

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 24, 2017
8:00 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Tom Begich

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PUBLIC HEARING ON VIRTUAL EDUCATION IN ALASKA; KENAI PENINSULA
BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

ROB SPARKS, Teacher
Soldotna Prep School
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on virtual education
in Soldotna Prep School.

GREG ZORBAS, Teacher
Kenai Borough School District
Kenai, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on virtual education
in the Kenai Borough School District.

ANNMARIE O'BRIEN, Superintendent
Northwest Arctic Borough School District (NWABSD)
Kotzebue, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced members from her district to testify on virtual education.

AMY EAKIN, Director of Technology
Parent
Northwest Arctic Borough School District (NWABSD)
Kotzebue, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on virtual education in NWABSD.

KIANA NORTON, Student
Kotzebue High School
Kotzebue, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a student's perspective of the advantages of virtual education.

TREVOR SHAW, President
Ketchikan Gateway Borough School Board
Ketchikan Borough School District
Ketchikan, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Shared his experience as a former homeschooled student in Ketchikan School District.

SUMMER LAZENBY, Parent
Director
Educational Operations
Challenger Learning Center
Kenai Peninsula School District
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Shared her experience as a parent of a student who participated in virtual education.

ALICIA MARLOW, Parent
Kenai Peninsula School District
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Shared her experience as a parent of a student who participated in virtual education.

MONICA GOYETTE, Assistant Superintendent
Mat-Su Borough School District
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced testifiers from Mat-Su School District.

JEANETTE PERDUE, Parent
Mat-Su Borough School District
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Shared her family's experience with online learning.

GRACE PEDERSON, Student
Mat-Su Borough School District
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Shared positive experiences with Apex and online education.

GRETCHEN MITCHELL, Student
West High School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Shared her experience with technology in the classroom.

DEENE MITCHELL, representing herself
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of virtual education opportunities.

JUDY ELEDGE, representing herself
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed the relationship between technical education in classrooms and freeing teachers to teach reading to low achieving students.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:00:35 AM](#)

CHAIR SHELLEY HUGHES called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:00 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senator Stevens and Chair Hughes. Senator Coghill arrived shortly thereafter.

Public Hearing on Virtual Education in Alaska; Kenai Peninsula Borough School District

[8:01:38 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES announced that the committee would be hearing from students at the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District about Video Tele Communications (VTC) in the classroom and also would be hearing public testimony about virtual education programs in Alaska.

[8:02:51 AM](#)

ROB SPARKS, Teacher, Soldotna Prep School, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, presented information on virtual

education in Soldotna Prep School. He said his students would be participating in the presentation.

[8:03:41 AM](#)

GREG ZORBAS, Teacher, Kenai Borough School District, presented information on virtual education in the Kenai Borough School District.

MR. SPARKS introduced the student presentation on Video Tele Communications (VTC).

MR. ZORBAS echoed Mr. Sparks' comments. He noted the presentation is student-driven.

[8:06:04 AM](#)

The students began their presentation.

The first topic was on unique differences and the advantages of a broader perspective from Video Tele Communication (VTC) because students get to meet new people and learn about their way of living from their point of view. They also get to hear other people's opinions about cultural conflicts and engage in virtual face-to-face communication. Finally, they can learn more about geography around the world.

[8:06:33 AM](#)

Students addressed differences in cultures. They have learned how to respect others and their beliefs and to be sensitive to their diversity. Students demonstrate mutual respect during their presentations. Learning about other cultures opens views on how the rest of the world is treated and how well students have it in America. It provides better socializing skills and higher social awareness.

[8:07:01 AM](#)

Students discussed their experiences in a more hands-on working environment. They collaborate in research projects and play the Ghana Game to learn about different cultures. They also use Kahoot for tests and as a fun learning game. They make use of their VTC skills.

[8:08:25 AM](#)

MR. ZORBUS noted the students will be asking committee members to participate in Kahoot.

The student continued with examples of how they use applied communication skills, such as learning in a "room without

walls." They learn how to ask questions by being engaged in the discussion and they use active listening.

[8:09:37 AM](#)

Students explained that video conferencing allows collaboration with a partner classroom, such as with virtual teams, projects, activities, co-teaching, and intra and interdisciplinary classes. They collaborate with all age groups.

[8:10:15 AM](#)

Students described the Ghana Game.

[8:11:06 AM](#)

SENATOR COGHILL asked to see the students on full screen.

MR. ZORBA directed the members to regroup.

[8:13:19 AM](#)

Students discussed good examples of student engagement and collaboration, such as partner classrooms with virtual teams and projects. There are question and answer opportunities with speakers and presenters. They talked about Padlet and Kahoot that connect to people around the world. They have meet and greet presentations and mystery quests/Skype.

[8:16:01 AM](#)

MR. ZORBAS directed committee members to go to the Padlet link and tell the class what an innovative classroom should look like.

CHAIR HUGHES noted the senators were participating.

[8:17:06 AM](#)

A student described Kahoot and invited the committee members to participate in a short game.

CHAIR HUGHES asked if they need to download the application.

[8:17:58 AM](#)

MR. SPARKS said Kahoot asks for a game code.

CHAIR HUGHES asked for the game pin number.

MR. ZORBA said at the end of the presentation the committee would be given the game code.

[8:19:04 AM](#)

Students described video conferencing skills and experiences. They said they gain better communication skills, confidence, and understanding and see how video conferencing can be used in various fields. They work in groups and in group settings and learn etiquette and active listening skills.

Students spoke of the use of video conferencing technology in various fields, such as telehealth and movie and television production. They also used video conferencing with school administrators and with many people around the globe.

[8:20:59 AM](#)

Students spoke of the benefits of video conferencing, such as saving money by reducing travel costs. Colleges and jobs will be more interested in students who have video conferencing skills. They are learning about various cultures and about other perspectives on various topics. Video conferencing sets students apart from other students.

[8:22:45 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES noted the arrival of Senator Giessel.

MR. KORBUS announced that they will now plan Kahoot.

[8:23:42 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES said the game pin is available and anyone can participate.

[8:24:50 AM](#)

The members and students played Kahoot, a short game showing examples of VTC in the classroom. It began with questions to answer, such as how students can benefit from VTC in the classroom.

[8:28:36 AM](#)

MR. SPARKS concluded that VTC allows students to share resources and take classes from other districts. Rural educators are very interested in doing that. They are trying to find ways to expand VTC.

[8:30:07 AM](#)

MR. ZORBUS noted a need for both types of online distance education. He opened the session for questions.

[8:30:43 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said the presentation was very impressive and the skills such as listening and being involved and knowing what

is going on in the community are very important. He thought the class involved citizenship and civics. He asked if any students plan to vote.

[8:31:34 AM](#)

Several students replied that they did.

CHAIR HUGHES asked if they have microphones, how the classroom is different from a regular classroom, and how the room is set up.

[8:32:46 AM](#)

OLIVIA explained that there are two TVs and two cameras in the room with a microphone hanging from the ceiling. Often they use smartboards for content.

MR. SPARKS asked them to explain the small group sessions.

OLIVIA explained that there are cameras and microphones on their laptops; they also use headphones to communicate.

[8:34:32 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES asked if the map of the world came from their class.

[8:34:58 AM](#)

ASHLEY replied that the map is from Padlet and you can do it all over the world, but they have done it just in the classroom.

[8:35:37 AM](#)

MR. ZORBUS offered to pull up a slide that shows student connections.

SENATOR COGHILL thanked the students and teachers and noted their use of communication styles. He asked for the protocol issues that help or frustrate learning with VTC.

[8:36:45 AM](#)

OLIVIA said there are challenges connecting with others and the lines are sometimes busy. There are also positives - good quality video and audio.

[8:37:38 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES asked if the advantages outweigh the challenges.

OLIVIA said sometimes because they have extra time to practice what they are going to say.

CHAIR HUGHES asked Mr. Zorba the same question.

[8:38:31 AM](#)

MR. ZORBUS said they have been doing VTC for 10-12 years. The advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The difficulties are far and few between now compared to previous years. They have one of the best IT people in their district.

He showed the committee a map of all places the Soldotna students connected with in the first semester.

CHAIR HUGHES thanked the students and teachers.

[8:41:20 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES opened public testimony. She asked several questions of consumers of education: whether virtual education should be promoted and what potential it might have, if the quality of education would be improved by using technology, and whether there would be greater access to great teachers. She welcomed written testimony from those who could not testify today. She asked if virtual education is something that would be good for students and should be advanced. She noted it is not a hearing on education funding.

[8:42:26 AM](#)

ANNMARIE O'BRIEN, Superintendent, Northwest Arctic Borough School District (NWABSD), Kotzebue, introduced members from her district to testify on virtual education.

[8:43:27 AM](#)

AMY EAKIN, Director of Technology, Parent, Northwest Arctic Borough School District (NWABSD), presented information on virtual education in NWABSD. She described the changes in technology since 1997. She said her six children's education has been greatly broadened by virtual education courses in the district. They also provide VTC which allows for districtwide courses. She agreed that virtual education should be grown to allow students access to a broader range of experiences.

[8:44:37 AM](#)

KIANA NORTON, Student, Kotzebue High School, presented a student's perspective of the advantages of virtual education. It allows students to take online courses or participate in VTC. It allows her to take Japanese, not offered at her school, and it provides flexibility in scheduling coursework.

[8:46:40 AM](#)

TREVOR SHAW, President, Ketchikan Gateway Borough School Board, Ketchikan Borough School District, shared his experience as a former homeschooled student in Ketchikan School District. He described the advantages of his virtual education. He shared information about Fast Track and the Alaska Digital Academy. He said education has multiple aspects, is sustainable and efficient. It provides the opportunity for students to take control of their education. It promotes success.

[8:50:52 AM](#)

SUMMER LAZENBY, Parent, Director, Educational Operations, Challenger Learning Center, Kenai Peninsula School District, shared her experience as a parent of a student who participated in virtual education. She listed the advantages of VTC, especially the connections with international sites. It provided her daughter an opportunity to communicate unfiltered one-on-one with other students and improved her "soft skills" such as communication and teamwork.

[8:53:22 AM](#)

ALICIA MARLOW, Parent, Kenai Peninsula School District, shared her experience as a parent of a student who participated in virtual education. She shared her experience in a pioneering family and her daughter's involvement in pioneering VTC at school. She listed the advantages of VTC. She spoke of her experience with VTC as a UAA student. Students' involvement in VTC prepares them for college in many ways, as well as having an economic benefit.

[8:56:26 AM](#)

MONICA GOYETTE, Assistant Superintendent, Mat-Su Borough School District, introduced testifiers from Mat-Su School District. She said they would discuss how virtual education can meet diverse student needs and locations.

JEANETTE PERDUE, Parent, Mat-Su Borough School District, shared her family's experience with online learning. She described her experience as a parent, teacher, and aunt. She stressed the importance of the human connection and virtual education. She listed examples and advantages of online classes. She concluded that their school district is providing a great justice to all students by using online learning. It must include the involvement of loving, caring adults.

[9:02:52 AM](#)

GRACE PEDERSON, Student, Mat-Su Borough School District, shared positive experiences with Apex and online education. She listed types of classes she took and the advantages of online classes, such as course offerings, time management, and catching up on credits. She talked about the importance of having a personal relationship with online teachers.

[9:05:48 AM](#)

GRETCHEN MITCHELL, Student, West High School, shared her experience with technology in the classroom. She gave examples of the importance of the teacher in her classrooms to motivate her. She noted Kahoot was a fun game in English. She described her experience with online classes without the presence of teachers as something that did not work for her.

CHAIR HUGHES asked if she took two-way virtual classes.

MS. MITCHELL said no.

CHAIR HUGHES recalled the importance of human connection.

[9:08:20 AM](#)

DEENE MITCHELL, representing herself, testified in support of virtual education opportunities. She stressed the importance of the connection with teachers and adults. She said classes without teachers didn't work for her children. She spoke of the benefits of VCT in rural areas. She did not want to see funding taken away from regular education.

[9:10:55 AM](#)

JUDY ELEDGE, representing herself, discussed the relationship between technical education in classrooms and the freeing up of teachers to teach reading to low achieving students. She shared her vast experience as an educator. She stressed the need for more teachers in elementary education. She is now a technical coach and has a reading specialty.

She emphasized that education is no longer a one-room school house. However, many schools in Alaska are either K-12 schools or combinations of grades and face the impossibility of having one teacher teach all grades. She said she has not found a virtual classroom that can teach K-2 reading. She noted the importance of having a teacher teach elementary students how to read. She maintained that an advantage of a virtual classroom is that it could free teachers to teach younger students while older students took online classes.

[9:14:58 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES made a point that teachers in a K-12 school must have a secondary teaching certificate.

[9:15:22 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said he is impressed about what motivated, high achieving students can do. He asked how virtual education can help low achievers.

[9:16:06 AM](#)

MS. ELEDGE suggested that if students cannot read they are not successful. She repeated the importance of virtual education freeing up teachers to teach the low achievers, especially in reading. Research says to target instruction for students who cannot read for 30 minutes a day, which is not possible in a K-12 school. She concluded that virtual education allows high school students to work at their level using technology and remedial students to work with a real teacher.

[9:18:45 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES observed that the low achieving students are the focus of virtual classrooms. Giving them access to great teachers and course options can motivate them to be involved. Tim Shumway at Copper River School noted that technology allows the learning gaps to be seen immediately. She thought virtual education had great potential for low achieving students. She stressed that, "We are not doing the best we can across the state."

She noted the importance of teachers and administrators knowing how to teach in virtual classrooms - the focus of the next committee meeting.

[9:20:48 AM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL thanked Chair Hughes for highlighting the fact that education has changed and allowing members the opportunity to change their thinking about how education is delivered.

CHAIR HUGHES made announcements about the next meeting.

[9:21:46 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Hughes adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 9:23 a.m.