ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE
February 27, 2017
8:00 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Shelley Hughes, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT
Senator Cathy Giessel
Senator John Coghill

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: PREPARING TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS FOR A VIRTUAL EDUCATION SETTING

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

PETE LAFRANCE, Education Technologist
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Representing himself, presented information on preparing teachers and administrators for a virtual education setting.

ANDREW CHLUP, Educational Technologist
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Representing himself, presented information on preparing teachers and administrators for a virtual education setting.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:00:56 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 Senators Begich, Stevens, and Chair Hughes. Senators Coghill and Giessel were excused.

PRESENTATION: PREPARING TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS FOR A VIRTUAL EDUCATION SETTING

8:01:25 AM
CHAIR HUGHES announced a presentation on preparing teachers and administrators for a virtual education setting, from the IT perspective. The presenters from the Anchorage School District will be speaking from their personal experience, rather than on behalf of the district. They will be speaking from both management and staff levels of an organization. They may provide insight on the differences between teaching in a virtual classroom versus a live one.

8:02:47 AM
PETE LAFRANCE, Education Technologist, Anchorage School District, representing himself, presented information on preparing teachers and administrators for a virtual education setting. He noted working in a virtual world is a big change for educators. He shared his teaching and IT experience in a variety of educational settings. He now works as a technology collaborator at Mirror Lake Middle School where he helps teachers use technology effectively and teaches a video production class.

He recalled memories of connecting with teachers, the heart of a good education. One of the biggest challenges of teaching in a virtual world is to open the doors to interpersonal connections. He noted the importance of teacher training as it relates to virtual education. The biggest predictor of success with virtual education is the teacher training component, which includes supervision. Another component for success in a virtual classroom is for the teacher to set appropriate expectations and concrete goals.

8:09:28 AM
SENATOR BEGICH spoke of discussions of virtual education approaches with presenters from Florida and New York. He said in times of budget crisis the availability of courses is affected. He asked whether expanding coarse options due to technology is a benefit.

8:10:25 AM
MR. LAFRANCE said yes. He provided examples of specialty courses in Luxemburg International School made available due to technology in education. They were a huge benefit to the high-achieving students. He cautioned that it becomes more difficult to offer low-achieving students appropriate courses.

8:11:59 AM
SENATOR BEGICH referred to a discussion about what a teacher needs to know about technology in education to incorporate it into the classroom. He asked if Mr. LaFrance was aware of teacher training courses, instruction, or in-services.

MR. LAFRANCE spoke of his own master's program in education technology at Michigan State University. He stressed the importance of the teacher's role. The Anchorage School District offers a program called iSchool for learning technology. He noted the problem is that technology is always changing. Creating habits of mind in teachers and helping them see technology skills as an evolving process is also important. Having continual exposure to technology tools and effective teaching models are important to teacher training.

8:15:52 AM
CHAIR HUGHES pictured a virtual professional development course showing ineffective and effective teaching.

SENATOR BEGICH added the importance of learning by doing.

He spoke about the importance of levels of readiness when exposing students to virtual learning. It includes a lot of teacher interaction with the lower ages, and more technology learning at the upper grades. He pointed out that some students can't learn that way. He asked when it is most appropriate to introduce different levels of technology.

8:17:51 AM
MR. LAFRANCE agreed that learning is related to brain development. At the International School in Luxemburg students participated at their own level. At the elementary level there was a slow introduction to learning the tools; later, students were able to engage with the curriculum; by 4th grade, students were creating their own curriculum, such as a video project. He added that middle school students can create cross curricular projects. He stressed the importance of parent training with technology education.

8:21:57 AM
SENATOR STEVENS said he has heard exciting things in virtual education, but he did not think virtual education necessarily provides a cost savings. He wondered whether it is an enhanced means of education or a cost savings.

8:23:00 AM
MR. LAFRANCE shared his experience managing a technology budget and suggested that cost savings should not be the main reason for using technology. He maintained that technology programs don't cost less if they are done well initially. Later on there may be cost savings, but initially there are costs for equipment, training, and staffing. His focus has always been on maintaining the quality of education.

SENATOR STEVENS recalled the importance books used to have in homes, whereas, today parents need to be educated to support their students in the virtual world. He wondered how to reach the lower achieving, unmotivated student with technology.

8:27:27 AM
MR. LAFRANCE agreed that some students do not do well with technology unless a teacher is present. A classroom teacher knows more about a student than a virtual teacher in a virtual classroom. He agreed it is a difficult question. Different modalities, the use of creativity, and the chance to explore a student's own interest sometimes helps.

8:29:58 AM
CHAIR HUGHES agreed there is a lot of initial upfront cost. She said she looks at technology in education as increasing the quality of education by increasing the access to some great teachers and course offerings.

8:30:49 AM
At ease

8:32:46 AM
CHAIR HUGHES brought the meeting back to order.

She pictured a school in rural Alaska with 25 students, multiple grades, and one teacher who has been trained in some content areas. She noted that scenario is a focus of hers - to use technology in the classroom to gain access to more good teachers and course offerings.

She asked whether two-way, virtual, synchronous education is good for low-achieving students if the teacher is virtual, but there is support provided by a local instructional aide. She wondered if a technical aid would also be needed.

She noted that the estimated turnover cost per teacher is about $50,000. The turnover rate in villages is quite high. She inquired if Mr. LaFrance thinks the scenario she proposed would be successful.

8:36:24 AM
MR. LAFRANCE agreed it was a good scenario to think about. He opined that the two-way model could work well in that diverse rural classroom with local aides. He thought technology was reliable enough today that a technician would not be needed. He agreed that some low-achieving students do better with technology than in the regular classroom. It also opens the door to high-achieving students. He spoke of a project-based charter school where he worked that challenged students at the appropriate level.

8:40:15 AM
CHAIR HUGHES wondered whether curious children can be directed to seek out and read information on the internet.

MR. LAFRANCE agreed that it could be motivating to search information independently. It does demand a basic level of information literacy and navigation skills.

SENATOR BEGICH pointed out that Dan Walker is trying to connect technology in small villages with homes. He thought that model was interesting.

CHAIR HUGHES hoped it would increase conversations in the home.

8:43:22 AM
SENATOR STEVENS recalled that during his time as a professor and as a legislator, the world of technology has changed drastically. He asked Mr. LaFrance what he envisions for the future.

8:44:13 AM
MR. LAFRANCE spoke of a diffusion into multiple devices, always-available devices with ubiquitous access to the internet. He predicted that there will be more operating systems, such as Chrome in the Cloud, that are less demanding, less expensive, with multiple options and easier interaction.

SENATOR STEVENS thanked Mr. LaFrance for his answer.

CHAIR HUGHES thought there also might be holograms in the future. She thanked Mr. LaFrance.

8:48:03 AM
ANDREW CHLUP, Educational Technologist, Anchorage School District, representing himself, presented information on preparing teachers and administrators for a virtual education setting. He spoke of his experience with virtual and blended learning schools and teacher training.

He listed three considerations when working from a district perspective with virtual schooling. The first is access - devices and bandwidth. The greatest limiter in Alaska is bandwidth. The second is appropriate course materials. There are strong materials in the middle school to high school range, decent materials in the intermediate grade levels (3-5), but very few independent study practices in the lower grade levels.

The second consideration with virtual education is the balance between competency-based courses, such as Algebra I, versus experience-based materials, such as performance. The competency-based course involves progression based on skill mastery versus seat time.

He drew attention to the third consideration with virtual education, student support models. He spoke of bi-furcation of teaching duties in the virtual classroom; a content area expert to assist students and/or a success coach to motivate and support the student. The traditional classroom teacher fulfilled both roles. They found that self-driven courses needed a success coach to motivate the student and provide context.

8:53:23 AM
CHAIR HUGHES asked whether an instructional aide could be the success coach in rural schools, and what kind of training that person would need.

8:53:49 AM
MR. CHLUP related that there were several learning models, such as blended models, with the use of paraprofessional or classified staff, but with counseling skills. In small rural schools the aides could bring cultural context into their roles. He suggested that they would need a few years of preparation to learn how to support the students and parents.

8:55:09 AM
SENATOR STEVENS asked how to provide an education to those who wish to remain in a substance lifestyle. He wondered if distance learning contributes to loss of population in rural villages.

8:56:14 AM
MR. CHLUP spoke of his experience on the Navaho Reservation when he did his master's program. One of his peers from the Navaho Reservation said that educational technology enabled students to remain on the reservation and have a blended modern/traditional lifestyle.

He opined that in 20 years artificial intelligence will put everyone out of jobs. The people who will be best equipped for the modern world will be the deep thinkers and artists. There are traditional and philosophical understandings throughout the world; with technology a person can work from anywhere.

Traditional understandings become problematic when connected to large scale courses, such as an adaptive learning system geared toward a typical understanding of the world. However, the opposite can be true as well; personalized courses can be developed with a Native understanding of the world and still address academics.

8:58:43 AM
SENATOR BEGICH said that is the question he has been asking superintendents. He maintained that there is a third choice beyond college and vocational education, those who wish to remain in the village. Two superintendents, one from the Bering Strait School District and one from the Lower Yukon School District are developing curriculum criteria that accommodates those who wish to stay in their villages. He has asked the superintendents and the commissioner to work together before the State Board finishes its planning process. He predicted something would come out of the discussion.

9:00:15 AM
SENATOR STEVENS said he has seen the expansion of awareness of the Yupik cultural in Kodiak.

CHAIR HUGHES commented that learning Native skills might provide village students the best of both worlds.

She asked Mr. Chlup to address the questions asked of Mr. LaFrance.

9:01:43 AM
MR. CHLUP stated that the biggest advantage to virtual learning is access to a variety of other coursework. He referred to Clayton Christensen's work out of Harvard, "Disrupting Education," describing a spectrum of zero technology access to a course that is only 80 percent as good as having a face-to-face teacher, to multiple opportunities. He suggested that was an important piece to consider when adding technology - something is always better than nothing.

He commented on teacher training. He noted a group out of California working on "Leading Edge Certification", a free educational resource for training educators in technology. Also, visualpromise.org offers micro-credential, competency-based checks for online educator training.

9:04:02 AM
MR. CHLUP addressed student readiness - he highlighted the skill of executive function as a level of readiness and how to prepare kids for that.

He stressed the importance of parent involvement in K-8 online education programs.

He turned to the topic of cost savings as it relates to online education. "The Chronicle of Higher Education" did a comparison of course fees and found that higher end courses cost the same or higher than regular courses. He said in his previous district they saved costs on competency-based courses. However, there are many cost factors to consider in a cost analysis, such as teacher training, curriculum, devices, and bandwidth. Some of the cost shifted to parents, depending on how much bandwidth and devices the district provided to families.

9:06:11 AM
MR. CHLUP discussed how to activate low-performing students. He noted the importance of relevance - whether a student is connecting with the curriculum. He agreed that some students are excited by online work, and some don't like it. He pointed out that different types of students perform well in blended programs, such as autistic students who are at different levels in various subjects.

9:07:11 AM
MR. CHLUP brought up areas of concern. There is a very small amount of data around the success of student online learning,

especially for special education. There is also little data on graduation rates. There are problems with students hopping from one online school to another resulting in lack of credit acquisition and low graduation rates. He stressed the importance of tracking overall success.

9:08:43 AM
CHAIR HUGHES suggested a success coach/counselor could help in that situation.

9:08:59 AM
SENATOR BEGICH summarized that for student hopping there is a need for a process in place to track a student who goes from program to program. There is also a need to develop a special education tracking system.

MR. CHLUP said yes, those are both key considerations.

9:09:58 AM
SENATOR STEVENS inquired what the future holds.

MR. CHLUP used the term "adaptive," a blend of what computers do well and what humans do well. Computers are good for rote learning and humans are good with learning as a social activity. Students need to learn to contribute to their communities and to society. Virtual learning struggles with the social aspects of learning. He predicted a balance between the two provided by an educator.

SENATOR BEGICH offered an example of planet searching where scientists do not use algorithms because a human's ability to see minute changes is unsurpassed.

9:12:06 AM
CHAIR HUGHES asked whether asynchronous competency-based programs might provide cost savings. She referred to synchronous, performance-based virtual courses, such as those in the Copper River School District, and asked about the potential for increased quality of curriculum, as well as cost savings.

9:13:36 AM
MR. CHLUP said it depends on the competency of the classified staff. He wondered, depending on course areas, whether the students could do as well without teacher-directed instruction. His experience is that synchronous learning relies on direct instruction due to the limits of technology.

9:15:17 AM
CHAIR HUGHES responded that the teacher uses interactive tools, not just direct instruction.

She thanked the presenters and made announcements.

9:16:38 AM
There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Hughes adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 9:16 a.m.