

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 17, 2015

3:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Mike Dunleavy, Chair
Senator Charlie Huggins, Vice Chair
Senator Cathy Giessel
Senator Gary Stevens
Senator Berta Gardner

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

CONFIRMATION HEARING

Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development
John Harmon

- CONFIRMATION ADVANCED

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JOHN HARMON, Principal
Lumen Christi Catholic High School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as an Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development appointee.

ACTION NARRATIVE

3:30:33 PM

CHAIR MIKE DUNLEAVY called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Huggins, Gardner, Stevens, Giessel, and Chair Dunleavy.

CONFIRMATION HEARING

Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development

John Harmon

3:31:10 PM

CHAIR DUNLEAVY announced that there would be a confirmation hearing on one nominee for the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development.

3:31:23 PM

JOHN HARMON, Principal, Lumen Christi Catholic High School, testified as an Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development appointee. He summarized his own education, relating that he graduated from Palmer High School and then went to law school to get a degree. He said he has been in Alaska the last five years and is currently the Principal at Lumen Christi Catholic High School.

He said he is a proponent of education and believes that, "As Alaskans, we have a strong responsibility to develop our students socially, intellectually, and physically." If appointed to the Board, he said he would work for continued flexibility in education, innovation, improved student learning, and the implementation of technology to prepare students for today's world. He noted he is a problem solver, innovator, and collaborator who would work with school districts and with the legislature to find long-term solutions for funding education and the additional challenges of education in the state. He would seek to find solutions for education's sustainability and for all students, teachers, administrators, and staff dedicated to Alaska education.

3:33:59 PM

SENATOR STEVENS noted Mr. Harmon's impressive credentials. He asked why he returned to education after being a successful lawyer.

MR. HARMON described the role education has played in his life. He talked about his time in Ohio where he was an adjunct instructor and teaching at Charter College. He said he is teaching classes now, as well as being an administrator at Lumen Christi.

SENATOR STEVENS asked what he finds fulfilling about being an educator.

MR. HARMON said he has always enjoyed education and has a variety of degrees. He enjoys seeing students excel and learn, and likes working with youth.

[3:36:29 PM](#)

SENATOR GARDNER thanked Mr. Harmon for his willingness to serve. She asked if he is a credentialed teacher.

MR. HARMON said he does not have an Alaska teaching certification.

SENATOR GARDNER asked if he holds a principal certification.

MR. HARMON replied that he has a Master's of Science in Education.

[3:37:25 PM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS asked about the curriculum at Lumen Christi Catholic High School.

MR. HARMON said Lumen Christi does not have Common Core and does not plan to adopt it. Lumen Christi is a member of the National Catholic Education Association, which supports a modified version of Common Core. It is up to the local schools whether or not to adopt those standards and curriculum. He said he does not support Common Core.

[3:39:07 PM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS asked why he should be on the State Board.

MR. HARMON said he could bring a lot to the Board with his legal background. He said he also has an educational background. He said the issues in private schools are the same as in public schools, such as repairs to schools, funding, salary increases, improving student learning, security, accreditation, staff training, student retention, and unfunded mandates.

He said Alaska is made up of many small school districts and they all have challenges. The smaller districts have unique issues similar to communities in the bush. He concluded that his experience would be valuable to the Board.

SENATOR HUGGINS noted Mr. Harmon has a private school background. He wondered how that would affect his service on the Board.

MR. HARMON spoke of his objective to serve all Alaskan students. He mentioned that he is not in favor of repealing the Blaine Amendment, which forbids direct government aid to educational institutions that have any religious affiliation. He said he is cautious about accepting public funds from the government that come with contingencies. He said he has no policy objective to repeal the Blaine Amendment.

[3:43:40 PM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS asked for Mr. Harmon to suggest two things that would enhance Alaska schools.

MR. HARMON said he would look for synergies between the schools and districts and collaboration of programs. He gave an example of sharing a professor with many sites via technology. He opined that there are many opportunities that would benefit by collaboration, especially with limited resources.

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SENATOR STEVENS noted the diversity of Education Committee members. He addressed the fact that the state has not accepted Common Core, but instead uses Alaska State Standards. He asked if Mr. Harmon would dismantle the Alaska State Standards.

MR. HARMON said he would need data to see what has been put into place, the purpose, and the results.

[3:48:05 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked how many students are in Lumen Christi.

MR. HARMON said the current enrollment is 89 students.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked what grade levels there are.

MR. HARMON replied grades seven through twelve.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked how many teachers there are.

MR. HARMON said eight full-time teachers and a number of part-time teachers.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked how many students will graduate this year.

MR. HARMON said 12 or 13.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked how many are in the senior class.

MR. HARMON said 13.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY what career choices the students make.

MR. HARMON replied that the majority go to college, both Catholic and non-Catholic, and into the military.

[3:50:12 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked about Charter College.

MR. HARMON explained that it is a private, non-profit technical school. Two of the biggest programs were welding and medical careers.

SENATOR STEVENS asked if the students came prepared.

MR. HARMON said it depended on the students. He said he would have to check the data. There were tutoring services available and an Office of Student Success. Some students had challenges in their lives.

[3:52:17 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS noted complaints from colleges about the unpreparedness of incoming students. He asked Mr. Harmon what he would do as a Board member to ensure that students were prepared for college.

MR. HARMON said colleges require different abilities than technical schools do. He stressed that there is a need to help students in the classroom and focus on writing.

[3:53:50 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked information about Lumen Christi's budget.

MR. HARMON said he could not share that, but could talk about the dynamics of the budget. It costs about \$12,000 a year to educate a student. About half of that is paid in tuition. The school relies on fundraising to support the cost of education.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked what courses a junior or senior would take in a given day.

MR. HARMON listed the possible courses. The school also has affiliations and partnerships with UAA and APU and other high schools for course offerings.

[3:56:02 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked what the highest level of math is.

MR. HARMON said it is calculus. He listed the progression of the math curriculum.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY commented on the leadership roles of the executive branch, the State School Board and the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED). He pointed out that he is looking at forging closer ties with the department during these difficult budget times. He asked how the state might get away from federal mandates by forming a closer relationship with educators to align purposes and goals in order to get the desired outcomes.

[3:58:45 PM](#)

MR. HARMON thought it was a communication issue. He suggested there could be a formal way of establishing a communication system or an informal method. He spoke of his experience on the Alaska Family Services Board in Palmer. He said he is a big supporter of parents' rights.

[4:00:08 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS noted the uniqueness of Alaska schools and school boards. He asked about how he would work with such diverse groups.

MR. HARMON opined that he would welcome the opportunity to reach out to all constituents. He thought that everyone has the best interest of students in mind. He stressed the importance of good dialogues.

SENATOR STEVENS spoke of saving money by using distance education.

MR. HARMON noted how far technology has advanced. He spoke of his time at Charter College and the blended method of education that included on-line education. It saved money and was a wonderful tool for diverse collaboration and great instructors.

[4:03:28 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked how a student progresses through the grades in Lumen Christi.

MR. HARMON said there are two components to assessing students; one is subjective and one is objective. The teacher assesses both areas. He said students earn credits in the higher grades.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked if there are assessments.

MR. HARMON said they do not have a graduation exam. Students go through by class and have great teachers.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked if there is too much testing in his school.

MR. HARMON listed the tests offered: Terra Nova, ASVAB, ACT, PSAT, and SAT. He said his students do well on the tests.

[4:07:26 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNLEAVY returned to the issue of Common Core. He asked if the Lumen Christi curriculum is based on Alaska Standards.

MR. HARMON said it is a derivative of several things, but based on the old Alaska Standards. They were just evaluated by Advanced Education.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked if there are teachers at Lumen Christi who have taught in public schools.

MR. HARMON said yes.

[4:08:53 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked Mr. Harmon for his philosophy on gathering and sharing student data.

MR. HARMON commented that what is important is that the data be used for continuous improvement; it needs to serve a purpose. He said it is a conversation to be held with stakeholders regarding privacy concerns.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY asked in five years what Mr. Harmon would consider to be an accomplishment.

MR. HARMON said Alaska is in a challenging time. He would like to find solutions to funding and maintaining student success.

CHAIR DUNLEAVY thanked Mr. Harmon.

[4:11:33 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNLEAVY read: "In accordance with AS 39.05.080, the Education Committee reviewed John Harmon for appointment to the State Board of Education and recommends that his name be forwarded to a joint session for consideration. This does not reflect an intent by any of the members to vote for or against the confirmation for John Harmon during any further sessions."

He thanked Mr. Harmon for his willingness to serve.

SENATOR GARDNER said she is probably going to vote against both State Board of Education nominees because they are not credentialed candidates and the Board should have public school teachers on it.

SENATOR STEVENS said he is impressed by Mr. Harmon. He opined that the Board should be made up of wise people who could move education forward.

SENATOR GIESSEL recalled her days on a private school board. She noted how innovative teachers and administrators had to be. She opined that Mr. Harmon would bring important dynamics to the State School Board.

[4:14:24 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNLEAVY noted he is impressed with Mr. Harmon's credentials, and family background. He opined that the State Board is a policy and regulatory board and varied experience is needed. The administration of education is by public educators. He concluded that he is impressed by the choice for Mr. Harmon to serve on the Board.

[4:16:36 PM](#)

There being nothing further to come before the committee, Chair Dunleavy adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 4:15 p.m.