

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 9, 2014
8:00 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair
Senator Charlie Huggins
Senator Berta Gardner

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Mike Dunleavy, Vice Chair
Senator Bert Stedman

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS ACHIEVING ACADEMIC
EXCELLENCE IN HIGH SCHOOL

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: EARLY LEARNING TODAY

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JENNIFER HARRISON, Executive Director
Eastern Aleutian Tribes
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on Alaska Native Students Achieving Academic Excellence in High School.

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director
Best Beginnings
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on Early Learning Today.

KRISTEN RAMSTAD, Director
Head Start - RurAl CAP

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on Early Learning Today.

ESTRELLA LEE, Manager

Parents as Teachers

RurAl CAP

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on Early Learning Today.

STEPHANIE BERGLUND, CEO

thread

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on Early Learning Today.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:00:37 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 Gardner and Chair Stedman.

PRESENTATION: ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS ACHIEVING ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE IN HIGH SCHOOL

[8:01:12 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS announced a presentation on Alaska Native Students Achieving Academic Excellence in High School.

[8:01:21 AM](#)

JENNIFER HARRISON, Executive Director, Eastern Aleutian Tribes, Anchorage, Alaska, presented information on Alaska Native Students Achieving Academic Excellence in High School. She shared that the material was part of her contract for her Master's in Public Administration. She began with a statement that there is a misleading public perception that Alaska Native students in small high schools are performing poorly. Due to the decline in state income from oil development, policymakers are looking for ways to cut education expenses. During the legislative session last year there were concerns that various options would be proposed like regional boarding schools or closing schools with less than 20 students.

MS. HARRISON reported that her research questions were, "Are there high schools where Alaska Native students are achieving

academic excellence. If so, are there community and school factors that positively affect Alaska Native students' academic performance." She said her client is First Alaskans Institute, which helps to develop the capacity of Alaska Native people in their communities to meet the social, economic, and educational challenges of the future.

She shared the background of traditional instruction methods of Alaska Natives, Russian bi-lingual schools, religious boarding schools, and lawsuits related to state-operated school systems, such as Kivalina. She said regional educational attendance areas were set up in 1974.

[8:04:46 AM](#)

MS. HARRISON addressed positive deviance, a possible approach when a concrete problem meets the following criteria: the problem requires behavioral and/or social change, when other solutions have not worked, and when positive deviance are thought to exist. She noted a few communities had already solved the problem. She gave examples of when to consider the approach.

She shared the results of her positive deviance research in 2009-2010 using standards-based assessment scores in 235 high schools. It uncovered positive deviance high schools where 15 percent to 46 percent of Alaska Native students were achieving advanced proficiency in reading, writing, math, and science. Those results answered whether there were schools where Alaska Native students were achieving academic excellence.

She showed a map where the top 20 percent of high schools were located.

MS. HARRISON said that next she compared differences in community and school factors between the positive deviant high schools and the bottom 20 percent. She concluded that there was not a statistically significant relationship between academic performance and school factors.

She said she found that there were statistically significant school factors, such as graduation rate, student survey return rate, and type of school district. The higher the graduation rate, the higher the academic scores; the higher the student return rate, the higher the academic scores; borough school districts had higher academic scores.

[8:08:25 AM](#)

She found that there was not a statistically significant relationship between higher academic scores and community factors: size, having local police, parent survey return rate, and voter participation rate. However, statistically significant community factors included demographics and language. The lower the percentage of Alaska Native students in a high school, the higher the academic scores. The higher percentages of community members with a high school diploma or higher degree, the higher the academic scores. The lower the percentage of community members speaking an Alaska Native language, the higher the scores, and the higher the percentage of students without limited English proficiency, the higher the scores.

SENATOR GARDNER asked if a community with a lower percentage of Alaska Native speakers had a higher performance.

MS. HARRISON said yes.

SENATOR GARDNER thought that was counter to what is expected.

SENATOR GARDNER asked if higher scores existed when the numbers of Alaska Native students in a school was high or low.

MS. HARRISON said low.

SENATOR GARDNER said when there is a high percentage of Bachelor degrees in a community, Alaska Native students do better.

MS. HARRISON agreed.

SENATOR GARDNER asked if the community has a high percentage of people with a high school diploma or GED, students do better.

MS. HARRISON said yes.

SENATOR GARDNER concluded that in the demographics, high correlates with high; under language, low correlates with high.

MS. HARRISON said correct.

CHAIR STEVENS announced the arrival of Senator Huggins.

[8:11:33 AM](#)

MS. HARRISON continued to discuss future research/policy options: examine the student survey return rate.

SENATOR GARDNER noted that parental permission is required before an at-risk behavior survey can be given.

MS. HARRISON said this is not an at-risk survey - it is about school perspective.

She continued to say future research might focus on rural education attendance area (REAA) school districts vs borough districts, increase science test scores, encourage GED completion and university distance education, and examine further the positive deviance approach - learn from the people.

[8:14:29 AM](#)

She addressed the power of positive deviance: learn from the people, plan with the people, begin with what they have, build on what they know, and use the best leaders.

She shared recommendations: hold another positive deviance dialogue, provide more academic data, sponsor field trips, and research viable and sustainable solutions. She concluded that what matters most is viable and sustainable solutions.

[8:16:22 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS described the organized borough he works in. He inquired if an advisory committee would be warranted in the smaller communities. He asked what Nanwalek does.

MS. HARRISON said Nanwalek has a strong language program, self-determination, and is a community that values education.

She noted positive deviance is a new, world-wide theory and has been used in health fields.

CHAIR STEVENS said more parent involvement is important.

MS. HARRISON described the elementary school in Argentina where teachers went to parents to show them how school would assist with farm skills.

[8:20:10 AM](#)

SENATOR GARDNER asked about sponsoring field trips.

MS. HARRISON explained that it is hard to see behavioral differences without visiting a community. The suggestion of field trips is intended for teachers and parents to see the top 20 percent of high schools.

[8:21:04 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS talked about the value of farmers in Iowa. He encouraged researchers to look at what is working in Mt. Edgecumbe, Nome, Kotzebue, and Barrow.

CHAIR STEVENS noted that many were unhappy with the boarding schools in the 60's and 70's. He agreed with the idea of involving parents. He requested comments on past boarding school success.

MS. HARRISON commented on experiences with past boarding schools regarding negative social impacts.

[8:27:11 AM](#)

SENATOR GARDNER said boarding schools students do well if their parents are involved.

MS. HARRISON said, statistically, students of parents who have graduated from high school do well.

CHAIR STEVENS said he had thought Native language immersion schools did well, such as the one in Bethel. He asked if that is true.

MS. HARRISON said it wasn't schools that had Native language classes, it was schools in communities with a higher number of Native speakers that did not do well. She thought there was a lot of parent involvement in the Bethel school.

SENATOR HUGGINS said colleges are boarding schools. He questioned whether learning a Native language is a factor in success. He used Russian as an example.

[8:32:57 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS wished to learn more about Native language success rates. He asked about the suggestion to hold dialogues with First Alaskans.

MS. HARRISON explained that First Alaskans Institute was looking at the boarding school concept to determine whether to support it or not. She said in her research she found that boarding schools had high test scores, but not advanced proficiency scores. The dialogue might be an extra day at a statewide conference. First Alaskans Institute might be interested in facilitating such a dialogue.

CHAIR STEVENS suggested encouraging parental involvement, such as advisory committees. He thanked Ms. Harrison for her presentation.

[8:36:28 AM](#)

At ease

PRESENTATION: EARLY LEARNING TODAY

[8:37:59 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS announced a presentation on Early Learning Today.

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director, Best Beginnings, Anchorage, Alaska, presented information on Early Learning Today. She began with a video on young children and their families. She thanked the committee for supporting programs for young children.

She began by discussing Best Beginnings and their local and national partners. She said that by age 4, a child's experience with words differs depending on the type of family they come from. Children from professional families have heard 30 million more words than children from poor families have. She stressed the importance of parent interaction with their children.

[8:43:49 AM](#)

She described a program called "Words Count." She shared ways the message is delivered to parents, such as PSA's, social media, videos, promotional items, movies, and community activities. She held up an "Every Day" refrigerator magnet, used to remind parents to interact with their children frequently.

[8:45:47 AM](#)

She shared ideas to help children understand the value of words; an outdoor story track, playing, singing, websites, and tablets as ways to interact with children.

She showed a map of areas where there are Early Childhood Partnerships and Imagination Libraries in Alaska. The goal is to engage families with helping their children.

She concluded that these conversations should continue into the future.

[8:51:19 AM](#)

KRISTEN RAMSTAD, Director, Head Start, Rural CAP, Anchorage, Alaska, presented information on Early Learning Today. She

shared statistics about the total number of children served by Head Start.

She addressed results from Head Start which will be out this summer. The goal is to prepare children for success and to be healthier. Children in Head Start are up to date on their Well Child exams and have been treated for chronic medical conditions.

She said an accomplishment is that 486 homeless children were served and many families acquired housing.

She discussed the future of Head Start. She related the effects of sequestration and the journey to restoration after the cuts. About \$1.6 million has been potentially restored and there is an increase in funding for a 1.3 percent cost-of-living adjustment.

[8:57:51 AM](#)

She addressed future opportunities for Head Start in forming stronger partnerships, such as with the Native Consortium, Tobacco Free, Childhood Obesity, with school districts, and with UAA nursing students to hold physical examinations.

She spoke of federal funds for Early Head Start and Partnerships for quality child care.

[9:00:37 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked how many children in Alaska are homeless.

MS. RAMSTAD said she could speak for Rural CAP. There are different kinds of "homeless," such as multiple families in one house, or in hotels and shelters. She said they are partnering with school district's Children in Transition. She noted it's not just an urban problem.

CHAIR STEVENS requested comments on Native student success.

MS. RAMSTAD stressed that parent involvement is key. There are attendance issues in certain areas of Head Start, which depends on parent involvement.

MS. HARRISON added that for kindergarten developmental profiles, family engagement is key.

CHAIR STEVENS noted poverty's role in school success.

MS. HARRISON agreed poverty is an incredible deterrent to children's success.

[9:05:39 AM](#)

ESTRELLA LEE, Manager, Parents as Teachers, RurAl CAP, Anchorage, Alaska, presented information on Early Learning Today. Ms. Lee shared a story about children in a grocery store and the importance of a child's need to be heard. Parents as Teachers (PAT) helps parents to learn, grow, and develop to reach their full potential. She shared areas where the program exists.

She related excerpts from parents who voiced appreciation for Parents as Teachers. She shared goals of the program.

She described the PAT approach: early detection and screening, supported development, and school readiness.

She shared statistics of PAT, its current enrollment, the numbers of children served, and the waitlist. She showed photos of children being served.

[9:15:15 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked about SPROUT.

MS. LEE said it is a program local to Homer. PAT is a nationally evidence-based model.

MS. HARRISON added that SPROUT is a partner with Best Beginnings.

[9:16:39 AM](#)

STEPHANIE BERGLUND, CEO, thread, Anchorage, Alaska, presented information about Early Learning Today. She shared that thread connects early care and education to Alaska by linking families with early care and education.

She shared how many children are in early care and education: 60,000 children under 6 participate, but there are less than 23 licensed spaces in child care, Head Start, and in preschools.

She addressed access, affordability, and quality of child care. Childcare assistance is one resource supporting access to child care. Currently, there are 4,200 children who receive a subsidy each month for care. Economic challenges transcend all working families. She noted the average rate for infant and toddler care

is between \$500 and \$800 a month and in some areas it can be \$1,000.

She said research indicates the single biggest factor in the quality of a program and in improving child outcomes is the teacher. Programs aim to provide quality care and education, but face challenges. Early educators are not treated as professionals and staff turnover is 46 percent.

[9:22:19 AM](#)

She said something big is already here. She thanked legislators for continuing support. She mentioned two programs - ROOTS, incentives and supports for higher teacher wages tied to increased expectations for training and ongoing professional development, and the Quality Reading and Improvement System.

She concluded that the early learning community is ready for more big things to come.

[9:24:03 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked how children are protected from child sexual abuse.

MS. BERGLUND said training in that area is limited due to a low-skilled, entry-level workforce and inadequate funds. She said thread has are strong partnerships with Office of Children's Services and others.

CHAIR STEVENS asked how thread is related to the other programs.

MS. BERGLUND said thread is the child care resource and referral network and focuses on the workforce; early care and education teachers and programs. There are about 7,500 early educators working across the state and 600 licensed child care programs. It also provides families with information about child care facilities. Alaska is one of seven states that does not have quality standards defined for child care programs. Thread works to help parents determine what child care should look like.

[9:27:34 AM](#)

MS. HARRISON added that, as of this month, there have been 211,352 Imagination library books delivered to children.

SENATOR GARDNER asked about the 77 percent of children in licensed care who receive a subsidy. She said that the subsidy must go to licensed care facility and not to a relative.

MS. BERGLUND said that is correct. She added that currently in Alaska a family can qualify for a subsidy and have a relative care for their child. The other 23 percent receive family subsidies. The total is 4,200 children who receive a subsidy for care each month. She concluded that eligibility is set very low and thread is lobbying that rates reflect current market rates.

SENATOR GARDNER asked if there are families that qualify for a subsidy, but can't get into a facility.

MS. BERGLUND thought that was the case because child care facilities are only meeting 50 percent of the needs.

MS. HARRISON thanked the committee.

CHAIR STEVENS thanked the presenters. He said they would follow up on this topic over the interim.

[9:31:07 AM](#)

There being nothing further to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 9:31 a.m.