founding documents. And I recite in part, "I believe in the United States of America as a Government of the people by the people, for the people, whose just powers are derived from the consent of the governed; a democracy in a Republic; a sovereign Nation of many sovereign States; a perfect Union, one and inseparable; established upon those principles of freedom, equality, justice, and humanity for which American patriots sacrificed their lives and fortunes."

As for Freedom: Thank you for our current laws and leadership! Parents of Alaska already have the freedom to choose which school is best for their child... as long as they have a substantial amount of extra money.

As for Equality: Why do some parents receive \$15,000 per child, others \$10,000, some only \$1,500, and some none? HB 145 addresses Equality by paying the full cost of education for each Alaskan child.

As for Justice: Lawmakers, I beseech you to refuse to allow the debate to center around the self-interests of adults. Which adults will be affected by this bill? Who will be empowered? Who will feel slighted? These are all red herrings. Focus on what is just.

As for Humanity: Keep the debate centered on what is best for children and stand firm on the principle that only parents know best what is best for the child.

This is a constitutional issue. Under our current system, many of your Alaska constituents either work multiple jobs, settle for less for their children, live with guilt that they should be doing better for

their kids, or dramatically sacrifice their lifestyles. They sacrifice their very lives, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to give their children the best. This last, by the way, is very noble if the state asks every other citizen to do the same.

As for Grace Christian School and most private schools—yes, we do have grave concerns about what government restrictions might accompany government funding that might try to limit our school's autonomy. We say that under this bill all private schools should remain autonomous—their personal distinctive are why parents choose them. Even public schools believe in site-based management to empower parents to impact excellence in schools.

What about accountability for private schools? If someone asks the question, then they do not yet understand the beauty of a free enterprise system where competition brings out the best in everyone. Every private school, like every private business, is already under more accountability than the state could ever heap upon it. Parents choose us to educate their child. If we cannot keep parents satisfied, they leave. It's that simple. And, this principle of free enterprise is the very principle that will make our public schools stronger than ever when HB 145 becomes law.

I urge you to trust parents. Trust competition. When private schools like Grace take average Alaskan students and graduate 100 percent of them and send 95 percent of seniors on to colleges and universities where they excel, what rules of accountability are necessary to make sure they are doing a good job?

Also, do not let the fears of a mass exodus from public schools deter you. Even if thousands of parents wanted to leave, there would be very little physical room in current charter and private schools in the early years for them to do so. It would be a slow transition as existing schools expanded and new schools were birthed, giving public schools several years to become more competitive. The final result? A nurturing educational environment in Alaska where children would thrive in a large variety of schools chosen by their parents.

I urge you to let Alaska become the innovative leader of our nation in excellent education by moving HB 145.

[9:44:09 AM](#)

BILL NOLL stated his support for HB 145, and said that this "may be the most important piece of legislation in front of the legislature this year."

[9:45:13 AM](#)

DAVID BOYLE stated that he had three adopted children who had attended school in five different state school districts. He declared his strong support for HB 145 and HJR 16, paraphrasing from a prepared statement, which read [original punctuation provided]:

I come to you as a concerned Alaskan. I have been active in education policy issues for about 3 years. I would like to preface my remarks before my presentation. I represent no special interests. I only represent what is the best for our kids. I have no vested financial interests in House Bill 145 and HJR 16. However, I do stand to gain when all Alaskan children can have the opportunity to reach their maximum potential.

I strongly support HB 145 because it creates the opportunities for kids to become productive citizens of this state and country. This bill gives parents the right to choose the best educational fit for their children, whether it be a charter school, public school, private school or home school. A child should not be relegated to attend the school in which he/she lives if it is a failing school or does not fit the child's learning style or needs. We have these failing schools in Anchorage-they remain open under waivers from the Dept of Ed and Early Development and the US Dept of Education. Why must children from these neighborhoods be required to attend failing schools?

Many of the failing schools in Anchorage are Title 1 schools and located in lower income neighborhoods. These lower income families are unable to get their kids out of these schools and into either charter or optional schools. (by the way, the charter and optional schools in Anchorage are the absolute best when it comes to student achievement.) Under HB 145,

these parents could opt out of these failing schools and enroll their kids in private schools or non-public charter schools. If schools are failing, the kids should not be allowed to fail.

Children should not be denied a good education because of the neighborhood in which they live. They should be allowed to choose the right school just like the families with the necessary financial resources do. These kids should not be denied an equal opportunity to a quality education because of a zip code.

The current way of doing business, throwing money at the problem, is not solving the root cause of the problem. Today we have an education monopoly in which only the wealthy can choose options. This educational system has little incentive to improve because there is virtually no competition. This system asks for more money to solve its problems with little, if any, accountability for making progress toward increasing student achievement.

This bill and HJR 16 can bring a transformational change to a broken system. Alaska can blaze a trail and set the example for the other states in true school choice. I ask that you be the trailblazers for our kids. Our only focus should be on the kids and what is best for them!

[9:48:39 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FEIGE asked Mr. Boyle how the Alaska school districts compared to the five other state school districts which his children had attended.

MR. BOYLE replied that Anchorage was in the middle.

[9:49:15 AM](#)

DENNIS BRADLEY declared that his children and grandchildren had attended public school in Anchorage, and he stated his support of HB 145 as it would provide parents the flexibility to choose the school best suited for their children.

[9:52:16 AM](#)

SID HEIDERSDORF, stating his support for HB 145, paraphrased from a prepared statement, which read [original punctuation provided]:

I support H.B. 145. I believe the availability of a scholarship program giving parents the choice of which schools they wish to support is a step in the right direction. I think most people agree that the performance of our schools in terms of student educations has seriously declined. We have witnessed for many years the failure in our public schools as they have morphed into social services organizations. During this time the constant demand has been for more and more money. In fact, the decline in school performance has occurred precisely during the period when more and more public money is being spent in public education. It is an unhappy fact that very few public officials and legislators are willing to stand up to the powerful unions and professional school administrators as they demand an increase in expenditures.

The problem with our schools is not lack of adequate funding. In Alaska, the amount of money spent per student ranks near the top when compared to the fifty states. More money will not salvage the present system. We are long past the time when we should have admitted that our present approach does not work and we need a change in direction.

There are many reasons for the decline of our schools and H.B. 145 or similar approaches represent needed changes. Reversing the trend will not be easy because of the entrenched and powerful opposition which major changes will precipitate. I believe at least two major changes are required to improve the performance of our schools and make them responsive once again to the educational needs of our children. First of all we need a drastic restructuring of the public school system which gives more autonomy to local schools. This would involve freeing the schools from the grasp of the existing educational bureaucracy and the National Education Association, thereby, giving our good teachers a chance to do the job they were hired to do- namely teach.

Secondly, a good dose of competition among our schools would be beneficial for all of our schools. Parental choice will return some power to the parents where it belongs. This is where H.B.145 would contribute to improving our schools. There is nothing like

competition to improve services and performance as schools concentrate on the business at hand which is education.

Ultimately, I believe a full-fledged voucher system whereby parents receive money for each child and the freedom to select the school of their choice is cheaper simpler to administer. It would provide incentive to our schools that we are finally serious about improving their performance. In conclusion, I support H.B. 145. I believe it is a step in the right direction to give some choice to parents to support schools that are doing a good job.

[9:55:35 AM](#)

RICHARD GIESSEL stated his support for HJR 16 and HB 145, and noted that he had been a teacher for 16 years. Paraphrasing from a prepared statement, he read [original punctuation provided]:

Public Schools are Religious.

Secular Humanism is the official State Religion of our Public Schools.

John Dewey, father of modern public education was main architect of the 1933 "Humanist Manifesto."

Charles Francis Potter, honorary president of the National Education Association was coauthor of the "Humanist Manifesto."

First Amendment to US Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Federal Department of Education, State of Alaska, and Anchorage School Board have all violated the First Amendment by establishing Secular Humanism as the official atheistic religion of the State and eliminating Biblical Christianity from public schools. It is wrong for the State to confiscate a citizen's property by force (through property and business taxes) and use that money to indoctrinate his children in a religious worldview contrary to what he believes.

The proposed School Choice bill corrects this violation of the First Amendment for citizens of the State of Alaska.

It restores freedom of religion by allowing parents to put their children in a school where their religion will be respected and affirmed rather than mocked and denigrated.

It stops the legal plunder of Theistic Believers by the State and the exclusive use of the confiscated property to indoctrinate Theistic Believers' children in atheism.

The State is not God and should not dictate teaching a single Religious Worldview. Please fix our faulty state constitution and restore our freedom of religion by passing the School Choice measures.

[9:57:51 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK agreed that secular humanism was the religion of the state.

[9:58:14 AM](#)

KATHERINE HICKS stated that her son went to public school, and she shared her reactions to visits of the local grade schools. She stated her support of HB 145 and HJR16, and pointed out that the bill addressed the need for academic accountability.

[9:59:51 AM](#)

CHAIR DICK declared that public testimony would remain open.

[HB 145 and HJR 16 were held over.]

[10:00:56 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.