

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
JOINT MEETING  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 14, 2018

8:01 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair  
Senator Cathy Giessel  
Senator John Coghill  
Senator Tom Begich  
Senator Shelley Hughes

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative Harriet Drummond, Chair  
Representative Justin Parish, Vice Chair  
Representative Jennifer Johnston  
Representative Chuck Kopp  
Representative David Talerico

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

All members present

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative Ivy Spohnholz  
Representative Lora Reinbold  
Representative Geran Tarr

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT  
ANNUAL REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

JAMES FIELDS, Chair

Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development  
Glennallen, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented the State Board of Education and Early Development Report to the Alaska State Legislature.

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner

Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions about the presentation.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:01:39 AM](#)

**CHAIR GARY STEVENS** called the joint meeting of the Senate and House Education Standing Committees to order at 8:01 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Begich, Coghill, Giessel, and Chair Stevens and Representatives Talerico, Parish, Johnston, and Chair Drummond. Representative Kopp and Senator Hughes joined shortly thereafter.

[8:02:33 AM](#)

**PRESENTATION: STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT  
ANNUAL REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE**

CHAIR STEVENS announced the presentation State Board of Education and Early Development Annual Report to the Legislature.

[8:03:08 AM](#)

JAMES FIELDS, Chair, Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, presented the State Board of Education and Early Development Report to the Alaska State Legislature. He said he is the coach of the Glennallen boys' basketball team and they just got back from Nome late Sunday and have games Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Tuesday. Considering his busy schedule, he thanked the committee for allowing him to testify via telephone.

He pointed out that in previous testimony, he has reviewed the three commitments--increase student success, support responsible

and reflective learners, and cultivate safety and well-being--in the Alaska Education Challenge (AEC). He thanked legislators for their support and involvement in the AEC. DEED continues to have conversations with stakeholders to move students forward toward better achievement and success throughout the state. In 2018 several districts have passed resolutions supporting the AEC.

[8:05:26 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS highlighted some Resolutions, beginning on page four of the report.

In March, the State Board adopted a resolution supporting the efforts of the University of Alaska and its Board of Regents to streamline transfer credit policies among Alaska's postsecondary institutions to help facilitate college completion.

MR. FIELDS noted the continuing collaboration between the State Board of Education and University of Alaska Board of Regents through a joint subcommittee that meets quarterly.

In September, the State Board approved the UAA early childhood special education endorsement program, thereby allowing the endorsement to appear on Alaska teaching certificates.

In November, the State Board reviewed and discussed the department's progress on a plan for how to move the Alaska's Education Challenge work forward. Board members provided positive feedback on the department's efforts, and their excitement for the action planning work with stakeholders as part of the next steps.

MR. FIELDS highlighted these portions of Significant Steps beginning on page 7 of the report.

Alaska successfully administered the statewide English language arts, math, and science assessments during the 2016-17 school year.

MR. FIELDS said the department is working on making sure the second year is administered successfully. The Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools (PEAKS) is Alaska's new statewide summative assessment and was first administered to students in grades three to ten in spring 2017.

[8:07:32 AM](#)

DEED's extensive eLearning library now offers over 50 eLearning courses available for educators in Alaska.

MR. FIELDS said the growth in this service shows that DEED is moving more toward assisting and supporting school districts rather than focusing on compliance.

MR. FIELDS highlighted these portions of the Implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) beginning on page 11 of the report.

On September 18, 2017, DEED submitted its state plan to the U.S. Department of Education for how it intends to implement ESSA. Alaska's state plan represents over a year's worth of stakeholder engagement and department preparation in creating a plan to implement ESSA requirements within the unique context of Alaskan education. The elements of Alaska's ESSA state plan are designed to support the broader work of improving Alaska's education system to meet the mission of public education in Alaska: An excellent education for every student every day.

Alaska's ESSA plan is a description of the system to help schools and districts measure their performance on key indicators, identify solutions for improvement, and target resources and support for all students to receive an excellent education and be prepared for college or career after high school.

In developing its state plan, DEED consulted with the Governor, members of the state legislature and state board of education, local educational agencies, Native representatives, teachers, principals, other school leaders, charter school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, administrators, other staff, and parents. DEED received more than 4,000 stakeholder comments submitted through online surveys, its ESSA Advisory Committee, discussion groups and webinars, and community conversations.

On December 15, 2017, the U.S. Department of Education provided feedback based on its initial review of the plan submitted in September 2017.

DEED anticipates resubmitting Alaska's plan by the end of February 2018.

[8:10:18 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS called attention to this note in the School and Student Data section on page 15 of the report.

In 2017, the preliminary five-year graduation rate was 81.3%. This refers to a cohort of students who were 9th-graders five school years previously. Many of the students graduated in four years, but others needed all or part of a fifth year.

MR. FIELDS said the graduation rate is moving in the right direction.

[8:10:49 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked for his insight on ESSA vs No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

[8:11:08 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS said the state is more in the driver's seat with ESSA. ESSA allows the state to tailor the law to what the state can do. It is not a generalized national plan. It gives the state more leeway on how it complies with national regulations.

[8:11:37 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES asked him to repeat the 2017 graduation rate and whether that includes students who needed a fifth year.

MR. FIELDS said 81.3 percent, and yes, it does include a fifth year.

[8:12:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON asked when the graduation exam, the High School Qualifying Exam, was no longer required.

MR. FIELDS said he thought it ended three years ago.

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON said 2014, then.

MR. FIELDS said yes, probably.

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON asked whether the state provides a catalog of eLearning opportunities outside the state of Alaska for districts to use.

[8:13:45 AM](#)

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), answered questions about the presentation. He replied that eLearning is for training for teachers for state or federal requirements, not for eLearning for students. DEED does not have a repository for student learning but is in conversations with other legislators and partners for creating some kind repository for eLearning for students.

[8:14:34 AM](#)

CHAIR DRUMMOND asked if the department will draw on the experiences and catalogs of districts who are already using eLearning.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said DEED is in the early stages of a conception for a repository. The idea is that any family in the state could go to website and see what districts are using and perhaps see which are rated most effective.

CHAIR DRUMMOND said she found it fascinating that the eLibrary's most heavily trafficked courses are the ones that provide instruction on foundational health and safety topics. This tells the state that teachers are being required to deliver more and more topics to their students. Teachers need support in those areas.

[8:16:11 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked if technical problems with computer-based tests would no longer be an issue.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said last year, with the first administration of PEAKS, districts could choose between computer-based tests or paper-based tests. The conversations around that choice were enlightening. DEED plans to continue that option. DEED does not want to force schools to administer computer-based tests if they do not have the capacity to do it well. The primary objective is to get credible, reliable data on how well the public education system is working. Reasons exist for why it would be attractive to have more computer-based tests, such as a faster return of scores, but the state is just not there yet. DEED is just trying to remain vigilant and not assume there will be no technical problems.

[8:18:13 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked what the statistics are on computer-based tests vs paper and pencil.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he will get the numbers.

CHAIR STEVENS said he is not interested in the exact numbers but would like to see the progression. He assumes in the future it would be more and more computer based.

[8:18:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON said a number of school districts came to her office suggesting they were spending a lot of time on Bree's Law and coming up with a curriculum. She asked if the training for Bree's Law, or soon to-be-called Bree's Law, is on eLearning.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said DEED has incorporated topics in what may become Bree's Law in current training. There is no brand-new training on dating violence, but that can be incorporated into existing training

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON noted, for the record, that there seems to be \$200,000 in the budget for developing that further.

CHAIR STEVENS said he had volunteered the Senate Finance Committee to participate in DEED's online teacher training program. He said perhaps the House Education members would also like to participate.

[8:20:29 AM](#)

CHAIR DRUMMOND asked how the graduation data on page 15 of the report would be affected if the years 2011 to 2016 also included a fifth year, like 2017.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said DEED's data, which he would get to her, shows that including a fifth year in those years increases the graduation rate.

[8:21:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PARISH said he might have the distinction of being the only committee member who has completed eLearning training. He supports alternative deliveries for mandated training, but he found DEED's eLearning delivery less than optimal. He spent a lot of time waiting for each new slide to upload. He hopes the department will look at ways to make it less wasteful as far as time. He is interested if DEED has had that feedback from others. He asked if there are any statutory remedy to make that program as useful as possible and if there are too many mandates.

[8:23:43 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said over the Christmas break he went through several hours of training because he needed to renew his certificate. The ones he took he found very engaging with video and lots of images. He was impressed with the latest versions of the training. DEED often gets positive feedback on the latest versions. He would be happy to review them with Representative Parish. The department is always very receptive on how to make trainings as relevant and efficient as possible.

[8:25:12 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said the legislature has spoken a lot about mandated training and unfunded mandates. They have asked for a list of those.

SENATOR HUGHES said she is pleased to see the ten percent increase in graduation since 2011. She asked why the rate increased and whether it was a steady increase across all districts or are just a few doing very well.

[8:26:05 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that all that she said is probably accurate. He would not attribute the increase to any one factor. The legislature, the department, school districts, and boards have made a concerted effort to address low graduation rates. He is excited because there is a renewed interest in increasing the graduation rate. The department's ESSA response due at the end of the month has goals and metrics to increase the graduation rate. DEED will work with districts to achieve the specific goals in the ESSA plan. There is not a consistent increased rate of graduation in each district. Some districts have ups and downs and others have a steady growth. He will get data to her.

[8:27:41 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES asked whether the expectations are different for what a graduate knows upon graduation.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said one point to note is the state did stop requiring a graduation exam. Within those ten years the rigor of standards increased. The current Alaska Standards are more rigorous than the former standards, the Grade Level Expectations.

SENATOR HUGHES said she is happy to hear that because they had heard concern from employers over the years about the readiness of graduates.

8:28:57 AM

CHAIR STEVENS asked the commissioner to reflect on NCLB vs. ESSA.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the changes between laws represent an exciting opportunity for the state. DEED's ESSA plan had the input of thousands of Alaskans. DEED had the good fortune to develop its ESSA plan while working on the Alaska Education Challenge, so they are not two separate plans. Connecting those two efforts created documents that reflect a shared vision.

He said the state has opportunities with ESSA to include more than test scores on academics as metrics in its accountability plan. He welcomes the opportunity for it to be so much more than that. DEED wants to include attendance as a metric. DEED wants to include other elements but is cautious about additional bureaucracy and the burden on districts for data. The question is how to nourish an accountability system that reflects the reality in schools and give families an accurate picture of how their schools are doing.

CHAIR STEVENS said he is glad to hear the state and federal governments are moving forward.

8:32:01 AM

REPRESENTATIVE KOPP commended Commissioner Johnson for courageously leading the department and confronting hard truths in a gentle way that is building powerful coalitions. He has not seen that before. On one hand it is easy to be discouraged when looking at the state's fourth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores. Low reading proficiency is linked to the likelihood of imprisonment and other dysfunctions. Alaska is only ahead of one state, statistically the same as nine, and all the other states are ahead of Alaska. The commissioner is giving a vision of how to get past that. The Alaska Education Challenge was his brainchild and showed people how to move forward.

8:33:46 AM

CHAIR DRUMMOND said she remembers when NCLB attendance requirements would eliminate any progress a school had made if only a few children were absent on examination days. She is glad, though, that he will continue to focus on improving

attendance. Speaking of mandates, Cordova School District representatives brought in a six-page spreadsheet of state-required programs. They need to look at what schools are required to do. They are somewhat frustrated about additional requirements, including the Alaska Safe Children's Act, part of which may soon be known as Bree's Law.

8:35:29 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said now that they are through the development phase, he hopes that in the next 12 to 18 months there will be a thorough review of regulations to identify what is purposeful and supports districts and students and what does not. He appreciates Representative Kopp's remarks. It has been his good fortune to be commissioner when many good folks have decided they wanted to sit down and share a vision for the public education system that recognizes students are getting a great education, but it is not working for enough of Alaska's students. He commended the legislators on the joint committee for their participation in the Alaska Education Challenge, which meant a lot to other participants. In terms of fourth grade reading, the ESSA plan includes third grade reading proficiency as a metric. They know that if a student can be reading by third grade, the rest of school will be easier. The student will thrive and require fewer resources. He noted that there is a bill on dyslexia and reading proficiency. He appreciated the legislators' attention to how important it is to pay attention to reading proficiency as soon as possible.

8:38:09 AM

SENATOR GIESSEL mentioned how critical reading is and asked if there are reading specialists in schools and what is the plan to have those kinds of skilled teachers in schools.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said some schools and districts have reading specialists, but many are without because of their size. He noted that many librarians invest hours in nourishing a child's desire and wish to read. He does not know that data exists about the number. No initiative exists to increase that number, although there are many other types of initiatives to improve reading

8:40:31 AM

CHAIR STEVENS said that spending time in classrooms is a great opportunity. He urged legislators to make it a goal to do that this year.

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON said so many school districts are looking at their strategic plans linked to the Alaska Education Challenge and are proud of the benchmarks they are already meeting. It is thrilling to see the cross-fertilization between districts. DEED in some respect is standing out of the way to let local efforts be the driving force.

[8:42:15 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked Mr. Fields if he had any closing comments.

MR. FIELDS said the commissioner's leadership has made the chair's job easier. He thanked all the committee members for their willingness to be part of education in the state.

[8:43:23 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he values the accountability that the legislature provides. It is meaningful to every student in the state. He assured the committee that the partners have rallied around a shared vision to improve the education system.

[8:44:05 AM](#)

CHAIR DRUMMOND described how energizing it had been to attend the Education Commission of the States event in June with Senator Stevens, the commissioner, the Alaska 2017 Teacher of Year (James Harris of Soldotna), and board president Mr. Fields and to spend time with similar contingents of folks from every state who are so committed to improvement in schools.

[8:45:00 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 8:45 a.m.