

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 4, 2011

8:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA - TEACHER PREPAREDNESS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

DEBORAH LO, Dean
College of Education
University of Alaska Southeast (UAS)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions of the committee regarding UAS' teacher education program and preparedness.

MARY SNYDER, Dean
College of Education
University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions of the committee regarding UAA's teacher education program and preparedness.

ERIC MADSEN, Dean
College of Education
University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF)
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions of the committee regarding UAF's teacher education program and preparedness.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:04:35 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR JOE THOMAS called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:00 a.m. Senators Davis, Stevens, Co-Chair Meyer, and Co-Chair Thomas were present at the call to order. Senator French arrived shortly thereafter.

PRESENTATION: UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA - TEACHER PREPAREDNESS

[8:04:54 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS announced the business before the committee would be to hear a presentation by the three deans of the University of Alaska (UA) on teacher preparedness. He reminded the committee of SB 83, which dealt with national teacher certification [though the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)]. He said that the committee members want to hear from the deans regarding how the colleges are addressing teacher preparedness.

[8:06:31 AM](#)

DEBORAH LO, Dean, College of Education, University of Alaska Southeast (UAS), said she arrived in Alaska in July and has found UAS' education faculty to be very hard-working and dedicated. She explained that what makes the program unique is that the program is taken out of Juneau and serves students where they are through distance education. For example, one faculty member spent three nights on a gym floor in order to serve the needs of a special education teacher in a rural community. The program is NCATE [National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education] approved and UAS will have another visit in October. She noted that the programs are aligned with all of the NCATE, state and national board standards. The pass rates on the Praxis exam I and II are very good and better than the other institutions that she came from.

[8:08:48 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said one of the issues that the Joint Higher Education Task Force has discussed is the Praxis exam. He asked for perspective on whether this exam works as a determining factor to decide who will be a good teacher.

MS. LO replied that the Praxis exam is the best measure available. She explained that Praxis I measures general

knowledge and Praxis II ensures that potential teachers are prepared to teach this body of knowledge. She said that she believes it works fairly well.

SENATOR STEVENS said the task force heard numerous complaints, particularly about Praxis I. He asked if there is a cultural factor that plays into this.

MS. LO replied that this has been an issue all over the country, not just in Alaska. Individuals aren't happy when they're told that they need remediation. However, the primary obligation, as a school of education, is to the children of Alaska and teachers that do not have good content knowledge can't be placed into schools.

SENATOR STEVENS thanked Ms. Lo for her response. He noted that this issue needs further review.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked Ms. Lo to think about whether a process should be put into place for individuals entering the program that would give them a better idea of what teaching is going to be like. He wondered if there is an evaluation process that is done to determine whether an individual has the propensity towards this career path.

[8:12:11 AM](#)

MARY SNYDER, Dean, College of Education, University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), said students are being introduced to a lot of their education coursework and field experiences earlier on in their education. This allows faculty members to observe teacher candidates in a number of areas early-on in order to identify students who might have some issues within the field. The university has added a retention officer to help students and counsel them, if needed, out of the program if they won't be suitable as a teacher.

She agreed that the Praxis exams aren't necessarily an accurate predictor of how a teacher will do. She noted that UAA is also NCATE accredited and did exceptionally well during NCATE's visit last spring. Sixty-two percent of the courses that UAA provides are offered through distance education and seven percent of its programs are 100 percent distant. She said that the College of Education is looking to make 100 percent of its programs available through distance education within the next three years.

[8:14:54 AM](#)

ERIC MADSEN, Dean, College of Education, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), said the university has been heavily involved with rural education programs for the past 40 years. He explained that there used to be faculty on the rural campuses; however, as the number of students in those programs declined, along with the increase in technology, it made more sense to conduct the programs from Fairbanks.

He explained that, with regard to the Praxis exams, the discrepancies in scores are related to how recently a student underwent training. Students who have prepared recently have very few problems.

He said that when students enter the program rigorous screening is involved that includes what students want to do and the skills that they bring with them. He added that there is also a practicum experience very early on in order to determine whether this is what the student wants to do long-term.

[8:17:34 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS commented that an effort is being made to bring more Native individuals into education. He asked if there are ways that UAF is working with students so they don't have to spend so much time on campus.

MR. MADSEN replied that all of its programs are available to students in the rural communities where they live and work through distance education. He noted that during the program there may be short periods of time when a student needs to be on campus.

SENATOR STEVENS asked if UAF is developing a cadre of teachers from that program that is worth pursuing.

MR. MADSEN replied that it is working very well in regards to the preparation that students receive. He noted that one thing that has changed over the past few decades is students in even the smallest communities have a wide array of professional options that they can pursue. This means that it makes it very difficult to attract these individuals to public education.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked him to comment on how recruiting is done and how teachers are encouraged to return to their villages to teach after receiving their education.

MR. MADSEN replied that the number of students from rural communities who are pursuing education is declining. However

much of this has to do with the status of the profession. Public education is not a high-status profession; this can be seen through salary discrepancies and working conditions. The one thing that would attract rural teachers and teachers in general would be to address teacher salaries and benefits.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked whether more mentoring would be helpful in rural areas in receiving a broader spectrum of pursuits and professions.

MR. MADSEN replied yes. He noted that it does create some additional challenges.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS noted, with regard to the teacher education program, individuals spend a year in an unpaid internship. He said that this is a bit unusual and asked for confirmation that this internship is considered a part of the educational aspect.

MR. MADSEN replied that in one sense students are in the classroom fulltime, however a majority of these individuals are not fulfilling the fulltime duties of a teacher; they are working under the guidance of a master teacher.

[8:23:23 AM](#)

MS. SNYDER added that UAA's students experience at least two schools during their year's experience in the classroom.

MS. LO noted that at UAS most individuals are in unpaid internships. The exception to this would be with special education because many of these individuals are already teachers who are being trained for this specialization while teaching.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if students get to pick the school for their internship or if they're assigned.

MS. LO replied that students often choose the school, particularly rural students. In special education, because there is such a critical shortage area in Alaska, teachers are frequently hired from the Lower 48 and receive their specialized training while teaching.

MR. MADSEN agreed with Ms. Lo that students will ask to work in a particular community or school. However, it is not always the students' choice; this negotiation process must take place under the supervision of a faculty member. He said it is most important that an intern is working with a mentor teacher who is going to be able to help them.

8:25:40 AM

CO-CHAIR MEYER said there's a huge demand for teachers in the state and it is troubling to have to recruit teachers from the Lower 48 because frequently they don't last due to culture shock. He asked how close UA is to meeting the demand for teachers through the three campuses. He then asked how UA gets the teachers in the state to pursue areas in the highest demand, such as special education.

MS. SNYDER replied that in 2010 all three universities graduated a little over 200 teachers, which is about one-fourth of what's needed in Alaska.

MR. MADSEN noted that in recent years they have learned that teachers who prepare in the state tend to stay longer in their positions. He explained that while at this point UA can't equate that with student achievement, teachers who have been in a position longer and have a greater depth of experience work better with their students. He said that getting teachers to take positions where they're most needed does not always happen by choice and teachers with experience need to be offered some incentives to consider those positions.

MS. SNYDER said that one initiative UAA has is the existence of some private funding to take 15 paraprofessionals enrolled in the elementary education program out to Chevak. The university sends a faculty member out there and the rest of the instruction is done through distance support. She explained that their anticipation is that this cohort of students who are all Chup'ik and Chup'ik speakers will become teachers in that area. UAA believes that this can be successful in other areas and Barrow has approached the university about using this same model.

MR. MADSEN concurred. UAF has 63 elementary and secondary interns in 18 communities, with only four located in the five largest communities in the state. The other 14 communities include very remote places and some of the regional centers.

8:30:35 AM

MS. LO said that UAS has the P.I.T.A.A.S. [Preparing Indigenous Teachers and Administrators for Alaska Schools] program which heavily recruits rural and Native students. UAS is currently designing the only undergraduate special education program in the state. She stressed the importance in training students early.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked what can be done to come closer to meeting the demand for teachers in Alaska. He suggested that perhaps a scholarship should be offered to students to encourage them to go into teaching.

MS. LO replied that UAS has 13 faculty members in the college of education and produces about 90 teachers every year. She said that the college is currently at capacity and more faculty would allow the college to produce more teachers. She acknowledged that incentives to go into education would also help.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked, with additional faculty, whether the university could graduate more teachers. He noted that it appears UAS is graduating about half of the system's teachers currently.

MS. LO replied yes. She noted that UAS' College of Education would like to produce more teachers and could do so with more faculty.

[8:33:17 AM](#)

MR. MADSEN said incentives could be useful with regard to encouraging students to choose a specific discipline within education and age level. However, in order to get people into the profession, scholarships and loan forgiveness programs should be considered. UAF, like UAS, is now running at capacity. To address the 25 percent needed increase in a meaningful way requires looking at the capacity of the UA education system.

MS. SNYDER concurred, increasing the faculty capacity and incentives for students to pursue education would be helpful. However, UA will never be able to fulfill 100 percent of the teacher demand due to the population base that UA is working off of.

SENATOR FRENCH expressed hope that the university president and the UA Board of Regents would bring forward proposals for adding faculty.

He asked how to measure teacher effectiveness and what can be done to promote that more.

MS. LO replied that UAS evaluates students starting from the time they enter the school. She noted that disposition is an important factor and occasionally a student must be dismissed from the program. She noted that the university's primary

obligation is to the children in schools, not the adults in the program.

MS. SNYDER added that at UAA candidates are evaluated by an independent clinical faculty member or regular faculty member from the university. There is also a lot of input from the student's "mentor teacher" and the principal in the building. Students are then evaluated at one, three, and five years out once they are in the field.

MR. MADSEN noted that UAF does the same. However, the topic many are reluctant to address is student achievement, which is, ultimately, the success for a professional. NCLB [No Child Left Behind] was measuring the progress of one cohort of students against a completely different cohort of students. Understandably, educators are reluctant to be measured under this basis, which adds some serious questions. The profession, in general, is willing to be accountable if the discussion is focused on the measure that indicates what an individual teacher contributes to the classroom and to individual students.

[8:38:29 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS noted that his daughter came to Juneau for the MAT [Master of Arts in Teaching] program. Each of the campuses appears to have a different approach and attract different types of students. He asked how the three campuses differ from each other.

MS. LO replied that UAS is different in its responsiveness to students. She said that sometimes it concerns her that "they hold their hands too much;" however, students have indicated that this responsiveness is valuable.

SENATOR STEVENS noted, from personal experience, that there is a lot of diversity between the three campuses' education program and the students that each of the programs attract. He asked how the students that UAS attracts might be different than those who might be interested to UAF's or UAA's program.

MS. LO replied that a majority of UAS' students want to receive their training in their community. There are only two programs that are Juneau-based; everything else can be done through distance learning.

SENATOR STEVENS asked about UAF's population of students pursuing education.

MR. MADSEN replied that the three programs have changed in dynamic ways. UAF is no longer the only campus that does rural education. Now the university looks at where it would be beneficial to collaborate with the other campuses. On an annual basis UAF looks at where it can branch out and not duplicate programs. He noted that this has been a constructive process.

[8:42:49 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS mentioned the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification. In the committee's understanding the process for certification is a rigorous process, perhaps more so than getting a master's degree. He asked the deans to comment on how they view this certification.

MS. SNYDER replied that UAA has just revised the master's program so that it is based on board standards and students will be well-prepared to get board certified.

MS. LO concurred that it's important to give students these options and fully aligned programs. However, national board certification is a rigorous and time-consuming process and is not for everyone.

MR. MADSEN said that the national board process has been positive for Alaska and the nation. He noted that about 20 to 25 graduates at UAF have obtained national board certification. He explained that he is reluctant about national certification standards and does not believe it would be helpful to have teacher training nationwide look exactly the same.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said NBPTS recognizes the difference between rural and urban and different ethnic groups. He asked how schools specifically address this in Alaska. He noted that a Native leader recently indicated that boarding schools might be helpful for rural and Native student populations.

[8:47:21 AM](#)

MR. MADSEN replied that collaboration speaks to this and UA recognizes that schools look different across the state. He explained that it is important to be in touch with these schools on a constant basis in order to recognize and respond to these differences.

MS. SNYDER said, with respect to the boarding or hub school idea, there are very few high-quality courses that cannot be taught effectively through technology for K-12 students. She explained that rather than pull more children out of villages,

it is important to look to technology. The course work is available; there just need to be better ways to deliver that content in villages so the teacher becomes more facilitative.

MS. LO agreed with Ms. Snyder. She encouraged the committee to think about the research by [James] Heckman, which won him the Nobel Prize, who said that early childhood education will produce the "most bang for your buck." This needs to be addressed rigorously in Alaska.

MS. SNYDER concurred.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked, with regard to rural schools, what kind of an education a teacher needs in order to teach such a broad curriculum from kindergarten through high school.

MS. LO replied that, in this type of situation, a teacher is also a facilitator who can get the resources for their student and facilitate the process of learning. She noted that a teacher can't be an expert in all areas; however they need to know where the resources are and make sure students are exposed to the information and courses.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if that is effective for the lower grades.

MS. LO replied that it is like gifted education. The teacher may not be gifted but they can facilitate to make sure that students get the necessary information needed. This is the same within small villages.

MR. MADSEN said it's easier for a small group of individuals to have the necessary content expertise to teach the subjects required at the elementary level. He explained that distance education strategies become more useful at the secondary level. He suggested that short-term intensives at regional centers may also be helpful and don't require students to be away from home too much. There are real costs to pulling students away from their families and communities.

MS. SNYDER agreed with Mr. Madsen with regard to elementary education. She explained that within secondary school it is important to look into broad liberal arts preparation.

[8:54:18 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS thanked the presenters and suggested the deans forward any further comments to the committee for consideration.

SENATOR STEVENS asked if the committee would be able to meet with the university to discuss the Fisher Report.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS suggested that the committee meet during the interim to hear this report.

SENATOR STEVENS said hearing the university's response would be valuable.

[8:57:26 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Thomas adjourned the meeting at 8:57 a.m.