

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 29, 2013  
8:00 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair  
Senator Mike Dunleavy, Vice Chair  
Senator Charlie Huggins

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Senator Bert Stedman  
Senator Berta Gardner

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

CONFIRMATION HEARING

University of Alaska Board of Regents  
Gloria O'Neill

- CONFIRMATION ADVANCED

DISCUSSION No. 3 ON VOUCHER SYSTEMS

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

See Senate Education minutes for 03/01/13 and 03/22/13

**WITNESS REGISTER**

GLORIA O'NEILL, Appointee  
University of Alaska Board of Regents  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented information related to her confirmation hearing.

PATRICK WOLF, PhD, Professor of Education Reform  
21st Century Endowed Chair in School Choice  
Department of Education Reform  
University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented information related to vouchers.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

8:00:10 AM

**CHAIR GARY STEVENS** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:00 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Huggins and Dunleavy, and Chair Stevens.

**Confirmation Hearing**  
**University of Alaska Board of Regents**

8:00:32 AM

**CHAIR STEVENS** announced that the first order of business would be a confirmation hearing for Gloria O'Neill [to the University of Alaska Board of Regents].

**GLORIA O'NEILL**, Appointee, University of Alaska Board of Regents, introduced herself.

**CHAIR STEVENS** asked Ms. O'Neill to provide information about her reasons for wanting to serve on the Board of Regents.

**MS. O'NEILL** related that she was asked by the governor's office if she would like to serve on the Board. She said she was ecstatic and very humbled because for many years, as president and CEO of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CTIC), she has focused on education issues. She opined that education is the equal opportunity for all Alaskans. She noted the last several years she has focused her energy on education reform. She shared her experience on education issues and how to advance opportunities for rural Alaskans. She related that the Native community needs to be involved in the education process.

She described how she has moved CITC into a position to make an impact in the local school district.

8:03:28 AM

**MS. O'NEILL** related her personal life and education history. She stressed the importance of education in her life. She concluded when she was asked to serve on the Board she replied "absolutely."

**CHAIR STEVENS** requested Ms. O'Neill comment on the impact of low income on students and their desire to go to college.

**MS. O'NEILL** said it is a complex issue. She related that parents who are engaged make a difference in their students' education.

It is important for children to have an adult in their lives for support within the schools. She stressed the importance of counselors in the larger school districts. She noted in rural areas there are fewer opportunities. She suggested leveraging technology to assist the community and parents in becoming involved in education.

[8:07:03 AM](#)

MS. O'NEILL spoke in support of residential schools. She suggested that the education system may need to look differently in the next five years.

CHAIR STEVENS spoke of working to develop Alaskans as Teachers. He requested comments on that issue.

MS. O'NEILL was clear that this is an area that she supports; a focus area that the university needs to prioritize. She spoke of some successes, such as the Alaska Native Education Science and Engineering program, but also challenges in rural Alaska. When looking at what has worked, there is success in investing in a program which teaches Alaskans to become teachers. She stressed the importance of turning around the poor graduation rate.

[8:10:26 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS noted the successes of the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program and director Herb Schroeder's innovative methods.

SENATOR DUNLEAVY moved to forward the appointment of Gloria O'Neill to the University of Alaska Board of Regents for confirmation before a joint session of the legislature. There being no objection, it was so ordered.

[8:11:20 AM](#)

At ease

### **Discussion No. 3 on Voucher Systems**

[8:12:27 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS announced that the final order of business would be a continuation of the discussion on school vouchers.

PATRICK WOLF, PhD, Professor of Education Reform, 21st Century Endowed Chair in School Choice, Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas, presented information related to vouchers. He said he would discuss the effects of private school choice programs. He related that today 33 private school choice

programs are funded by direct government appropriation or tax credits. These schools serve 244,000 children nationally.

He said he has spent the last 14 years studying school choice programs for the federal and state governments and for private foundations. He explained that he has completed longitudinal evaluations of the school choice programs in Milwaukee and in the District of Columbia.

[8:15:17 AM](#)

MR. WOLF described the impacts of the Choice Program on the Milwaukee School District, all of them favorable. He said the value of a private school voucher program is that it is less expensive than the amount spent on public school students and it saves taxpayers money. The Choice Program also produced better outcomes for students.

He reported that researchers use scientific methods to evaluate school choice programs. The positive effects of such programs are similar for both government-financed voucher programs and for tax credit-financed scholarship programs.

[8:16:40 AM](#)

MR. WOLF quoted data from Education Week: "Of the ten gold standard experimental evaluations of voucher and voucher-type programs, nine have reported achievement gains from the voucher programs for all or some subgroups of participating students."

He related that in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, after three years, students who used the federally sponsored vouchers gained an additional four-and-a-half months of learning compared to students in the control group. The D.C. students also graduated at much higher rates, with a 30 percent gain in the graduation rate.

He discussed the Florida Statewide Tax Credit Scholarship program which showed a significant increase in reading scores. He concluded that in Milwaukee, D.C., and Florida, there were similar findings regarding reading scores. He pointed out that public schools deliver better educational results for their students when they face competition from private school choice. He related that private school choice programs serve highly disadvantaged students. Of the 33 voucher and tax credit programs, 19 serve lower income families, six are limited to students in underperforming public schools, and two programs are targeted to both. Ten voucher programs are limited to students with disabilities.

[8:19:29 AM](#)

MR. WOLF shared information about the D.C. voucher program which began in 2004. Over 99 percent of the students were African-American or Hispanic-American with the average annual family income of just over \$17,000. He said that 17 percent of the students had a diagnosed disability. The students served by this federal school choice program were highly disadvantaged.

He reported at the start of the Milwaukee study in 2006, students in the program were matched with the lower performing students in the public schools. He quoted John Witty as saying, "The evidence is overwhelming that voucher programs do not cream the best and the brightest kids. In fact, it is the opposite. They attract more disadvantaged students out of the public schools."

He maintained that vouchers programs often improve racial integration, political tolerance, and volunteerism. He said research has confirmed that students and adults volunteer at higher rates if they have exercised private school choice.

MR. WOLF provided statistics about parent satisfaction with school choice. Every study shows that parents are much happier with their child's school if they played a role in choosing it. In the D.C. program, 80 percent of parents graded their child's school with an A or a B, compared to 50 percent of parents in the control group.

He made concluding comments about the benefits of private school choice programs. He quoted a parent in a D.C. voucher program explaining why the program was important to her.

[8:22:48 AM](#)

MR. WOLF offered to answer questions.

CHAIR STEVENS asked Mr. Wolf to describe the types of schools he works with.

MR. WOLF replied that the majority of private school choice schools are religious schools. In D.C. about 60 percent of the students attended Catholic schools. In Milwaukee about 45 percent attended Catholic schools and about 30 percent attended Lutheran schools. In Milwaukee there are several Jewish, Islamic, and Evangelical schools. There are also some secular private schools.

[8:24:25 AM](#)

SENATOR DUNLEAVY inquired if schools in New England were the first voucher schools.

MR. WOLF replied that there is some disagreement as to whether they are private or voucher schools. Some rural communities never established public schools in Maine and Vermont. The state decided to pay the tuition for students in those areas. The schools looks like voucher schools, but they are run by the state. He said he liked that there are a variety of models.

SENATOR DUNLEAVY noted Alaska is in the process of trying to change the constitution to allow for public money to be used for private or religious schools. He mentioned contradictory studies and how much they vary, pro and con, regarding vouchers.

MR. WOLF opined that some programs do a selective reading of the literature. He noted he presents all results of all studies in his presentations. Sometime the samples are too small to get a clear significant impact of a program. Many critics seize the one result that was not significant and then characterize the study as such. He deemed that not fair.

He pointed out that all four studies show that voucher kids graduate at a higher rate.

[8:29:21 AM](#)

SENATOR DUNLEAVY spoke of NEA's resistance to school choice and their claim that such an approach will seriously negatively impact public education and will cost taxpayers more money. NEA claims there is no federal protection in terms of discrimination and that some schools are teaching religion. He opined that the argument boils down to money and religion.

MR. WOLF commented that when a private school choice program is implemented there is only a small exodus to the new program. About 3 to 5 percent of eligible students participate the first year. The financial impact depends on how the program is designed. If the money follows the student, the public school gets less money. The purpose of the funding is the education of the student, so the money going with the student is legitimate. He said most parents like that religious education is included in the curriculum in order to help with the child's formation. Most parents don't care which kind of religion is associated with the school. The voucher schools accommodate kids with diverse backgrounds.

MR. WOLF spoke to the legality of vouchers. Because parents are deciding where the resources are going, it does not represent a government endorsement of religion. He emphasized that when public schools face competition, they tend to improve their performance and student test scores go up.

[8:34:53 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS requested more information about how all schools improve with competition from private schools.

MR. WOLF said the research is not sufficiently advanced to ensure that is so. He said there are general trends, such as public schools tend to communicate more effectively with parents and clarify what their school provides. This has a positive effect on school achievement and on parental involvement. These are modest improvements. He concluded that private school competition causes schools to be more outward looking.

[8:37:08 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS inquired about socio-economic status as it relates to school choice in high school and in college.

MR. WOLF shared his uncertainty about the inequity surrounding Pell Grants for disadvantaged students and vouchers for K-12 students. He stressed that disadvantaged students benefit most from private schools.

SENATOR HUGGINS provided an example of previous resistance to cyber schools, charter schools, and correspondence schools, which now are popular. Parents are now promoting those programs. He asked if Mr. Wolf is seeing the same thing.

MR. WOLF described the Florida Virtual Academy, the largest private school participating in a tax credit scholarship program. He said, in general, a policy infrastructure that allows school choice is the future of education. It is a blend of virtual learning and alternative teaching methods, such as coaching students. He said that states can put the policy structure in place now in order to accommodate the transition to blended learning.

[8:42:35 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS referred to data that reflected that Alaska received a C grade for education in a poll of Alaskans. He wondered why school choice evolved in Milwaukee and D.C.

MR. WOLF said key leaders of those communities demanded it. In Milwaukee, Pauley Williams worked with Governor Tommy Thompson and Republican leadership to craft the first urban school voucher program. In D.C., the Republican Congress proposed a school voucher program and Mayor Anthony Williams and the superintendent promoted it. He pointed out that most initiatives are bi-partisan and driven by a coalition.

[8:45:13 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS described Alaska's low population and inquired how school choice applies to rural districts, of which Alaska has many. He said rural students are having difficulties on national tests.

MR. WOLF reported that he visited Anchorage in 2012. He agreed that Alaska is unique. He thought private school choice would have the most impact in urban areas such as Juneau, Anchorage, and Fairbanks. He understood that existing private schools are under-enrolled. The most immediate effect would be felt in urban areas. Rural areas are not impossible to incorporate into school choice by the use of residential schools or hybrid and virtual schools.

[8:48:45 AM](#)

SENATOR DUNLEAVY noted he is a prime sponsor on SJR 9, a very controversial bill. He said in Alaska there is a home-school correspondence program, which he described as a voucher to purchase materials and equipment. He wished to allow children to integrate into private schools for classes. He asked if there is a similar model in the Lower 48.

MR. WOLF said very few states provide financing for home schooling. He said this type of customizing of education is the direction of the future. Private school choice helps support that customization of education. Parents like to have their children socialize, so a hybrid model would be very attractive.

SENATOR DUNLEAVY said opponents paint a negative picture of school choice. He asked if there is any evidence of this.

[8:53:11 AM](#)

MR. WOLF said he has seen bad public schools in urban settings have to close due to public charter schools in D.C. and in Milwaukee. He opined that the students in public schools win by moving to better schools. He said he did not consider that a disaster.

CHAIR STEVENS said it was a very informative presentation. He thanked the presenter.

MR. WOLF related his excitement about what is happening in Alaska. He listed states that are also interested in making private school choice available: Arkansas, Tennessee, Georgia, Minnesota, and Montana.

[8:55:53 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Committee at 8:55 a.m.