

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 19, 2018

7:58 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

CONFIRMATION HEARINGS

Board of Education and Early Development

James Fields
Sandra Kowalski
Tiffany Scott
Lorri Van Diest

- CONFIRMATIONS ADVANCED

University of Alaska Board of Regents

Stephen (Joey) Sweet

- CONFIRMATION ADVANCED

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JAMES FIELDS

Board of Education and Early Development
Glennallen, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as appointee for reappointment to the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development.

LORRI VAN DIEST

Board of Education and Early Development
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as appointee to the Board of Education and Early Development.

SANDRA KOWALSKI

Board of Education and Early Development
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as appointee to the Board of Education and Early Development.

TIFFANY SCOTT

Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development
Kotzebue, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as appointee to the Board of Education and Early Development.

STEPHEN (JOEY) SWEET, Student Regent Appointee

University of Alaska Board of Regents
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as student regent appointee to the University of Alaska Board of Regents.

ALEC BURRIS, Student Body President

University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported the confirmation of Joey Sweet to the University of Alaska Board of Regents.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[7:58:00 AM](#)

CHAIR GARY STEVENS called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 7:58 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Begich, Hughes, and Chair Stevens. Senators Coghill and Giessel joined shortly thereafter.

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)

Board of Education and Early Development

[7:58:19 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS announced the consideration of the governor's appointees to the Board of Education and Early Development. These are James Fields, Lorri Van Diest, Sandra Kowalski, and

Tiffany Scott. He asked each of the appointees to give their personal background, what they bring to the board, why they want to serve, and their goals for the year.

7:59:07 AM

JAMES FIELDS, Chair, Board of Education and Early Development, said he has been the chair for three years and has been on the board for five. He was on the school board for the Copper River for nine years. He's lived in Glennallen for 15 years. He has the longest tenure on the board. He brings a history of where they have been the last five years. They are in a good place. There's a different feel from two to three years ago. There's a momentum to move forward.

8:01:18 AM

LORRI VAN DIEST, Appointee, Board of Education and Early Development, said she is a retired Mat-Su educator, a lifelong Alaskan who grew up in Seward. Her father was a teacher. Her first teaching job was in Seward High School. It was rewarding to teach the students she had babysat. She moved to Mat-Su. At Colony High School she taught math, became a guidance counselor, and coached girls' basketball. She spent her last 6 years as curriculum coordinator. In 2010 she retired to become a full-time teacher and mother to her three children. Now she works part-time as a substitute counselor for the district and she is president of the local community council. She offers the board her experience as a teacher, counselor, curriculum coordinator, and home school educator. She's interested in serving on the board because of the commitment leaders and stakeholders have taken to bettering Alaska's education for all children. The Alaska Education Challenge has laid the foundation and philosophy for this to happen [with the three commitments]-- increase student success, support responsible and reflective learners, and cultivate safety and well-being. [Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)] Commissioner Johnson said their shared commitment to those shared values should be deliberate and intense as they transition to a new, more efficient and effective education system.

8:04:26 AM

SANDRA KOWALSKI, Appointee, Board of Education and Early Development, said she is currently the Director of Indigenous Programs for the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Before that position, she spent 28 years in K-12 education. She has been a teacher and principal in rural and urban Alaska. She was Assistant Superintendent for the Fairbanks School District. Her perspective as a public administrator brings strength to the

position. She is interested in serving because of the work that has been done by the Alaska Education Challenge, especially the culturally relevant focus and student-centered learning initiatives. She is interested as well in tribal compacting.

[8:05:33 AM](#)

TIFFANY SCOTT, Appointee, Board of Education and Early Development, gave her Inupiaq name. She is from Kotzebue and her family is from Noorvik. Her children attend school in Kotzebue. She is from the Northwest Arctic Borough but graduated from Colony High School. She just finished nursing school and is a registered nurse at the emergency department at Maniilaq Health Center in Kotzebue. She worked for Nenana Regional Corporation in the government affairs department.

CHAIR STEVENS asked, reflecting on the happenings in the world, such as the shootings in Florida [in Parkland February 14, 2018] and the marching by young people in front of the Capitol [Juneau-Douglas High School students protesting gun violence], whether they have any reflections on things to be aware of and how to deal with millennials.

[8:07:28 AM](#)

MS. KOWALSKI they are learning new ways in education to get students engaged and own their learning. When young people are out making statements, they are finding their way. They are learning new skills to be future leaders. By giving them space and providing leadership and respect for their actions so they know they are listened to, they can have a conversation with millennials (millennial or not, that is how young people should be treated). It teaches them to be the emerging leaders that they want them to be.

[8:08:33 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS said it was a horrible tragedy, but it goes back to the Alaska Education Challenge. They talked about safety and community involvement. They need to own their schools and communities and what goes on in them. The students have said they want to take ownership, they want to do what's right. The school climate can be good, but there can be small pockets where it is not good. In his district, they have guidance counseling, but their emphasis is on getting a social and emotional counselor who can reach out to kids and maybe avoid some of these tragedies. In the Alaska Education Challenge, they have talked about the importance of the behavioral side. Personalized learning is critical. They need to get information out about

what some schools are doing. They want it to be locally owned, not mandated.

[8:10:51 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said they have spoken about civics education. The figures are that 17 percent of young people vote. One of the reasons for public education is to create citizens. He asked what they can do to help young people become more involved and voters.

[8:11:24 AM](#)

MS. SCOTT said hers began at home with her parents. Democracy does not happen without an active and engaged public. This continued through the classroom with her U.S. government and history teacher at Colony High School who nurtured in her a desire to be an active participant in the public process. Encourage young folks to serve in various capacities. She hopes her participation at this level encourages others as well.

[8:12:22 AM](#)

MS. VAN DIEST said focus on getting the message out that voting is so important. She asked how many of them are supervoters who vote in every election. Civics and government teachers should work with students and have that be part of curriculum. The students who don't vote probably have parents who don't vote either. Schools have elections. Maybe those can be more like public elections.

[8:14:07 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said after the march the kids went back to high school and those who were eligible registered to vote.

[8:14:27 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH said over the last few years the legislature wrestled with the issue of the explicit prohibition of public funds for private education and there have been efforts to change that. The board sets policy for Alaska. He asked for their thoughts on the use of public funds for private education.

[8:15:27 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS said as a businessman, he believes competition is always good. Mat-Su does a good job of making sure it has competition within its public school system. Competition makes school district compete, whether homeschooling or whatever it may be. Anything that makes competition is good for schools. Next year he will have six kids in Copper River School District, from a senior to kindergarten. The more he can get Copper River

to be competitive, whether it's in the homeschool program or online curriculum, it will benefit kids.

[8:17:17 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH said competition almost always doesn't. He asked Mr. Fields if he is in favor of a constitutional amendment to change the prohibition of public funds for private education.

MR. FIELDS asked him to define private education.

SENATOR BEGICH said by private education he means not publicly funded, not publicly-provided education. Alaska has amazing amounts of different kinds of concepts, charter schools, homeschools. He is talking about funding to private entities with public funds.

[8:18:14 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS said would need to see specific details to state whether he would be for or against something.

SENATOR BEGICH said fair enough.

[8:18:40 AM](#)

MS. KOWALKSKI said she does not have a straight answer. Schools and communities need to develop educational systems to meet needs of students in that community and the goals of that community. They started a tribal school in Kotzebue when she was a young mother and felt the public school didn't meet the family goals of two of her four children.

[8:19:36 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES said Tiffany was on the school board in Mat-Su and went to school with her daughter. The Alaska Education Challenge is all about addressing the achievement gap, particularly in the rural areas. She has lived in Hoonah, Bethel, and Ft. Yukon and had children in the public schools in the 70s and 80s. She grieves that the same challenges exist and in some ways are worse. They are faced with a fiscal challenge but still have this great need. They are second or third per student spending in the nation, but their academic results are at the bottom. She asked what strategies can transform rural schools. That is at the top of her list and what she wants to change.

[8:21:29 AM](#)

MS. SCOTT said that Northwest Arctic through tribal schools serves as an excellent model for indigenous engagement in

education delivery, one that is culturally focused, culturally responsive, and includes community. In rural areas it takes that kind of effort to bring about outcomes in student achievement required to insure a healthy future not only for their students, but their community. Bringing in community, having those tough discussions about how education is delivered is important to success in rural areas.

[8:22:31 AM](#)

MS. VAN DIEST said she has not lived in rural Alaska. They do need to involve community leaders. That is what excites her about the Alaska Education Challenge. Part of that is the tribal involvement. Tiffany and Sandra will bring in that perspective that she doesn't necessarily have.

[8:23:15 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said he does not understand the tribal compact. Teachers have the responsibility to prepare kids for careers and life and success. If they go down a different path and concentrate on subsistence living and hunting and fishing, as important as that is . . . He asked if they can help him figure that out how they succeed with tribal compacts and still help their kids succeed in life.

[8:23:55 AM](#)

MS. KOWALSKI said that what is important for her as a mother and Alaska Native is that her children and grandchildren grow up grounded. For rural Alaskan students to be successful, they must have a sense of place about the world around them in their educational system. Teaching a student to hunt and their own traditional roots does not ground them in a way that holds them back. It gives them a foundation to move forward. Two of her four children went to a tribal school in Kotzebue. They were well-grounded academically when they transitioned to the big school where she was principal. They were grounded. Nikaitchuat Ilisagviat has only 20 students. They are there for three to five years immersed in Inupiaq language and culture. They are participating in cultural activities. They're cutting seal, they're cutting fish, they're preparing foods, they're going out on the ice with their teachers. When they come to June Nelson, granted they haven't had the preschool kindergarten English reading strategies taught to them, but they are grounded, they are engaged. Academically they do well. As a principal, when they gave out citizenship awards in a school of 500, many of the students who got awards came from a tribal school of 20 kids because they were grounded in character and in values as well. Giving communities that space to plan their own educational

system is not going to hold any student back, it's going to propel them forward.

[8:26:13 AM](#)

MS. SCOTT said including cultural and language components of an education help reaffirm and, in some instances, restore the cultural identity that is so important to creating a well-rounded and a whole person, whether they stay in rural areas or move to urban areas.

[8:27:09 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH said early education means a lot to him. He asked about their positions on early education. He hopes that Alaska will one day have universal pre-k.

[8:27:38 AM](#)

MS. KOWALSKI said she is hoping they can expand preschool services across the state, especially in rural communities. When she was in the Northwest Arctic, they had a two-year kindergarten program. That was a strong foundation of early learning experiences. Even in the tribal school in Kotzebue they started at school at three years old. Families need that support and opportunity.

[8:28:26 AM](#)

MS. VAN DIEST said she would like to see early education expanded.

[8:29:10 AM](#)

SENATOR COGHILL said the Alaska Education Challenge will be a big deal. For him, the focus is on sixth and seventh graders. That is when they lose children as far as academic excellence. They enter high school unprepared in many ways. Everything in the world is marketed to them. They hit that emotional speed bump of life. This is when predators and marketers go after children and when they are emotionally intense with each other. He asked how they can help kids get through that age in life.

[8:30:32 AM](#)

MS. KOWALSKI said as a former middle school principal in Fairbanks, she did research on whether students in middle school settings had a better chance of finishing high school. Students who went through a middle school transition, meaning attending a sixth or seventh grade middle school, were more challenged in high school in grades 9 and 10 in making good grades and completing high school. Fairbanks decided to decrease the number of transitions and give middle school students a smaller school

setting. Fairbanks is working on having more K-8 settings next year. Developmentally, that age group is focused on their social setting more than their academic setting. The idea that students attending middle school are lost has a lot to do with the type of middle school they are in. Middle schools are harder settings because they are larger. They need to work to provide opportunities to form positive relationships with each other and adults.

[8:32:50 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS said in Glennallen, K-12 is all in one building, but at different ends of the building. Many times there is a disconnect from elementary school to junior high and from junior high to high school. If there is a connect between fifth and sixth grade, teachers can provide personalized learning, which gets the academic piece out of the way. Communication needs to happen from K through 12. Early education is not something the state has to do. Copper River Native Association has an early learning program. Partnerships and collaboration between districts and other Native organizations or private businesses can happen. Communities must own education. If districts can do this effectively, there are dollars and programs that can be had if businesses are brought in. Education must be relevant; otherwise millennials won't show up.

[8:36:10 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES said Sue Hull's [former board member] parting words were old fashioned, back to basics, family engagement. Great teachers will somehow bring families in.

[8:36:54 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said he wished he had time to ask about homeschooling. His district is losing two schools because of the lack of population. The solution from the district is to offer homeschooling. He would like to know if they are doing all they can to help those homeschool parents.

[8:37:49 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS opened and closed public testimony.

[8:38:24 AM](#)

SENATOR COGHILL moved to forward the following names of appointees to the Board of Education and Early Development to the full legislature for consideration: James Fields of Glennallen, Sandra Kowalski of Fairbanks, Lorri Van Diest of Palmer, and Tiffany Scott of Kotzebue.

CHAIR STEVENS found no objection and the names were forwarded.

[8:38:44 AM](#)

At ease.

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)
University of Alaska Board of Regents

[8:38:48 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of the governor's appointee to the University of Alaska Board of Regents. He asked Stephen (Joey) Sweet to tell the members about himself, what he brings to the board, his interest in serving, and his goals.

[8:40:27 AM](#)

STEPHEN (JOEY) SWEET, Student Regent Appointee, University of Alaska Board of Regents, said he is originally from Mat-Su and now lives in Anchorage. He graduated in the fall with a degree in political science. In 2016 he took part in the legislative internship program. Currently he is pursuing a master's in public administration with an emphasis in criminal justice. He brings the student perspective to the board. Students are feeling a lot of stress because of budget cuts; they see that in morale and declining enrollment. His goal is to course correct. If they can get one good year for the university, it can break the spell that has affected the university the last few years. He feels that if they can get one good year they can go back to normality.

[8:42:25 AM](#)

MR. SWEET said to be specific, he would like to see the university increase degree completion. That means increasing recruitment and keeping students at the university. The university has undergone a lot of strategic thinking about what pulls in and keeps student in a university and what pushes them out. As an example, in 2019, the university will offer an emergency scholarship fund that will be available for unexpected costs. That can mean the difference between staying in or dropping out during a semester. The university has put a lot of thought and effort into a strategic plan for the future regarding student enrollment, which is a mechanism for revenue. They need to graduate on pace. The trend is students taking longer time to complete undergrad degrees. Graduating students diversifies the state economy. They are graduating political scientists, such as himself, engineers, economists, a whole host of diverse graduates at every campus.

[8:44:17 AM](#)

MR. SWEET said University of Alaska President Jim Johnsen says having a college diploma increases any of the metrics used for measuring success, such as likelihood for staying out of prison, lifespan, amount of money made, etc.

[8:45:00 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked how long the term is for a student regent and whether he will be able to complete his term before he finishes his degree.

[8:45:15 AM](#)

MR. SWEET said the appointment is May 31, 2017, through May 31, 2019. The other members serve eight years. He does anticipate being a student for two years.

[8:46:09 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked why it is important to have a student on the board.

MR. SWEET answered for the student perspective. They see every square inch of the campus. Students see things that staff and administration wouldn't see. He is at the Legislature because of the Coalition of Students Leaders legislative advocacy trip. At the business meeting yesterday, one of the students from Fairbanks said there are not enough family friendly bathrooms, especially for single male parents. That won't occur to someone who is not in that position.

[8:47:57 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES said one of the challenges to recruiting more students and having them graduate on time is the alarmingly high number of students who need remedial coursework. There was some discussion of rather than have these students take zero level courses could they be in 100 level courses with stronger tutor supports.

[8:48:47 AM](#)

MR. SWEET said that as someone who took a zero level class as a freshman, he would be supportive of that. Better tutoring hours would be at the top of the list of what keeps students in school.

[8:49:24 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES said she hoped he could be a bridge to school districts across the state, so graduates will be ready for college.

[8:49:47 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked him who is his favorite faculty member and why.

[8:50:06 AM](#)

MR. SWEET said that when he started at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), he knew he wanted to study political science but didn't know what he wanted to minor in. Introduction to Justice completely changed his perspective. He found a world-class staff with the Justice Center at UAA. There are many high-caliber things about UA, but he would highlight the UAA Justice Center.

[8:51:02 AM](#)

ALEC BURRIS, Student Body President, University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), supported the Student Regent confirmation. He said he has worked with Regent Sweet for the past two years. He has truly enriched their engagement with the Board of Regents. He made it his mission to make students aware of what is going on at the Board of Regents and making sure they have a seat at the table.

[8:52:16 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS opened and closed public testimony.

[8:52:22 AM](#)

SENATOR COGHILL moved to forward the name of the following appointee to the University of Alaska Board of Regents to the joint session of the legislature for consideration; Stephen (Joey) Sweet of Anchorage.

CHAIR STEVENS found no objection and the name was forwarded.

He reminded members that signing the reports regarding appointments to boards and commissions in no way reflects individual members' approval or disapproval of the appointees, and that the nominations are merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.

[8:52:37 AM](#)

At ease.

[8:52:48 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 8:52.