

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

March 31, 2017

8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Shelley Hughes, Chair
Senator Cathy Giessel
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Gary Stevens
Senator John Coghill

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 96

"An Act relating to education; relating to school districts; relating to course credit for students; relating to group insurance, self-insurance, and other cooperative arrangements between school districts and businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies; relating to funding for school districts; relating to school operating funds; relating to competency examinations for teacher certificates; relating to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission; relating to the duties and powers of the Department of Education and Early Development and the commissioner of education and early development; relating to a virtual education consortium; relating to the minimum wage for bus drivers; relating to the investment, appropriation, and administration of the public school trust fund; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 96

SHORT TITLE: EDUCATION: SCHOOLS/TEACHERS/FUNDING

SPONSOR(s): EDUCATION

03/20/17	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/20/17	(S)	EDC, FIN
03/22/17	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

03/22/17	(S)	Heard & Held
03/22/17	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/23/17	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/23/17	(S)	Heard & Held
03/23/17	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/24/17	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/24/17	(S)	<Bill Hearing Canceled>
03/27/17	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/27/17	(S)	Heard & Held
03/27/17	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/28/17	(S)	EDC AT 5:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
03/28/17	(S)	Heard & Held
03/28/17	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/30/17	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/30/17	(S)	Heard & Held
03/30/17	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/31/17	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on SB 96.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:02:18 AM

CHAIR SHELLEY HUGHES called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Begich, Giessel, and Chair Hughes. Senators Coghill and Stevens were excused.

SB 96-EDUCATION: SCHOOLS/TEACHERS/FUNDING

8:02:56 AM

CHAIR HUGHES announced the consideration of SB 96. She noted there would be invited testimony from Commissioner Johnson. She said, based on his concerns, they have addressed many items in the bill.

8:03:49 AM

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), stated the following:

It is an honor to be here with you today discussing SB96 because it is an expression of your willingness

to work together to think creatively on behalf of Alaska's students.

The committee collectively, and each member individually have welcomed DEED into your offices to discuss ideas, refine proposals and support a relentless focus on closing Alaska's achievement gap.

Senator Hughes, thank you for your leadership. Thank you for your creativity, your transparency, and willingness to listen to input and adjust your proposals. It is very encouraging to Alaska's educators and families when they hear you say this is only the beginning of a process and that you welcome continued dialogue and deliberation. Your willingness to lead and collaborate will benefit Alaska's students.

This committee represents differing viewpoints and perspectives, yet Alaska's students would do well to follow the example that I have seen from each of you individually as you have genuinely worked together across party lines to develop great ideas. Washington can learn from Alaska...as observed here on this committee, there are examples of elected officials from differing political perspectives who put character above party. On behalf of Alaska's students, thank you for teaching them how a democratic republic works.

[8:05:40 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON continued:

I want to also thank Joshua Banks. Alaskans are getting more than their money's worth out of Joshua. He is a willing learner and tireless worker.

I also want to note the attitude of cooperation that I heard from several of our associations, most notably, the Alaska Association of School Boards, the Alaska Association of Business Officials, the National Education Association, and the Alaska Superintendents Association. Their statements supporting change, innovation, and thoughtful ideas to close the achievement gap and be more efficient are evidence that they are already working hard to develop unity worthy of our students.

8:06:25 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON turned to SB 96:

Now, regarding, SB 96. Senator Hughes, your comments seem most applicable. It is a work in progress, but it is good work and it is good progress. It is only those with courage who have the confidence to put out a draft and invite critique. Those who fear change will react negatively, but those who understand the importance of an excellence education, will roll up their sleeves and work with us. As with any first draft, there is still work to do, but you've heard commitments from organizations, individuals, and departments that are ready and willing to work alongside you. I thank each of you for your willingness to continue the work in Alaska's Education Challenge.

SB 96 reflects the conversations you've been having in this committee. It touches on student learning, educator excellence, modernization, finance, and community ownership, all of which is part of the Alaska Education Challenge. By introducing this bill to begin the conversation, you and your committee members have elevated these topics in anticipation the work with many different Alaskan's.

I would be remiss if I didn't restate to the committee what I've said before and you already know. The most pressing legislative issue for Alaska's system of public education is the need for of a complete sustainable fiscal plan. When the current crisis started, today's second graders were in kindergarten. They will be in third grade next fall. If a complete forward looking fiscal plan is not in place this year, they could be in fourth grade before a fiscal plan is passed and working to sustain a viable economy for their future. The year this year's kindergartners were born, Alaska enjoyed revenue of 8 or 9 billion dollars from oil. This year, that is down to 1.6 billion. That, along with rising cost of health care, has left a mark on Alaska, including the public system of education. Thank you for the many hours you and your colleagues have invested in a fiscal plan. Please continue to focus on that work so that when our kindergartners are seniors, they will have a thriving

steady Alaska in which to plan their own families and careers.

8:08:58 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON concluded:

It is with great respect for each of you that I say sincerely, I have enjoyed our work together thus far. Thank you for allowing me to join you in today's discussion.

8:09:15 AM

CHAIR HUGHES noted there was a lot of public testimony over concerns with Sections 10 and 11. The committee was aware of some of those issues and has been working with Legislative Legal to prevent unintended consequences. The committee, the Commissioner, and the other body had a goal to free up school facilities that made sense for savings purposes. They are trying to be transparent and plan to write a new CS with input from DEED that includes a list of schools to which this provision would apply. They will change 80 percent to 70 percent school capacity and request that recommendations be reported back in January of 2018. She noted that this is Education Transformation - Act I. Next session will be Act II.

8:12:39 AM

SENATOR BEGICH thanked Senator Hughes for her work and said he is supporting her efforts and concepts in the bill.

He asked Commissioner Johnson how SB 96 fits into the Alaska Education Challenge.

8:14:03 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said conversations about the bill and the Challenge have been happening together. The committee's work elevates the concepts in the Alaska Education Challenge. He stated that it takes courage to put a draft of a bill out. They will be discussing and refining the elements of both.

He listed the five committees that have been developed in the Alaska Education Challenge: Student Learning, Educator Excellence, Modernization and Finance, Safety and Well Being, and Community and Tribal Ownership. Each component of SB 96 can fit into all of the committees, but they will figure out where each one best fits. He opined that it is a wonderful opportunity to discuss both the bill and the Alaska Education Challenge together.

[8:16:36 AM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL agreed with the Commissioner Johnson's comments on the courage needed to put forth a bill and the challenge to refine the elements of the Challenge.

[8:17:03 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES commented that she is rather new to the Education Committee process and brings a fresh perspective. It does seem like a good idea for the State School Board and their subcommittee process to be able to make education recommendations. She looks forward to the legislature's role in the process.

She asked if there is anything in the bill that is going the wrong direction from the five Challenge committees or whether it complements them.

[8:18:05 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said, in terms of the Alaska Education Challenge, there are two broad goals. One is that the recommendations are good, quality, right recommendations. The other important part of the process is unity around the public education system and a vision for what we want. He wants those who will work on the committees to show up committed to both the unity and the recommendations. He said, "If we stand together to close the achievement gap in this state, we'll have accomplished something, even apart from the particular recommendations." This effort represents collaboration, cooperation, and unity on recommendations. He concluded that SB 96 is very much in line with the direction of Alaska's Education Challenge.

[8:19:36 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON agreed with the provisions in SB 96 to modernize the system, make great teachers available to more and more students, be more efficient, and address teacher quality.

[8:20:05 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH summarized that any idea that moves Alaska forward is worthy of consideration and, in general, the bill is moving in the right direction.

[8:20:50 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he does not have all the answers, but is willing to listen. He agreed with Senator Begich's comment.

[8:21:15 AM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL pointed out that there has been talk about the need to innovate and change education for years. She said this is the first time it feels as though steps are being made forward, begun by the bill, in collaboration with the Commissioner who is looking to make things move forward. She said it was encouraging and she appreciates it.

[8:21:54 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES thought that everyone who has previously led in education has had good intentions, but there were daunting challenges. It was encouraging to learn that other states have poverty, racial diversity, and economic challenges as great as Alaska's, yet were able to achieve high academic results. She maintained that every student matters and we cannot give up on students. We must provide tools to districts, so they can provide opportunities for their students, such as access to great teachers. With a national shortage of teachers, this is the right time to address this issue. Next year the committee's focus will be on teacher education. She is encouraged to know that Alaska can do better and people seem to be getting on board.

[8:24:57 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON added that the state is fortunate to have partners in this mission, such as superintendents. In states where achievement gaps have been closed, all stakeholders were involved in the process and worked together. He agreed that the time is right, and the opportunities outnumber the challenges.

[8:26:22 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES asked whether there are any particular sections that need further work. She inquired whether Section 5, the reporting by districts of the ratio of students, employees, and teachers to administrators, would be helpful.

[8:27:00 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that this information is already available. They will work with the committee on how it will be reported.

CHAIR HUGHES asked about increasing the Praxis scores and delaying the mandate to do so.

[8:28:29 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that he has not gotten into the details of that section yet. It may be that teachers are already

scoring high. He wanted to spend more time looking at the data. He agreed that teacher quality is essential.

[8:29:13 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES inquired whether the requirement for the department to make available professional development for virtual education to districts is a good idea and would provide savings to districts.

[8:29:48 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON thought it would. The department wishes to provide more support for educators in the classroom. There are districts that already provide great staff development. Also, DEED can work with the Alaska Staff Development Network to provide targeted staff development addressing particular needs.

[8:30:58 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH agreed targeted staff development was an effective method of professional development.

He addressed broadband limitations. He said his office has been working with Quintillion, a company that is completing fiber optics along the North Slope to Nome. He suggested inviting them into the process as a partner.

He noted a section in the bill that addresses percent of market value (POMV) and adjusting how to spend the Public Schools Trust. He said there has been testimony that says it would double the amount of money that could be used for education. He asked for Commissioner Johnson's opinion on that.

[8:33:25 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON addressed the first question first. He said he is encouraged by conversations about broadband and the contacts that have come forth about broadband. There are exciting projects out there that will be good for Alaska in the future.

The department's position on more money through investment is positive. They don't have expertise within the department on investing, but have had conversations with the Department of Revenue. They want to get the most for their money, in terms of investment, for education.

[8:34:33 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES wanted to work on broadband over the interim with the department, the delegation in Washington, D.C., and

communication companies to seek reasonable costs for school districts in rural areas. She asked the department to be a part of that conversation.

[8:35:21 AM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL addressed a concern in Section 8 about the use of "businesses". She pointed out that Quintilian is a business and would be a good partner with school districts. She described a teleconference between high school students and Greens Creek. She suggested not eliminating "businesses" from the bill.

[8:36:56 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said they should have a hearing on all the ways businesses benefit public education. He thanked the business community for their substantial contributions to education.

[8:37:43 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH spoke in favor of the continuation of the tax credit for education between the university and the business community.

[8:38:44 AM](#)

CHAIR HUGHES appreciated the dialogue with Commissioner Johnson and working with his team. She thanked Senator Begich's staff as well as her staff.

[8:39:17 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH thanked his staff.

CHAIR HUGHES held SB 96 in committee.

[8:40:00 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Hughes adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 8:40 a.m.