

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 1, 2017

8:01 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

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

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: GRADUATION RATES AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN ALASKA

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

DR. MICHAEL JOHNSON, Commissioner  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented information on Graduation Rates and Academic Achievement.

BRIAN LAURENT, Data Management Supervisor  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented Graduation Rates and Academic Achievement in Alaska.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:01:36 AM](#)

**CHAIR SHELLEY HUGHES** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:01 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Giessel, Begich, Stevens and Chair Hughes. Senator Coghill arrived shortly thereafter.

**PRESENTATION: Graduation Rates and Academic Achievement in Alaska**

[8:02:12 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES announced that the only order of business would be a presentation on Graduation Rates and Academic Achievement in Alaska by the Commissioner of Education, Dr. Michael Johnson, and Brian Laurent, Data Management Supervisor for the department. She said we often hear anecdotally that academic achievement in Alaska is poor compared to other states. She requested that Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) report on the actual numbers for Alaskan schools. She stated that Alaska has many excellent teachers and schools and she dispelled the perception that the Education Committee is against the work teachers are doing. The meeting will be to add to the conversation about what is going on in schools and what the committee can do to make the education system better.

[8:03:21 AM](#)

DR. MICHAEL JOHNSON, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), presented information on Graduation Rates and Academic Achievement. He read from the following:

First, the information we give you today helps us understand how the public education **system** is working, it is not a report on individual districts. The **system** of public education is called for in the constitution, Article 7 Section 1. The information we give you today is about that entire system, not one single component.

Second, today, as we speak, teachers are working hard to provide a great education to our students. This data is not an evaluation of our teachers. It is not an evaluation of our students. There are tools that evaluate teachers and there are tools that evaluate individual students, the data represented today is not one of those tools.

Third, achievement data is only one piece of information about our system. Just as in medicine, one test does not tell us everything we need to know.

There are many other factors that should be considered, but achievement is definitely one of those factors.

CHAIR HUGHES noted the arrival of Senator Coghill.

8:05:05 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON continued:

Other indicators are attendance, teacher turnover, curriculum, and many societal factors that show up in the classroom door every day, such as the impacts of poverty, substance abuse, childhood hunger, physical and sexual abuse, just to name a few.

Fourth, many students in Alaska are receiving a great education. We have some schools with graduation rates of almost 100%. There are students graduating from Alaska's schools and going on to prestigious colleges, workforce training programs, the military, and homemaking. We have many reasons to celebrate in our public school system.

Fifth, but as we celebrate the successes, we must not forget the students that have fallen into a tragic achievement gap. There is a gap among Alaska's schools, and there is a gap between Alaska and other states in our country, and there is a gap between America and other countries in our world.

We must NOT be content with that gap. We must not be content when our public school system is not working for ALL of our students and their families.

I hope today's presentation is informative, but more importantly, I hope it is motivating. The Alaska Education Challenge has a purpose, and that is to make our system of public education system, called for in our constitution, work for more and more of our students.

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CHAIR HUGHES suggested Commissioner Johnson's testimony could be used as an op-ed.

8:06:38 AM

BRIAN LAURENT, Data Management Supervisor, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), presented Graduation Rates and Academic Achievement in Alaska. He provided an overview of his presentation.

[8:08:04 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT explained how the graduation rate is calculated. First, a cohort assignment based on initial entry into 9th grade is gathered. For example, the 2015-2016 four-year cohort is based on first-time 9th graders in the 2012-2013 school year. Students transfer into and out of cohorts and the final cohort is based on the school of the student's most recent enrollment. The graduation rate is the percentage of students in the cohort who graduated within four years. This method has been in place since the 2010-2011 school year.

[8:09:03 AM](#)

He shared that DEED publishes graduation rates at the state, district, and school levels. They publish by subgroups, including race/ethnicity, students with disabilities, English learners, and economically disadvantaged. They report graduation rates for four-year and five-year graduates.

[8:09:32 AM](#)

He distinguished between the four-year rate and the five-year rate. The 2015-2016 four-year cohort is based on first-time 9th graders in the 2012-2013 school year. The 2015-2016 five-year cohort is based on first-time 9th graders in the 2011-2012 school year. In a given year, the four-year cohort is a completely different group of students than the five-year cohort. The 2015-2016 four-year cohort will become the base for the 2016-2017 five-year cohort.

[8:10:12 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT described shifts in graduation requirements that have had an impact on graduation rates. On July 1, 2014, the repeal of the High School Graduation Qualifying Examination (HSGQE) requirements went into effect and it was the beginning of the College/Career-Ready Assessment (CCRA) graduation requirement. On June 30, 2016, the repeal of the CCRA graduation requirement went into effect. Now, students must meet all local requirements to receive a diploma.

[8:11:26 AM](#)

He displayed four-year and five-year graduation rates for all students statewide for years 2010 to 2016. He detailed the impacts HSGQE and CCRA had on those rates.

[8:12:33 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES asked how to combine the two rates to see how many do not graduate or take longer than five years.

MR. LAURENT replied that they only calculate up to a 5-year graduation rate. However, they also report the total number of graduates in a particular year.

CHAIR HUGHES inquired if the yellow bar includes both 4-year and 5-year graduates. She asked if 19.2 percent did not graduate within five years in 2015-2016.

MR. LAURENT explained that the 5-year rate is 80.8 percent and the 4-year rate is 76.1 percent. It means that 19.2 percent of the students in that cohort did not graduate within five years.

CHAIR HUGHES asked how many students in Alaska do not graduate from high school.

MR. LAURENT did not think they had a metric for that. He said those students are included in the dropout rate and not all students who did not graduate are dropouts.

[8:14:37 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS summarized that the increase in graduation rate in 2014 and 2015 is due to the end of HSGQE and the next increase will occur due to the elimination of CCRA.

MR. LAURENT did not anticipate much of an increase. With the CCRA there was not a minimum cut score; the requirement was simply to take it.

[8:15:14 AM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL asked how many kids graduate in less than four years.

MR. LAURENT said those students would be included in their class cohort.

[8:15:55 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH shared a story about a nephew in special education who took seven years to graduate. He inquired how many special education students don't graduate and if they are part of the 19.2 percent.

MR. LAURENT noted that information is in the next slide.

[8:16:43 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked how districts are funded for students who take longer than four years and if they fall under the Foundation Formula funding.

MR. LAURENT explained that a general education student can be funded up to the age of 20.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON agreed. Special education students are funded until they turn 22. All students can request to be allowed to complete their diploma after those ages, but the district receives no funding for them.

[8:18:35 AM](#)

SENATOR COGHILL asked whether students that move between schools and those that complete GEDs are shown in the graph.

[8:19:01 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said 19.2 percent does not mean a student dropped out and didn't finish high school or earn a GED.

MR. LAURENT added that GED students are included in the 19.2 percent of non-graduates.

[8:19:41 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT turned to the four-year graduation rates statewide by subgroup from 2010 to 2016. He showed the graduation trend of all students, students with disabilities, English learners, and economically disadvantaged students.

MR. LAURENT showed a graph of graduation rate by race/ethnicity. He drew attention to the lowest graduation rate, that of Alaska Native/American Indian students.

[8:21:22 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT showed an image of the department's website. More graduation data is found on the statistics and reports page.

He concluded that the graduation rate increased after the repeal of the HSGQE, which was a barrier. No comparisons to graduation rates prior to the 2010-2011 school year should be made due to different calculations used. For small schools and districts, the graduation rate can fluctuate due to their small sizes. He noted that the inverse of the graduation rate is not the dropout rate and a graduation cohort versus a count of graduates are not the same thing.

He offered to answer questions.

[8:23:21 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES asked if there is a connection between the elimination of the exams and not having a statewide assessment and students needing remedial work entering college, despite high GPAs.

[8:24:22 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that the department had conversations with the university about that as they selected the new assessment to be administered this spring. He stressed the importance of having a standard measure for high school students to ensure that they are prepared for college and careers. He hoped to address this issue by having end-of-course assessments rather than a standardized grade level test.

[8:25:27 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked if would be harder to track graduation rates going forward due to varying graduation requirements by school districts.

[8:26:12 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT responded that there are statewide requirements in place; students must earn 21 credits to graduate. Districts can choose to exceed those requirements. In the past there was a choice of three assessments. He thought it was important to mention that graduation requirements vary by district.

[8:27:39 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT turned to an overview of academic achievement, including a balanced assessment system and the recent history of Alaska's summative assessments, the Standards-Based Assessments (SBA) and the Alaska Measures of Progress (AMP). He said he would also discuss the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

MR. LAURENT noted there are many types of assessment systems. He showed a graph of various types and stressed the importance of having a balanced assessment system. He said he would address summative assessments and interim assessments. Alaska's summative assessment measures Alaska's English, Language Arts, and Mathematic Standards and is administered at the end of the school year. Interim assessments, such as the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), are administered by all districts

multiple times per year and allow districts to determine student growth within the school year. They are not necessarily aligned with state standards. The interim assessment is not part of the summative assessment. The goal of the summative assessment is to help inform school improvement practices, provide stakeholders with a point of information about how schools are doing, and to ensure educational equity across the state.

[8:30:54 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT discussed the recent history of Alaska's summative assessment. Beginning in 2005 Alaska administered the SBAs which were aligned to grade level expectations in reading, writing, and math. When they began in 2005, grades 3 through 9 took them; grade 10 was administered for the first time in 2006. Grades 3 through 10 took the SBAs until 2014. There was also a science test for grades 4, 8, and 10.

[8:31:47 AM](#)

He showed SBA results by content area, statewide, for all students from 2005 to 2014. The rates were stable with a higher number of students scoring proficient in reading than in writing, and higher in writing than in math.

He showed reading results for the SBA by subgroup. He said the dramatic decrease for English learners was due to how they were reported by school districts.

[8:33:17 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH noted only a decrease for English learners, and asked if it meant all other subgroups improved.

MR. LAURENT explained that the all-students group remained relatively flat; there would have been an increase for the category non-English learners.

SENATOR BEGICH implied that another category would increase.

MR. LAURENT agreed it was the non-English learners that increased. He further explained how the learners were coded.

[8:35:29 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked for a definition of English learners.

MR. LAURENT said they include students who are immigrants and a significant number of Alaska Natives, which is different than other states. The language spoken by most English learners is Yupik.

SENATOR STEVENS asked how many students are Native language students.

MR. LAURENT said they do not publish that number for privacy reasons.

CHAIR HUGHES asked how many total English learners there are.

MR. LAURENT offered to provide that data. He added that Yupik is spoken by 40 percent of English learners.

[8:37:53 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT showed SBA reading results statewide by subgroup, noting the trends are the same as in math and writing. He did the same for writing and math results by subgroups and race/ethnicity.

[8:39:48 AM](#)

He turned to the recent history of Alaska's summative assessment. In June 2012 the State Board of Education adopted more rigorous English, Language Arts, and Math Standards. In 2015 the state administered the Alaska Measures of Progress (AMP) assessment aligned to those standards. He stated that no comparison should be made between SBA and AMP results because they measure different things.

[8:41:03 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT showed AMP results for English and Language Arts by grade for all students in 2015. The percentages were much lower than for the SBAs because the tests painted different pictures of students. He said results were the same for math.

Next, he showed AMP ELA and Math results by subgroups and by race/ethnicity.

[8:43:11 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT said there is no summative assessment data available for 2016. A new assessment will be given in 2017 called the Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools (PEAKS). It is aligned to state standards. The test window opens March 27 and lasts for one month.

[8:44:06 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT addressed the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which compares Alaska students to students in other states. It is administered every other year to grades 4,

8, and 12. In Alaska, 75 percent of students in 4 and 8 take it. Results are only reported at the state level, not at the district level.

[8:45:08 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES asked why it is not administered to 12th graders.

[8:45:27 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT did not know, but offered to find out.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON also did not know. He noted that part of the DEED team is funded by NAEP and he will ask them.

CHAIR HUGHES asked whether the department would consider giving the test to 12th graders.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said yes.

[8:46:20 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS agreed it would provide important information.

[8:46:37 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT said NAEP is transitioning to a digitally-based assessment for 2017.

[8:47:06 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES asked if online tests are set up for students to save if there is a technological glitch.

MR. LAURENT explained that the NAEP team goes to school sites with tablets for students to take the test. With AMP and PEAKS there is a process in place for testing conditions in schools with challenged technology. A local caching server saves test information until there is enough bandwidth.

[8:48:58 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stressed the importance of knowing test results as soon as possible. Paper testing for PEAKS would slow testing down.

MR. LAURENT clarified that PEAKS has a 5-week test window and students who take the paper version of the test do it during the first two weeks. They want to ensure that all tests get to the vendor in comprehensive format. There is a challenge getting results back this year in a timely manner due to the process of standard setting - establishing the cut points between different levels of proficiency - because it is a new assessment. He said

he is expecting NAEP results data in August, a couple months later than usual.

[8:50:19 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT compared Alaska scores to scores in other states and all public schools in grade 4 reading. The purpose of the graph is to show Alaska's relative position to other states. Alaska ranked 49th in 2015. He said because NAEP is administered to a sample of students the results show how Alaska compares to other sampled schools.

He showed grade 8 reading average scale score by state with Alaska at 42nd. In grade 4 math, Alaska ranks 47th, and in grade 8 math, Alaska ranks closer to the national average.

[8:52:47 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT talked about the wide discrepancy in scores between SBA and AMP. He showed a graph that depicted the different information the state received from both tests. Next, he compared AMP and NAEP results in ELA and in Math, which now look similar.

[8:54:52 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT discussed the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is administered every three years "to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students." About 540,000 students completed the PISA assessment in 2015. He noted that smaller states and smaller schools are not included in the sampling and it is possible that no students in Alaska took the PISA. A total of 72 countries and economies took the test. The rankings are out of 70 countries, because two countries were excluded for technical reasons.

He said the major domain of PISA in 2015 was science.

[8:56:23 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES asked whether the 72 nations are industrialized nations.

MR. LAURENT said that is correct.

He shared U.S rankings. Out of 70 countries in science, the U.S. ranked 25th; in reading 24th; and in math 40th. He noted the difficulty of comparing countries due to the sampling process. He highlighted the number of countries that ranked higher,

similarly, and lower than the U.S. He showed the U.S average score comparison in 2015 versus 2012.

He noted examples of countries that the U.S. scored similarly to.

[8:58:48 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT concluded that the summative assessment is just one piece of a balanced assessment system. The SBA and AMP results should not be compare. AMP achievement looks very different than SBA proficiency, but more like NAEP. Alaska has room for growth when compared to other states, and the U.S. has room for growth when compared to other states.

[8:59:45 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS thanked Mr. Laurent. He asked why Alaska scored lower on NAEP in 4th grade than on 8th. Alaska was 42nd in grade 4 and 33rd in grade 8.

MR. LAURENT explained that the sample is representative and does not include every student.

[9:01:58 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES maintained that it was hard to look at some of those scores and achievement gaps. She wondered whether the amount of money spent on education impacts student achievement. She noted that the Augenblick Study concluded that it didn't.

[9:02:44 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT responded that he has not done that analysis, but it was worth looking at. He opined that it would hard to compare "apples to apples" across Alaska school districts.

CHAIR HUGHES shared that when she researched state rankings in education, a report by the National Education Association reported ranking by revenue spent on education, not academic achievement. She asked if spending on education should be the focus.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said it was an important question because students are always learning from educators and listening to the conversations on their priorities. He used an example of buying a car to make the point that spending a specific amount does not ensure the same quality. He suggested looking at how money is spent, not how much is spent. He agreed that it is worth talking about.

[9:05:55 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked whether the state is looking at the Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) in cooperation with the university, the Department of Labor, and Post-Secondary Education.

MR. LAURENT named the four agency partners that work with SLDS, DEED, DOTPF, the Commission on Post-Secondary Education, and the University System. They decided not to request additional outside funding for SLDS. It will now serve as an internal resource for the partner agencies to answer education policy-related questions. Currently, DEED has not submitted any new data into their SLDS, which is called ANSWERS.

[9:07:31 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if there is value in the SLDS program.

MR. LAURENT replied, in theory, there are benefits, because currently there is partnership occurring and they do not have to invent the wheel every time a policy question comes up. Alaska received answers to valid questions they asked about the use of data.

[9:08:29 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked if there is data that shows a relationship between student readiness to attend school and improved test scores; if there is some correlation between early education and achievement over time.

[9:09:25 AM](#)

MR. LAURENT said he and his colleague have been collaborating on how they report on early learning data. They use the Alaska Developmental Profile as part of the comprehensive system of student assessment, and they have changed how they report the results of kindergarten readiness based on that profile. Currently, they do not have a standardized definition of what pre-K is. When teachers submit the ratings, they are letting the department know of the kindergarten readiness of students and whether students attended pre-K. The challenges are the lack of a standardized definition of pre-K and no guidance in terms of how much pre-K students received. Therefore, they can't dig deep into a student-level analysis. They can report on a school-wide and district-wide level the results of the developmental profile, which serve as a starting point.

SENATOR BEGICH said he was eager to see that as it evolves. He referred to the Augenblick Study which showed that the amount

spent in schools made very little difference, except for economically disadvantaged populations, special education students, and Alaska Native students, which are not adequately funded. He thought investing in those populations would improve test scores.

MR. LAURENT agreed that the subgroup results highlight the achievement gaps and the need for this conversation.

[9:12:46 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS did not know what the solution was for economically disadvantaged children. He opined that focusing on English learners would be the easiest to do to help improve test results. He asked what is to be done with all this information.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON maintained that "we need to be dissatisfied" with the results and then do something about it. The State Board of Education and the governor have established a process to do something about it.

He appreciated the point that English learners might be a place to start. However, he said he wants the system to work for all students. He does not want to just look for the easy fixes. He hopes to take specific steps to close the achievement gap and show an improvement by the second assessment of PEAKS. He stated, "At least all are unified around the fact that we are dissatisfied with the performance that we currently have."

SENATOR STEVENS agreed all students should be considered.

[9:16:02 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES asked Commissioner Johnson whether it is possible for Alaska to move up in rankings. She requested three things to focus on to change what we're seeing, because we are dissatisfied, and we can do better.

[9:17:09 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that it has to be possible for Alaska to move up and for all students in all areas of the state to improve. He wished to have more time to ponder on the three specific areas of focus. The process in place is to prioritize "what we are going to do to close the achievement gap." He hoped to bring diverse ideas together and unify around several steps to take to close the achievement gap.

CHAIR HUGHES asked if two-way virtual education might be one of the solutions.

[9:19:36 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said absolutely. He thought technology had great potential to improve the quality of learning in schools, and as a tool to give students access to great teachers and courses they might not otherwise have. Technology will help students get a better education.

CHAIR HUGHES thanked the presenters and made announcements.

[9:21:09 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Commissioner Hughes adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 9:21 a.m.