

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 17, 2015

8:04 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Wes Keller, Chair  
Representative Liz Vazquez, Vice Chair  
Representative Jim Colver  
Representative Paul Seaton  
Representative David Talerico  
Representative Harriet Drummond

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins

**OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT**

Senator Mike Dunleavy  
Representative Lori Reinbold

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

CONFIRMATION(S):

Board of Education and Early Development

John Harmon - Palmer

CONFIRMATION(S) ADVANCED

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

JOHN HARMON, Appointee  
Palmer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as appointee to the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, discussed his qualifications and answered questions.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

8:04:07 AM

**CHAIR WES KELLER** called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:04 a.m. Representatives Seaton, Vazquez, Drummond, Talerico and Keller were present at the call to order. Representative Colver arrived as the meeting was in progress. Representative Lora Reinbold and Senator Mike Dunleavy were also in attendance.

**CONFIRMATION(S): BOARD OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT**

8:04:19 AM

CHAIR KELLER brought before the committee the appointment of John Harmon to the position of the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development. He advised the committee that its job is to review Mr. Harmon's credentials and pass his application to the joint session of the House and Senate for consideration. He advised that public testimony will not be taken and the burden is on the committee to ask whatever questions members deem are appropriate and should be on the record. He further advised that he spoke with Mr. Harmon, who is abreast of the current issues facing education.

8:05:18 AM

JOHN HARMON, as appointee to the position of the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, said he is a strong supporter of education, and is the principal of Lumen Christi High School in Anchorage. He paraphrased the following statement [original punctuation provided]:

I believe that as Alaskans we have the responsibility to develop our students socially, intellectually, and physically. If appointed to the Alaska school board I would work for continued flexibility in education, innovation, improved student learning, and implementation of technology to prepare our students for today's world. As you know, Alaska is facing many budget challenges, I consider myself a problem solver and an innovator. We should consider this time in Alaska's history an opportunity to work with the school districts throughout the state and with the legislature to find long-term solutions for funding education. If we accomplish this, we have accomplished a great deal. I really do want to support ... again, our students, the hard working

teachers, the administrators, and staff dedicated to Alaska education.

[8:07:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ disclosed that her daughter attends the Lumen Christi High School in Anchorage, and she did not know Mr. Harmon had been nominated until his name was read across the floor Wednesday morning.

CHAIR KELLER advised her vote is still required in moving Mr. Harmon's credentials to the joint session of the House and Senate.

[8:07:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked whether he has a conflict implementing Alaska laws and the Alaska State Constitution with regard to the separation of private and religious schools from public schools.

MR. HARMON replied that he supports the Alaska State Constitution and that this position does not specifically deal with that issue. He referred to the Alaska State Constitution, Article VII, Section 1, which read:

§ 1. Public Education

The legislature shall by general law establish and maintain a system of public schools open to all children of the State, and may provide for other public educational institutions. Schools and institutions so established shall be free from sectarian control. No money shall be paid from public funds for the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institution.

MR. HARMON stated it ensures the quality standards based instruction to approve academics achievement for all students, which includes public, private, and home schools. He related that his focus would be to uphold the Alaska State Constitution and state laws.

[8:08:52 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER requested Mr. Harmon's opinion on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law and its successor, as it relates to federal mandates for education in Alaska and the country.

MR. HARMON stated he does not support federal mandates and believes, as it relates to education, the best people to determine the education of Alaska's students are the parents, local communities, and local school boards. He said he does not support the Common Core or federal mandates. Although, he said, he is optimistically encouraged about the new legislation in that it offers more freedom to the states and local administrators, but sometimes the devil is in the details and it is important to review how that law will be promulgated.

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER referred to student assessments, and advised there are a number of bills within the legislature rolling back certain mandated assessments, and recently the school districts instituted an online statewide assessment. He asked Mr. Harmon's opinion regarding the value of these assessments, whether too many are required, how they relate to student learning, how they are affecting class time, and his general philosophical ideas.

MR. HARMON responded that as a principal, assessments are important as there must be student standards, and knowing where students stand in their studies in moving forward. However, assessments are a small data point as it relates to understanding whether or not a child is learning because more is involved than facts and figures. He expressed pride in the efforts put forth by teachers and their ability to assess a class versus a standardized test. He remarked that teachers are trained, and in working with the student's parents, offer better assessments. He said that part of college bound students is taking assessment exams, such as the SAT and ACT, and summarized that assessments are important, as are standards, but Alaska must continue to evaluate whether they are actually being effective and understand whether Alaska's children are learning and growing.

[8:13:06 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER asked whether the SAT, ACT, and WorkKeys exam should be mandated as a graduation requirement.

MR. HARMON answered he does not believe they should be mandated, and within his position at Lumen Christi High School made the decision not to mandate. He said not all students want to go to

college and there may be other assessments or programs more appropriate for students. He expressed that he supports career and technical education in meeting the needs of communities, and his school has expanded in the areas of welding and medical support services. In order for students to achieve those roles, SATs are not necessary, he opined.

[8:14:19 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER asked whether Mr. Harmon is familiar with the WorkKeys exam.

MR. HARMON responded that his exposure to WorkKeys is not to the level of the ACT and SAT, and at this point would say he is not familiar with the WorkKeys exam.

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER queried whether Alaska is testing students at the correct level.

MR. HARMON replied that schools do want to test students to determine where they are and collect data points, but there is more to education than a test result. He explained that Alaska's education system is developing students' minds and developing them to serve in the community for which is a social aspect to education. He further explained that with regard to sports and team work there is a physical aspect to education that testing hardly touches. He opined that education must continue to determine whether something is useful or not.

[8:15:52 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND referred to his comment "quality standards based instruction for public, private, and home schools." She pointed out that the Board of Education and Early Development does not supervise private schools.

MR. HARMON responded he is aware that the state statute exempts private schools and explained that the Alaska State Constitution reads that it is important for education and early development to address the needs of all students in the State of Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked whether there is a school based board or a community based board governing the Lumen Christi High School

MR. HARMON advised that the school setup is a board of limited jurisdiction that sets policy, the Parish Pastor is responsible

under canon law for the administration of the school, it is affiliated with the Catholic Archdiocese of Anchorage who also gives guidance, and his responsibilities are the day-to-day operations of the school.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND requested the funding base as to whether the Catholic Archdiocese of Anchorage supports it, or whether it is entirely tuition-based.

MR. HARMON answered that the funding comes from multiple sources and tuition is approximately 50 percent of the funding, the parish supports a large majority of the education of which approximately 60 percent of the students are Catholic, there are a number of fund raisers throughout the year, and the Archdiocese contributes a limited amount of money.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked the cost per student at Lumen Christi High School from all sources as he will be exposed to quite a bit of funding issues as a member of the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development.

MR. HARMON stated it is approximately \$12,000 per student of which is increasing, and tuition covers approximately half of that amount.

[8:18:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER referred to teacher evaluations and advised that Alaska is rolling out a new process across the state wherein teacher job performance evaluation is tied to student assessments, and asked Mr. Harmon's understanding of those regulations.

MR. HARMON indicated that it is becoming a more important component, but student performance as it relates to tests is one data point, and there are so many data points in reviewing teachers. He advised Lumen Christi High School is accredited through Advanced Education, and as part of that process he does not look merely at the results of test scores, but deeper.

[8:20:17 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER questioned whether the state is ready to implement the same policy across Alaska.

MR. HARMON deferred the question pending further study with the people closer to that issue in the various schools and school

districts. He pointed out strengths he brings to the table in that he is a strong collaborator, researches information, listens to other peoples' thoughts relating to certain initiatives and agendas, has served on a board with Dr. Deana Paramo, and supports teachers.

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER asked how Mr. Harmon would take into consideration and vote on the concerns of school districts, principals, and teachers on implementation of the process if the educators expressed that "we were ready for this process, and that it would unfairly evaluate their job performance because the process isn't ready and hasn't been ground tested."

MR. HARMON responded that it is difficult to answer before he actually understands the depth and level of these concerns.

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER questioned how Mr. Harmon would listen to concerns that the model has not been effectively created and that it will affect the ability to teach, and instead provide something that works rather than forcing another mandate.

[8:23:17 AM](#)

CHAIR KELLER interjected that hypothetical questions are okay, but to not insist.

MR. HARMON answered that he has the same issues and challenges as other schools across the state in that he has to determine where the issues come down and whether they make sense. He agreed that added expectations cannot continue when education is already challenged in so many way that do not make sense. He offered that his private high school also has unfunded mandates in that he must implement safe and safer training, and background checks, and the Archdiocese of Anchorage advised that he must figure out how to pay for them, and he does.

[8:25:17 AM](#)

MR. HARMON, in response to Representative Vazquez, stated he was born in Pennsylvania and his family moved to Alaska in the 1970s, and he graduated from Palmer High School in the 1980s. He advised he left the state to practice law, always returning because his family lived here, and permanently returned to Alaska approximately five years ago. He stated that the law and education are two of his passions and was the President at Charter College and also taught classes. He noted concerns that he does not have teaching experience, but during the last couple

of years he taught a class and plans to teach an English class. He expressed it is important that administrators understand the challenges in the classroom.

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ requested the occupation of his brother.

MR. HARMON advised that his brother and sister-in-law work for the Anchorage School District in Eagle River, and his sister home schools her four children. He described himself as a supporter of education for Alaskans and meeting their needs to make this a better community.

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ asked whether Mr. Harmon has a Master's in education.

MR. HARMON said he does, and reviewed his degrees.

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ noted there has been criticism in that he does not have experience in a large school district.

MR. HARMON stated that when he substitute-taught in Palmer it was a much larger school system, and also at Charter College. He admitted it may be a weakness that he hasn't worked in the public sector, but believes he has an understanding of its issues. He remarked that being in a small school setting offers benefits because as an administrator he is working with various issues such as, teacher burnout. He stated that people do not understand how important dedicated teachers are to education, and how much time it takes to prepare for a class and be a good teacher.

[8:29:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON noted that over the last ten years, within this committee, there have been a number of accountability initiatives in ascertaining educational progress. He offered that across school districts in the state the graduation rate has increased from 10-20 percent, and in looking back at the schools in Alaska, asked to what that might be attributed.

MR. HARMON answered that he has not had time to research the data, but there are a number of reasons as education goes back to the classroom and teachers. Therefore, if Alaska has good teachers working with students it improves student learning which is how success is achieved. Innovation is important and, he advised, he recently had an accreditation visit from Advanced Ed which is much more student focused.

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON recalled that ten years ago there was an inability to track why students were not graduating, and accountability was an issue. He explained that a state longitudinal data base was put in place in order to track students' progress, and asked whether the state can arrive at conclusions without knowing the path and progress of students. He questioned what initiatives could be implemented on a statewide basis to improve education.

MR. HARMON pointed out that innovation in education is very important and there is value in data and data points. Personally, he advised, he values people's privacy and collecting certain relevant data. He said that sometimes there can be too much data, a data dump, which is not at all valuable. To the extent it can be determined what is important to have as it relates to measurements is good information as a tool. With regard to the question of how schools can be successful, innovation is important, he said. For example, financially it does not make sense for him to run a class when he has less than five students but rather to possibly partner with another school and bring them together, or use interactive classrooms. He offered that innovation saved his school a substantial amount of money by partnering with other schools and states, and improved student results.

[8:35:27 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE TALERICO assumed Mr. Harmon's school is a member of the National Catholic Education Association (NCA), and asked whether the curriculum is run under a national program, how much local control to have in the state's schools, and to offer his opinion on curriculums.

MR. HARMON replied that his school is a member of the NCA, which has recommended a Catholic Common Core curriculum but has left the decision up to the local Archdiocese. He advised that when he first started at the school, the Alaska Conference of Bishops asked the Alaska Catholic high school principals whether they supported the Common Core Initiative. He expressed his opinion against adopting the Common Core curriculum, of which Lumen Christi has not adopted. He noted that to the extent Lumen Christi is a member of an organization, it offers recommendations and his school decides what is best for its students.

REPRESENTATIVE TALERICO asked what the appointee would like to accomplish if appointed to this position.

MR. HARMON responded in that Alaska is facing budget challenges and with his background and experience in the law, running a college, and running a high school, a solution for educational sustainability in Alaska. An innovative approach is to have an understanding from the various stakeholders and work together to that end, and he would like to help accomplish that endeavor. Also, he said, to prepare students for life, whether college, technical, or community involvement and offer broad education options to meet those needs. An example, he stated, was a student recently asking about pilot training, and the approach taken assisted the student in attaining his goal.

[8:40:37 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON noted that Mr. Harmon had general disagreement with federal mandates, ESEA, and NCLB, and had expressed concern regarding the funding situation. He asked what the balance would be as a school board member in rejecting the requirements of federal law, thereby denying attached federal funding.

MR. HARMON represented that in many ways Representative Seaton's question is hypothetical as there will continue to be unfunded mandates and offered that the litmus test is in the best interests of Alaskan families and students. He said with the teachers at Lumen Christi High School, if they believe he is making a policy decision or implementing something not in the best interests of the students, let him know. He offered that with regard to the repeal of the Blaine Amendment, the issue should be left to the legislators and voters, not the state school board. With regard to funding, he expressed, he is always cautious when the government offers the private sector funds because it comes with a contingency.

[Technical difficulties.]

[8:44:21 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:44 a.m. to 8:47 a.m.

[8:47:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON said he appreciates Mr. Harmon's response regarding private funding coming from a public source, but he is

interested in the public funding that comes from the federal government. Specifically, he asked, whether there are any decisions and mandates that have come forward from the federal government that Mr. Harmon would have said "No, we will not do that and we will not take ... therefore, the federal funds."

MR. HARMON said he is not as familiar as he should be to comment on that question because he does not know the exact funding of the mandates and how they are coming through.

[8:48:43 AM](#)

CHAIR KELLER said he commends Representative Seaton for asking the question because it is a question the legislature struggles with in determining funding for education. The bottom line is that the school board takes the brunt of making those decisions, he opined.

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON offered that some of those go to state longitudinal databases, the teacher evaluations and incorporating performance are part of the requirements with federal funding.

MR. HARMON offered that he would have to look in more detail, but he would perform a cost benefits analysis as is done in the private sector to operate in the black.

[8:50:25 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER remarked that Mr. Harmon has a full resume for his professional background and noted that often the Department of Education and Early Development (EED) informs districts, and this committee, that certain state regulations must be implemented for assessments in response to federal laws and regulations. He asked, with Mr. Harmon's legal background whether he will help the legislature reform, roll back, and analysis the state and federal mandates.

[Technical difficulties.]

[8:51:17 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:51 to 8:54 a.m.

[8:54:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER reiterated whether Mr. Harmon would apply his legal background to critically reform education, as the legislature has been told it must implement certain issues without a thorough vetting on what state's rights are, and whether the mandates must be followed. He asked whether Mr. Harmon would help the legislature reform education and be critical of issues put in front of him as it relates to these mandates, thereby, increasing student learning.

MR. HARMON replied he would apply his legal background to detail reviews of the mandates, and also apply his practical aspect in having worked in administration with many challenging issues, his own unfunded mandates, balancing budgets, and working with teachers. He opined the ultimate goal is to make Alaska a better place and to educate its students.

CHAIR KELLER advised the committee to prioritize its questions.

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER referred to Common Core and the Catholic Common Core curriculum, and asked whether that is the same as the Gates Foundation Common Core being promulgated in the public schools.

MR. HARMON clarified there is the Common Core and also a Catholic Common Core which is a modified version of that, but Lumen Christi Catholic High School, and himself, do not subscribe to either of those. He reiterated that it is overreach and unnecessary for student learning and achievement and the state is better off making its own decisions on how to educate Alaskan students. Those two "animals" are out there and he is not supportive, but is supportive of standards in education and ascertaining that students are learning and progressing, he said. He reminded the committee that he goes back to the teachers who perform excellent assessments as they are in the classroom.

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER requested a written response [regarding Common Core].

[8:59:21 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked the name of the board he served on with Dr. Deanna Paramo.

MR. HARMON replied "The Alaska Family Services Board" in Palmer.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND offered that the state's public school principals play a huge role in the evaluation of teachers, and asked whether as Lumen Christi High School's principal, he performs the evaluations himself, or whether it is a team and who is part of that team.

MR. HARMON explained there is a multi-prong approach for teacher evaluations which includes, "with the evaluation the department chairs, sit in coach collaborate and do evaluations on the teachers," he performs the formal evaluations and is also present with the students, present in the classroom, even if it is a class he is not teaching. He said in addition, he receives feedback from parents, students, and many data points the school uses in evaluating the effectiveness of teachers, as well as the learning of the students.

MR. HARMON responded to Representative Drummond that he does spend time in the classrooms observing teachers.

[9:01:16 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ asked whether he had ever initiated collaboration with the Anchorage School District on behalf of students.

MR. HARMON answered yes, in that it is important to understand the needs of his students. A small private school cannot always meet the needs of its students, and if they have special needs and the school does not have the resources, he recommends those students over to the resources in the school district. He said he has recommended students to SAVE and the King Career Center as his school does not offer those types of courses. Likewise, sometimes the school cannot meet all of the needs of a student and they will take a supplement classes through charter schools, correspondence programs, or summer school classes. He said there are situations where students are interested in a course the school doesn't offer and the students will take one or more classes at the Anchorage School District, or the University of Alaska, or the Alaska Pacific University.

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ questioned what Mr. Harmon can bring to the state board of education.

MR. HARMON related that he has a varied background, understands budgets, education, and the law, with strength in communication and collaboration.

[9:03:52 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON related that he went to meetings with several hundred educators from across the state who were working on developing the Alaska Standards, which is the basis of the statewide assessments and noted that several of the large districts have adopted Common Core as the standards. He asked whether those standards are the same, that the state school board should have a regulation requiring districts to adopt a certain set of standards, or whether that is a local school board decision.

MR. HARMON reiterated that he does not like federal mandates as it should be pushed down to the people aware of the needs of the students' best, and school districts should have flexibility. He said those districts, should they find it is not working, not achieving their goals, or it doesn't make sense, that they revisit the issue. He related he has seen initiatives in education come and go, but it is important to not put something in place and if it's not working to keep going with it anyway. He said re-evaluation is very important but he is not a supporter of mandating any type of program such as Common Core.

[9:05:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND referred to Mr. Harmon's comment that he, in collaboration with the Anchorage School District, has sent some of his students to summer school at the Anchorage School District, and pointed out that it is no longer offering summer school due to the budget cuts.

MR. HARMON responded that he is aware of that and it is a concern because the public school district provides the needed services that serve all of Alaska's students whether in home-school or a private school because those entities do not have the resources. He expressed that those cuts are concerning because it is hurting education for everyone.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND surmised that Mr. Harmon has received requests from students he has been unable to serve, who are then recommended to the Anchorage School District.

MR. HARMON responded that he recommends them to the program that would best suit their needs, and often it is the Anchorage School District.

[9:07:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked, in terms of special education needs or developmentally disabled students, whether those students are enrolled in his student population.

MR. HARMON explained that Lumen Christi High School can only meet needs to a certain level on both ends of the spectrum wherein students with IEPs and gifted students are referred. He described the school as a core education program with a firm belief it should not enroll students whose needs it cannot meet.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND gathered that Mr. Harmon cannot accept students whose need cannot be met as, for example the Anchorage School District, Mat-Su Borough School District, and Lower Kuskokwim School Districts have to accept every student that walks through the door. She asked whether he will have a difficult time with that point as a member of the state school board.

MR. HARMON advised that he did not understand the question.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND restated that the Anchorage School District is required to serve every student that seeks to be registered in the school district and pointed out that his school cannot serve every student requesting admission. She questioned whether that will create a problem for him as a member of the state school board that supervises every public school in the state.

MR. HARMON replied that it will not be an issue. He noted that the public school system educates most of the students and is very important, so if Lumen Christi High School cannot meet student needs they will be sent to the location their needs will be met.

[9:10:10 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ moved to forward the name of John Harmon to the joint session of the House and Senate for confirmation. There being no objection, the confirmation of John Harmon is advanced from the House Education Standing Committee.

[9:10:34 AM](#)

**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:10 a.m.