

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 21, 2012  
8:02 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: MAYOR'S EDUCATION SUMMIT by MAYOR DAN SULLIVAN

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

DAN SULLIVAN, Mayor  
Municipality of Anchorage  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Delivered a presentation on the Mayor's Education Summit.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:02:37 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR KEVIN MEYER** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators French, Co-Chair Thomas, Davis, Stevens and Co-Chair Meyer.

**Presentation: Mayor's Education Summit**

[8:03:04 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER introduced Mayor Dan Sullivan who would present the Mayor's Education Summit. He expressed interest in continuing to participate in the process.

8:04:18 AM

DAN SULLIVAN, Mayor, Municipality of Anchorage, explained that the goal of the summit was to look at ways to improve student performance in the Anchorage school district. He relayed that he became interested in the issue the first year he served on the assembly and saw how much money the municipality spent on education. Within a decade the budget doubled to \$800 million, but enrollment and performance stayed about the same. The question that more and more people started asking was how to get better results for that amount of money. He acknowledged that education was not generally the mayor's main purview, but in the last several years the mayors in many states have had it elevated to the top of their list of priorities. He emphasized that there were certainly pockets of excellence in the Anchorage School District as well as throughout the state and country. Everyone was looking for ways to spread that excellence consistently through all schools. One purpose of the summit was to bring in experts to find out how to achieve a higher standard.

MAYOR SULLIVAN listed the cross section of 100 stakeholders that were invited to the summit including civic and community leaders, educators, policy makers, business, and labor. The two-day summit was convened and seven nationally recognized authorities shared their expertise. The participants drew what they could from the presentations and set goals to achieve higher educational performance. Four conclusions were to: 1) increase student performance; 2) ensure every classroom has the best teacher and every school the best principal; 3) offer more choices for students and parents; and 4) find a way to spur the community to support the changes.

8:09:08 AM

MAYOR SULLIVAN played a 10-minute video that discussed the lead-up to the summit and the goal of finding a path to establish Anchorage as a great international city characterized by a superior education system.

8:19:24 AM

MAYOR SULLIVAN said the first result of the summit was the Anchorage School District decision to switch to the common core standards, which sets the bar much higher for student performance. That is step one, because the higher the bar the

higher the students will achieve. He said the word "choice" was mentioned during the video, and it was not about vouchers. Throughout the summit the participants asked for more choice in vocational education. College isn't the right path for every student, but every student needs the skills necessary to go to college.

He said that LIFO is one of the structural elements being eliminated in the effort to attain excellence in the classroom. That concept is that the last teacher hired is the first out when there is a budget constraint. That is a barrier to keeping young, bright, successful teachers.

One of the experts who spoke in the video talked about what happened in Finland about 30 years ago. That country recognized its people as the most valuable resource and made a decision to become the best-educated people on earth. This was accomplished by taking several measures. First, no less than a master teacher is allowed in any classroom in Finland, and they are paid accordingly. Another step eliminated about half the teaching colleges, which made the degree more rigorous. Education is delivered hands-on; students learn geometry by building and chemistry by cooking. He noted that Korea takes an entirely different approach and is almost as successful. This illustrates that there is no one answer to improving standards, but the key is to have master teachers in the classroom and effective leaders.

MAYOR SULLIVAN said that Finland waited 10 years to evaluate this new approach in the international testing arena. When they did participate, Finland scored 10 points higher than the next closest country. For the past 20 years Finland has continued to be number one in the world in education. The U.S. was number one 30 years ago and is now 23rd in the industrialized world in education. He said that was unacceptable and he was trying to see if the Anchorage School District couldn't become the shining example of how to do it right.

[8:26:50 AM](#)

MAYOR SULLIVAN said Phase 2 of the summit was a series of six community discussions at various locations across Anchorage. The public was asked to comment on the result of Phase 1 and to present new ideas. He noted that the results of the survey that participants completed were in the packets. Phase 3 of the summit will be in June. The 100 participants will reconvene and develop an achievable action plan. This may require changes in law and will require collaboration with teachers and unions to

ensure that everyone has the same goal of excellence. He said he was committed to this improvement and he believed that all the stakeholders were as well.

CO-CHAIR MEYER commented that there was a lot of interest in the subject, in Anchorage in particular. He observed that Finland emphasized vocational-technical education, and this committee emphasized that this year as well.

8:30:24 AM

SENATOR STEVENS cautioned that opinions vary with regard to who was the best teacher. Students have different mentors and the best is not always going to be one teacher out of one school.

MAYOR SULLIVAN said he agreed. The goal was to have every teacher in every classroom be a great teacher.

8:31:50 AM

CO-CHAIR THOMAS reviewed the work the committee did this year to improve teacher standards through the university system. He highlighted that the committee looked at education as a continuum. He thanked Mayor Sullivan for elevating the issue, and said he would watch with interest how the initiative moved forward.

MAYOR SULLIVAN said University of Alaska officials participated in the summit and the president expressed concern about the number of incoming students that need remediation. Mayor Sullivan expressed a desire for university officials to look at how to emulate the attributes of successful teaching colleges.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if he anticipated using test scores to evaluate success. He noted that the committee was concerned that the standards for the high school exit were reduced and that testing didn't start early enough to identify issues.

8:36:41 AM

MAYOR SULLIVAN said the statistics were interesting. The U.S. ranks well through third grade and then declined to 23rd in the world.

CO-CHAIR MEYER confirmed that university officials were frustrated that so many students needed remedial instruction. He noted that this committee and President Gamble supported what was initially the Governor's merit scholarship. He noted that Commissioner Hanley chose not to adopt the common core standards that Anchorage and many states adopted because he wanted to

develop a standard that was more reflective of the rural culture. With regard to school choice, he said the issues like transportation could probably be worked out.

MAYOR SULLIVAN commented that ABC schools were the norm 30 years ago and the results show they were still successful. He questioned why that was now an exception school.

[8:40:23 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS asked Mayor Sullivan to provide the names of the experts that participated in the summit. She said she appreciated that he wanted to improve education standards, but her perspective was that as mayor his plate was already full. She also pointed out that the school district had yet to vote on adopting the common core standards.

MAYOR SULLIVAN said he spoke to the board members and understood that they were going to adopt it.

SENATOR DAVIS expressed support for the common core standards. Referring to the video, she stated that charter schools in Alaska were not restricted. Anyone could establish a charter school as long as it was done through the school district and the Board of Education.

MAYOR SULLIVAN said he would contact Dr. Patrick Wolf and ask him to provide the research he used to determine that Alaska had among the most restrictive charter school laws. Referring to an earlier comment about the mayor's role, he opined that the mayor in any city can play a role in setting the bar higher in educational performance by bringing forward good statistics and information so people can make good decisions.

[8:45:14 AM](#)

SENATOR FRENCH thanked Mayor Sullivan for holding the six public meetings on education, and asked what he heard about early childhood development or early childhood education.

MAYOR SULLIVAN said considerable time was devoted to discussing that issue. Finland does not have early schooling but the evidence shows that systems can be successful both with and without early schooling. Every jurisdiction has to establish what works best, but every kindergarten teacher will agree that a child who comes to school with basic skills will find it easier to achieve higher results than a child that comes in with no preparation.

SENATOR FRENCH highlighted that Finland's state-supported system provided quality, free daycare for working parents and after graduation there was no college tuition.

MAYOR SULLIVAN said Finland made a deliberate commitment to be the best-educated people in the world. He said he didn't know if Anchorage could adopt that model and achieve similar results, but it may be worth trying.

SENATOR FRENCH commented on an article by Tom Friedman about Taiwan's commitment to education.

MAYOR SULLIVAN agreed that human resources were the greatest and most sustaining.

[8:50:08 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said he appreciated the four points about improving education, but did not understand how "choice" fit in with the others.

MAYOR SULLIVAN referenced the video and the comment by the head of the Pacific Northern Academy who asked why there weren't more schools like Chugach Optional School if 800 kids were waiting to get into that school. He was pointing out that the demand exceeded the supply for those existing successful programs. There were a lot of choices including vocational, optional, or ABC schools, but there was also a long waiting list to get into those programs. The point was that there were clearly successful programs and there were not enough of them.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS commented on the success of the Finland experiment and his expectation that Fairbanks schools would keep up with Anchorage schools.

MAYOR SULLIVAN reiterated that there was no one model, but that there were elements in the top five or six from which to draw.

CO-CHAIR MEYER thanked Mayor Sullivan and said he looked forward to the June meeting.

[8:56:21 AM](#)

Seeing no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Meyer adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 8:56 a.m.