

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 10, 2020

8:03 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair
Representative Grier Hopkins
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky
Representative DeLena Johnson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Chris Tuck
[One vacant seat as of 1/25/2020]

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S) : ASSOCIATION OF ALASKA SCHOOL BOARDS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

NORM WOOTEN, Executive Director
Association of Alaska School Boards
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided opening remarks for the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards and offered remarks to the committee.

STARR MARSETT, President
Anchorage School Board
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented PowerPoint slideshow entitled "Good Things in ASD" during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

NEERYA BRU, Student
East High School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided comments and answered questions of the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

DEBBIE CAREY, Board Member
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District
Ninilchik, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

KAEGAN KOSKI, Student
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District
Kenai, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 198 during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

FLORENCE SARREN, Student
Bering Strait School District
Unalakleet, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 181 during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

JORDAN SEGUNIK, Student,
Shaktoolik High School
Bering Strait School District
Shaktoolik, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 181 during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

KATIE OLIVER, Board Member
Kodiak Island Borough School District Board of Education
Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

JUDY CARSTENS, Board Member
Kodiak Island Borough School District Board of Education
Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

DEBRA ADAMS, Teacher
Cordova City School District

Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

PETE HOEPHNER, Board Member
Cordova City School District
Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

RICHARD LEE, Interim Superintendent
Kashunamiut School District
Chevak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

KAY ANDREWS, President
Southwest Region Schools
Dillingham, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

JOHN ATCHAK, Board Member
Kashunamiut School District
Chevak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

ETHAN SUNDOWN, Student
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 181 during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

BART MWAREY, Superintendent
Hydaburg City School District
Hydaburg, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

Patrick Williams, Teacher

Bethel Regional High School
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

GREGORY SLATS, Board Member
Kashunamiut School District
Chevak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

WILLIAM SPOTT, Superintendent
Yakutat School District
Yakutat, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided district updates and comments to the committee during the presentation on the Association of Alaska School Boards.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:03:28 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR ANDI STORY called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:03 a.m. Representatives Johnson, Hopkins, Zulkosky, Drummond, and Story were present at the call to order.

PRESENTATION(S): Association of Alaska School Boards

[Contains discussion of HB 198, HB 181, SB 6, and HB 204.]

[8:04:30 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the only order of business would be a presentation by the Association of Alaska School Boards.

[8:04:56 AM](#)

NORM WOOTEN, Executive Director, Association of Alaska School Boards, explained that this is the boards' first legislative fly-in, consisting of 80 school board members, plus 20 students who participated in the Youth Advocacy Institute on Saturday and learned how to participate in school boards and advocate for students and educational programs. He shared that the students

also are visiting individual legislators, and he thanked committee members for scheduling time to visit with students.

[8:06:24 AM](#)

STARR MARSETT, President, Anchorage School Board, gave a PowerPoint presentation entitled "Good Things in ASD" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. Referring to slide two of the PowerPoint, entitled "Anchorage School District: A Solid Investment," she drew attention to the statistics of Anchorage School District (ASD) on the slide. She pointed out that ASD consists of more than 46,500 students and noted that the grade levels within ASD consist of kindergarten through twelfth grade. She went on to explain the racial demographic of ASD consists of 58 percent students of color and 42 percent white students. She highlighted that the four-year graduation rate increased to 84 percent, while the five-year graduation rate rose to 87 percent. The district has 92 buildings and is the largest facility footprint after UA (University of Alaska). She concluded that ASD is the eighth largest employer in Alaska.

MS MARSETT, referring to slide three of the PowerPoint, entitled "Career Technical Education," explained that Career Technical Education (CTE) programs exist in ASD high schools and include curricula such as biomedical and culinary. She noted that King Tech High School is the focus center of CTE and consists of 200 full-time students - 800 part time students and an additional 200 part time students in ASD's third session. She noted that the CTE program serves a total of approximately 1,200 students in King Tech High School.

MS MARSETT, referring to slide four of the PowerPoint, entitled "Newest CTE Program: Growing Our Own," explained that one of the newest CTE programs is "Educators Rising," where ASD is "Growing Our Own" teachers. She testified that ASD's biggest concern is teachers that look like students. Bartlett High School has 23 ninth- and tenth-grade students enrolled in this CTE program. Eleventh- and twelfth-grade students are then enrolled in ASD's "middle college," which provides General Education Requirements towards a Bachelor of Science (BS) in Education. Ms. Marsett explained that these students then apply for a two-year post-secondary program, during which the students are hired as student aide interns. She went on to explain that the cost savings from not paying benefits to interns results in a net savings, which allows ASD to take advantage of the students' skillsets, pay for the two-year, post-secondary program for students to earn their BS in Education, and then these students

are asked to contract with ASD for a commitment of two years or repay the post-secondary costs. She indicated that this is a way to create diversity among ASD teachers and "grow our own" teachers from and in Alaska.

8:09:07 AM

MS. MARSETT, referring to slide five of the PowerPoint, entitled "Fine Arts," explained that the photo in the slide is one of "Sonic Boom," which consists of over 2,000 sixth-grade first-year music students enrolled in band and orchestra. She explained that ASD is still offering art programs to students, to allow the students more choices.

8:09:31 AM

MS MARETT, referring to slide six of the PowerPoint, entitled "World Language and Immersion Programs," explained that ASD is diverse with over 100 different languages spoken by the student body, of which Yupik is one of the top five. She also noted that ASD is the first school district in the nation to offer an indigenous 50/50 immersion school. The district also offers Japanese, Spanish, Russian, German, Chinese, and French in the foreign language program.

8:09:53 AM

MS MARSETT, referring to slide seven of the PowerPoint, entitled "Preschool," explained that ASD has expanded preschool in areas of low enrollment and which have space available, ASD has created a fourth tier of bussing resulting in cost savings that offset the cost of an additional six pre-K classrooms this year. She explained that 80 percent of ASD students enrolled in pre-K are moving into kindergarten and general education without requiring an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

MS. MARETT, referring to slide eight of the PowerPoint, entitled "Lower Yukon School District Partnership," said this is a partnership of which ASD is very proud. She explained that ASD brings Lower Yukon School District (LYSD) students into King Tech High School, which has enabled ASD to provide a third-tier session. She indicated that basketball in the rural areas tended to distract students from attending King Tech High School, but she was hopeful that students will elect to prioritize participation in the CTE programs. She explained that the LYSD partnership has enabled ASD to provide CTE at King Tech for an additional 200 students, at no cost to ASD.

[8:11:09 AM](#)

MS. MARESTT, referring to slide eight of the PowerPoint, entitled "Efficient use of Time, Space & Funds," explained that in addition to CTE third-sessions through partnerships with other districts, and the six additional preschool classrooms, ASD has closed or merged five different schools in four years. She explained that in 2017, ASD closed Mt. Iliamna Elementary School, and moved Crossroads Alternative School to Benson Secondary School; in [2019], ASD closed Mt. Spurr Elementary School and co-located PAIDEIA Cooperative School within Central Middle School; in 2020 , ASD plans to co-locate AVAIL [school] within Benson Secondary School to realize additional savings.

MS. MARSETT explained that ASD is currently developing its budget and has an approximate \$19.5 million deficit and plans to eliminate the "IGNITE" program [ASD gifted and talented program] and to deliver elementary health differently; instead of by health teachers, it will be delivered through physical education (PE), in a classroom, or through librarians. She explained that ASD is receiving a lot of feedback on cuts, and ASD is looking carefully at all cuts. She noted that ASD is examining boundaries to shift capacity differentials. She indicated that, despite efficiencies and innovative approaches to delivering programs to students, ASD predicts that it will be required to cut additional programs in the future.

[8:13:18 AM](#)

NEERYA BRU, High School Senior, East High School, testified that she joined student government in ninth grade, and in eleventh grade, joined the SAB (Student Advisory Board). She testified that she viewed the legislative fly-in as an opportunity to learn more.

MS. BRU testified that at East High School, the student population is diverse. She recognized high CTE third session enrollment, as well as that a majority of CTE students are participating in the nursing program. She testified ASD is providing an amazing opportunity that is otherwise not available in the students' communities.

[8:14:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY indicated her excitement regarding the Yupik language immersion program and noted that Lower Kuskokwim

School District (LKSD) has had a Yupik immersion program since the 1990s. She asked Ms. Marsett how the ASD and LKSD programs are different or similar.

[8:14:44 AM](#)

MS. MARSETT explained that the ASD Yupik immersion program is a 50/50 program, meaning that students spend half of their day [immersed] in English, and half of their day is spent [immersed] in Yupik.

[8:15:14 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSON asked to refer to slide two of the PowerPoint presentation, specifically to the statistic of 84 percent graduation rate. She asked to what group that statistic applies: students starting that school year or overall from freshman year?

[8:15:37 AM](#)

MS. MARSETT answered it is 84 percent graduation rate of that year.

[8:15:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSON posed a follow up to clarify whether the 84 percent rate is that of a graduate who would have started his/her senior year that school year.

MS. MARETT confirmed this as accurate.

[8:16:04 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY specified that there is a standard measurement of tracking students that should include all four years of high school.

[8:16:17 AM](#)

MS. MARSETT answered that the 84 percent represents a total of that, following those students.

[8:16:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS indicated that Educators Rising - "growing our own" - is a very good program and he is pleased to

see the vertical integration and tracking of these students all the way through their education and post-graduation employment.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS indicated that \$19 million in budget shortfall is a substantial gap to try to close and he appreciates the efforts of ASD, such as in consolidating schools and evaluating boundaries; however, he expressed that eliminating IGNITE and the changes to the health education program were unfortunate. He indicated that several students with whom he has met have stressed the importance of health education, and he asserted that students should receive more than the "three R's."

[8:17:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked Ms. Bru to share what topics her fellow students have asked her to bring forward on their behalf to the school board.

[8:17:39 AM](#)

MS. BRU answered that at East High School the top concern is about discipline: out-of-school suspension (OSS) and attendance rates. She indicated that students are happy with the programs as outlined in the presentation, and the feedback she receives pertains more to students who do not want to attend classes.

[8:18:11 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND expressed interest in how ASD was able to expand preschool and save enough money to create six additional classrooms and will follow up in a separate meeting with Ms. Marsett.

[8:18:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY, referring to slide three, asked Ms. Marsett to explain the bulleted point "full release internships for seniors."

[8:18:51 AM](#)

MS. MARETT replied that ASD works with the business community to provide unpaid internships according to a student's field of study.

[8:19:20 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked if those business community members were part of ASD's community partnerships.

MS. MARSETT indicated she could only answer the question in part. She went on to say that ASD staff works with over 800 business partners and volunteers to coordinate internships.

8:19:58 AM

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSON stated that labor negotiations often revolve around health care. She asked whether ASD has coordinated with state and local government entities to potentially pool more employees [resulting in cost savings].

MS. MARSETT noted that ASD exempt employees have Vera Whole Health that has resulted in a cost savings estimated to be \$2 million. She provided examples of health plan specifications that contributed to the cost savings. She noted that Anchorage Education Association (AEA) is self-insured and frequently re-negotiates with ASD.

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSON noted that ASD is the eighth largest employer in the state, and it being such a large group, she asked whether there had been any discussion about pooling other groups for additional cost savings.

MS. MARSETT indicated that discussions have taken place; however, since AEA is self-managed, there are limitations to potentials for pooling for [economies of scale] and ASD has not pooled with other groups.

8:22:58 AM

DEBBIE CAREY, Board Member, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, began her testimony by noting that the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD) values education and meeting student needs through quantifiable measures and uses data to inform decisions while allowing choices that best meet the needs of students. She explained that KPBSD consists of 42 schools, made up of small, large, charter, alternative, and homeschool options. She highlighted two recent recognitions: Tustumena Elementary School in Kasilof was recognized by the National Elementary and Secondary Education Act Distinguished Schools program, and Carlyn Nichols of Seward Middle School was named Alaska Teacher of the Year by Alaska Society for Technology in

Education as a result of her exceptional integration of technology, redefining the learning experience of her students.

[8:23:57 AM](#)

MS. CAREY explained that KPBSD has based its strategic plan around "4 R's," explained as: ready, relevant, responsive, and rigor. She described innovations in achieving goals and students achieving their lifelong individual learning potentials through incorporating "student voice" [student cultural informed teaching] via videoconferencing, and application of technology that includes videoconferencing for distance learning. She noted that Nanwalek and Port Graham schools were awarded grants through ConnectEd Apple Grant which expanded their technological learning capabilities.

MS. CAREY cited programs such as Upstream Academy, innovation with drones, industry certifications, Jump Start, concurrent credits, college dual credits, and CTE. She attributed the success of these programs to timely and responsive communication. She acknowledged unique community collaborations with Project GRAD and Caring for the Kenai. She explained that KPBSD focuses on the whole student, including mental wellness and social/emotional goals. She noted that these objectives are supported by programs such as Project Aware and Sources of Strength.

[8:26:01 AM](#)

KAEGAN KOSKI, Student, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, explained the program, Sources of Strength, to the committee, which is a peer-to-peer support and suicide prevention program. Mr. Koski also described the BookNook project literacy program to engage young students who otherwise have demonstrated apathy towards reading.

MR. KOSKI testified in support of proposed legislation HB 198. He testified regarding his own observed and his peers' direct experience with "atrocious acts of harassment." He suggested that passage of this legislation would improve the educational experience for all students.

[8:27:43 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS thanked Mr. Koski and acknowledged the importance and efficacy of the Sources of Strength program. He

also acknowledged statewide cuts to education and inquired of KPBSD how it would address its budget shortfall.

[8:28:12 AM](#)

MS. CAREY said that the district was once again strategically tapping savings to offset the approximate \$2 million shortfall and noted that the district would be unable to continue to tap savings in the future. She added that the district is reaching out to the communities within the district to assist it in making plans for potential future budget shortfalls.

[8:28:48 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked whether the [Kenai Peninsula] Borough is contributing the maximum it will allow in terms of local contribution.

MS. CAREY replied that, for the first time in many years, the borough will be funding the district up to the cap.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND acknowledged her delight at Mr. Koski's presence and testimony before the committee. She explained that KPBSD is one of five "urban" districts; however, given her experience of having grown up in New York City, the "urban" designation seems antithetical; KPBSD is rural and "far flung." She asked whether all the schools in the district are on the Kenai Peninsula.

MS. CAREY offered multiple examples of areas with schools not specifically on the Kenai peninsula: Tyonek, Port Graham, Nanwalek, and Russian schools at the head of the bay; small schools such as Hope School in Moose Pass; and several large high schools such as Kenai Central High School and Soldotna High School. She also noted Ninilchik, which is a kindergarten through twelfth grade ("K-12") school. She described that there exists a variety of combinations of grade levels at discrete schools, including homeschools.

[8:30:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY acknowledged the exceptionalism of the students who had testified thus far at the hearing, as well as those she had interacted with individually. She noted that the Alaska State House is wrapping up budget subcommittee processes. She asked how KPBSD funds suicide prevention programs, and

whether the district has adequate resources to fund this important work.

MS. CAREY offered that programs receive grant funds through Project Aware and Sources of Strength. She expressed hope for continued funding availability through those grants. She emphasized the importance of mental wellness particularly at younger ages, leading to much stronger high school students, and the district intends to focus on younger students. She continued naming additional sources of funding for specific sites, including Ninilchik Traditional Council and "Project GRAD," which provides a counselor.

[8:32:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY suggested that, while Sources of Strength currently provides the curriculum, the district should be able to provide that curriculum and would need an increase in funds and resources to sustain these programs going forward.

MS. CAREY agreed.

[8:32:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY recalled earlier testimony regarding the use of drones and asked Ms. Carey to elaborate.

MS. CAREY explained that through the Caring for the Kenai project, Seward High School built a drone using a 3-D printer and is working with the City of Seward to map flood zones. She continued that Ninilchik and possibly Homer have drone programs.

[8:34:13 AM](#)

FLORENCE SARREN, Student, Bering Strait School District, first highlighted the School Climate Connectedness Survey, which measures student interest in school. She indicated that the students who have "given up on school" metric has been favorably in decline. She explained that only 32 percent of students have not given up, while 68 percent have given up on school. She emphasized that her school and the district have good programs, but there is room for improvement.

MS. SARREN testified in strong support of HB 181, "An Act relating to mental health education." She testified that her school district suffers the second highest suicide rate in the nation. She opined that this bill would benefit both the school

and the region. She claimed that the implementation of this bill would provide healthy coping mechanisms for unhealthy thoughts among students.

[8:36:17 AM](#)

JORDAN SEGUNIK, Student, Shaktoolik High School, Bering Strait School District, testified that implementation of HB 181 would directly positively impact himself and his peers to gain skills to cope with negative feelings. He explained that some - but not all - members of his community have unhealthy coping mechanisms and suffer from depression and loss due to suicide. He suggested that this bill would introduce applicable skills into his community to help all residents.

[8:37:55 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked whether Ms. Sarren wished to add to her testimony.

MS. SARREN indicated that, in the interest of the committee's time, she would like to arrange to meet to provide additional information directly with individual legislators.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND agreed to set up meetings later.

[8:38:35 AM](#)

KATIE OLIVER, Board Member, Kodiak Island Borough School District Board of Education, expressed gratitude on behalf of the Kodiak Island Borough School District (KIBSD) for legislative support of forward funding of education, as it provides essential, stable, and predictable funding to meet the needs of students and improve student outcomes across the state. Ms. Oliver requested an increase in the base student allocation inside the foundation formula. She noted that KIBSD serves over 2,400 students within the City of Kodiak and in five smaller community schools around the archipelago.

MS. OLIVER suggested that excellent work takes place when quality teachers have a manageable number of students, when students are challenged, and when they can take advantage of opportunities to manage to their own individual talents. She noted that KIBSD, like other districts in Alaska, struggles with teacher recruitment and retention, and currently over 40 percent of KIBSD teachers are untenured, meaning that they have been employed in the district for fewer than four years. She

explained that the district has unfilled positions, as well as positions filled by itinerant contract staff. She outlined increasing obstacles to effective recruitment, including being required to recruit earlier in the school year, the high costs of recruitment, decreasing local qualified applicants, and increased costs associated with staff turnover and training.

MS. OLIVER stated that KIBSD is strategizing to solve recruitment problems, particularly in special education. She noted that KIBSD has an initiative with the education department of University of Alaska, Anchorage, Kodiak College in their education department, in conjunction with community partners to create a pipeline of talent into the district.

MS. OLIVER testified that KIBSD's approach to "grow your own" teachers is centered in arts and culture integration as an approach to teaching and learning. She described the Munartet Project Grant for dual enrollment credits. She explained that the district is encouraging education as a career path available to students. She highlighted that the program is in its fourth year of existence and that every teacher who has graduated Kodiak College has been hired by the district. Ms. Oliver requested continued legislative support of the University of Alaska to help grow the workforce and to invest in any majors that will attract teacher workforce to Alaska. She testified that KIBSD supports legislation for additional funding for pre-K, and that the district has a strong program that it wishes to continue. She testified that the district encourages support of programs for children around four years of age, and that KIBSD has experienced growth in this demographic.

[8:43:19 AM](#)

MS. OLIVER testified that KIBSD has benefited from grant funds for broadband internet, and it supports any legislative efforts to increase speeds to the benefit of all KIBSD schools.

[8:43:45 AM](#)

JUDY CARSTENS, Board Member, Kodiak Island Borough School District Board of Education, provided a synopsis of the content of the AASB legislative fly-in, describing breakout sessions in which different school board members from across the state met and discussed issues such as HB 204 and the Alaska Marine Highway. Ms. Carsten testified that AASB members reached a clear consensus that the top priority negatively impacting students is the lack of ferry service. She read a statement

that the AASB coastal community members drafted as public testimony to the House Education Standing Committee, as follows:

School districts across coastal Alaska rely upon a strong, reliable marine highway system to connect them to the rest of the state. The state ferry system provides a cost-effective and sometimes singular option of transportation that is necessary for the transport of students, materials, and food. The Alaska Marine Highway is an essential transportation infrastructure of the state.

MS. CARSTEN also brought forward concerns from communities that the lack of groceries due to reduced or eliminated ferry service is causing discipline problems among students within the schools.

[8:46:43 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSON mentioned the Alaska Reads Act [SB 6], the proposed legislation requested by the governor, and asked whether KIBSD had read the legislation and could offer testimony or critique of it.

[8:47:08 AM](#)

MS. OLIVER indicated that after preliminary analysis, KIBSD is excited that the proposed legislation includes support and opportunities for funding for pre-K. She stated that the district shares the goals prioritizing literacy ensuring students' ability to read by the third grade. She testified that the borough has several questions for clarification on several areas of the legislation. She cited specific areas of concern as the reporting requirements burden on districts, the ranking and prioritization of individual schools, and a question regarding the extent of local control over the program.

[8:48:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS urged the Cordova City School District (CCSD) to make sure its individuals' voices or collective district voice is heard at opportunities for public testimony regarding SB 6.

[8:48:54 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND recommended that Ms. Carstens submit the written statement regarding impacts of reduced ferry service to the House Transportation Standing Committee - of which she is a member - to inform the committee on additional impacts of the cuts to services.

[8:50:44 AM](#)

DEBRA ADAMS, Teacher, Cordova City School District, stated that she has been a teacher in Cordova since 1983. She highlighted one of many major accomplishments of CCSD; it held the distinction of the only school in Alaska to have received this year's AP (Advanced Placement) CollegeBoard Honor Roll. She continued by noting two areas of concern for the district and students. The first is the tremendous impact of no ferry service to Cordova. She stated that Cordova is scheduled with no ferry service from October [2019] to May [2020], and students are challenged to participate in activities such as sports and academic competitions, and the community is experiencing shortages of fresh produce and other groceries. She acknowledged that the community has rallied to support student activities; however, it cannot sustainably continue to rally in future years.

MS. ADAMS continued with the second area of concern, that of teacher retention in Cordova and throughout the state. She explained that Alaska provides no incentive to attract and retain teachers without programs such as defined benefits. She went on to describe her fear that a colleague, whom she admires as brilliant, and whom she predicts would contend for award of Teacher of the Year, has no incentive to stay in the state. She expressed that not only this specific colleague might probably leave, but also other talented and devoted colleagues.

[8:53:15 AM](#)

MS. ADAMS indicated a correlation between teacher retention and the success of the community of Cordova. She explained that when she began teaching, her predecessor had been a teacher in Cordova for 25 years. She noted that students go on to become neighbors, local nurses, and city council members. She urged the committee to consider possibilities that would increase teacher retention, such as defined benefits.

[8:54:11 AM](#)

PETE HOEPHNER, Board Member, Cordova City School District, stated that he has attended legislative hearings in Juneau for several years, and the deficit spending, or flat funding, over the last seven years is "unbelievable" and "inconceivable." He cited that over the last ten years, the base student allocation (BSA) has increased by 8.7 percent, and during that same time period, the Anchorage consumer price index (CPI) has increased by 27 percent and health insurance costs have increased by 326 percent. Mr. Hoephner drew the analogy that previous cuts have been "through the muscle" and subsequent cuts have gone "to the bone and beyond."

MR. HOEPHNER described the current educational environment in Alaska as one where teachers have no retirement plans, and the state is losing population. He recalled the testimony of Ms. Adams, that the children educated in communities in Alaska are the future citizens and public servants of those communities. He asked the legislature to consider what it wants the future of Alaska to look like when weighing its decisions, and he advised that for growth to occur, education must be funded. He went on to suggest that the legislature scrutinize appropriated dollars that fund the actual classroom; of a \$15,000 to \$18,000 student allocation, retirement and health care costs may reduce that amount by \$6,000 to \$7,000 in the actual classroom. He stated that classroom dollars are fewer and fewer every year.

[8:56:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSON concurred with Mr. Hoephner's recommendation to scrutinize actual dollars that fund the actual classroom. She suggested that health care in particular is an "overwhelming" burden across many sectors. She asked Mr. Hoephner to provide any suggestions for solutions.

[8:57:42 AM](#)

MR. HOEPHNER elucidated that there are several ideas, the first of which is additional revenue. He stated that education in Alaska needs stable funding, and the legislature's role in education is to increase revenues, and his purpose in testifying as a school board member before the committee is to request additional funding for education. He indicated that budget cuts and flat funding have been in place since 2014; kindergarteners then are now in the eighth grade.

[8:58:43 AM](#)

PRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY agreed with Ms. Adams' testimony regarding the importance of teacher retention, and the positive impact teacher retention has on communities. She recalled positive interactions with teachers that helped to shape her life path. She asked, in addition to new revenue streams and examining defined benefits, what other types of support Ms. Adams would recommend to positively impact teacher retention.

[8:59:49 AM](#)

MS. ADAMS answered that she would need additional time to carefully consider the question, and perhaps a program that provides financial advisors to teachers might positively impact teacher retention. She explained that teachers, while they are trained in their field, are not trained in investing and retirement planning, and that offering professional expertise in personal financial management would be valuable.

[9:02:28 AM](#)

MR. HOEPHNER commented that he has participated in teacher union contract negotiations for several years. He suggested that the current climate of fiscal uncertainty has led to CCSD being required to take such measures as delaying implementation of negotiations for up to a year, and - as when the ferry was cut - it was required to come up with an additional \$150,000. He suggested that current contracts are, in actuality, incentivizing teachers to leave after five years, due to the 401k program. He indicated that one teacher, Ben Walker, has left the state. He pointed out that "older teachers" have taken a cut in pay to contribute to newer teacher retention, but that under the current program, teacher pay is reduced by \$100 per month - which CCSD matches - and teachers will not see that money for 20 years. He noted that CCSD was not able to hire a PE teacher this year.

[9:04:20 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY noted that a change to defined benefits for teachers occurred in 2006 to a defined contribution system. She stated that teachers in Alaska not only do not have a supplementary benefits system, they also do not qualify for Social Security benefits. She pointed out that private industry offers programs such as 401k in addition to Social Security Benefits; however, Alaska's schools do not.

[9:05:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS thanked Ms. Adams for her long teaching career and noted that he still interacts with his former teachers in his home district. He suggested that the contribution which funds Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) and Teacher Retirement System (TRS), when scrutinizing dollars into the classroom out of the BSA, should be considered classroom dollars because it is the "feedstock" for the teachers. He noted that in Fairbanks, teachers negotiated a 403(b) program. He noted that Tier 3 staff are permitted to cash in their sick leave and deposit that into their retirement plans. He noted that previous employees were able to cash in sick leave, and Tier 3 and Tier 4 employees have or will have lost any unused sick leave at the time of retirement. He stated that pay and benefits is in fact the incentive to retain teachers and should be viewed as actual dollars to the classroom. He commended CCSD for its efforts in teacher retention through contract negotiations and expressed his hope that other districts look to CCSD as an example for teacher retention. He concluded that he hopes that the legislature will help achieve fiscal stability for education going forward.

[9:07:52 AM](#)

RICHARD LEE, Interim Superintendent, Kashunamiut School District, informed the committee that Kashunamiut School District is in the process of dealing with some "extreme" financial issues that have persisted from the past, and is seeking grants funding and to identify future funding needs. He noted that one difficulty facing the district is finding teachers who will stay in the rural communities more than a year or two. He noted that rural Alaska cannot compete with Lower-48 districts, and, previously, the allure of Alaska included salaries that were a little bit higher than those in the Lower-48.

[9:10:13 AM](#)

KAY ANDREWS, President, Southwest Region Schools, reiterated previous witnesses' testimony on teacher retention. She expressed gratitude to legislators for meeting with school districts and for working on behalf of the districts. She indicated that Southwest Region Schools (SRS) intends to review and provide written comment and position statements on proposed education legislation. She noted that SRS has concern with the Alaska Reads Act, particularly the assessment requirements. She explained that weekly Individualized Education Program (IEP)

assessment is not realistic. She explained that reading specialists require a mastery, and postulated that at a regional job fair, one might encounter one single master reading specialist; and under SB 6, the district would require eight specialists. She also highlighted concerns about the curriculum and the impact on existing pre-K programs across the state. She stated that she is a strong supporter of pre-K programs and speculated that SB 6 would not be necessary if a robust pre-K program had been in place statewide. She encouraged the development of such a program.

[9:13:14 AM](#)

MS. ANDREWS continued by noting that, in the unlikely case that the district was able to recruit and hire the necessary reading specialists, her community has a critical housing shortage. She explained that routine maintenance of facilities, which is compounded by extreme weather, is very costly and unpredictable, causing difficulty in planning for those costs. She noted that only 30 percent of students are proficient in reading, which indicated that seven out of ten students would be required to report under the proposed legislation. She indicated that other programs would suffer from the requirements, resulting in schools becoming reading-only schools. She noted that SRS teachers are currently managing multiple grade levels, and for them to become reading specialists is not realistic. She noted that the shortage of teachers is nationwide. She said she was encouraged by the dialogue surrounding teacher retention, particularly the University of Alaska, Anchorage Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) study. She suggested examining what is being done to retain teachers, such as by conducting exit interviews of departing staff.

[9:17:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS encouraged Ms. Andrews to take advantage of opportunities for public testimony on SB 6, whether on behalf of herself or on behalf of her professional organization. He asked Ms. Andrews whether SRS conducts exit interviews.

MS. ANDREWS indicated that SRS does conduct them. She recommended that the exit interview process be examined by experts to ensure that the proper questions are being asked to obtain the desired data.

[9:18:04 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND stated that the Alaska Reads Act is large & complex, and clarified that the intent of SB 6 as implemented would be universal pre-K. She noted that SB 6 is still in development in the Senate. She encouraged Ms. Andrews - as Representative Hopkins suggested - to take advantage of opportunities for public testimony on SB 6.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked Ms. Andrews which communities are a part of her district.

MS. ANDREWS noted that the district includes schools in Dillingham, Togiak, Twin Hills, New Stoyahok, Manokotak, Aleknagik, Clark's Point, and Ekwok - communities in the Dillingham census area.

[9:20:10 AM](#)

JOHN ATCHAK, Board Member, Kashunamiut School District, related a success story wherein approximately 25 years ago, he encountered a small child and posed a question in his Native language, "Do you need help?" He reflected on his dismay at the child not having understood this phrase in his Native language. He noted that in the time since, more and more children have become fluent in their Native language as a result of foreign language immersion programs. There are currently programs in kindergarten and first, second, and third grades, with two highly qualified teachers fluent in Yupik. He noted that the students are "taking it home" and teaching their parents to understand and speak Yupik.

[9:25:10 AM](#)

MR. ATCHAK went on to explain that the immersion programs teach two ways of thinking, which helps develop students. He noted that the district is focused on raising test scores and expanding the immersion program into additional grade levels.

[9:26:46 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND agreed that second language programs for students are critical to brain development.

[9:28:40 AM](#)

ETHAN SUNDOWN, Student, Lower Kuskokwim School District, recounted the arrest of now-former Bethel school [principal] in December 2019, by the Federal Bureau of Investigation FBI Child

Exploitation Task Force on serious and heinous charges of child pornography. He emphasized that HB 181 would help students and members of the community to deal with the ramifications of this serious and unexpected behavior from a trusted educator. He noted that students in Bethel had recently felt a credible threat of a possible school shooting, and that the memory of the 1997 shooting at Bethel school frightened students enough to stay home from school. He noted that some parents in Bethel are still recovering emotionally from the 1997 Bethel school shooting. He spoke in strong support of HB 181.

[9:31:23 AM](#)

MR. SUNDOWN explained that his family is a strong and emotionally supportive unit. He suggested that not all students have the support of their families, and that HB 181 - if done right - would have an amazing impact on the mental health of students. He encouraged that even people who have the privilege of a supportive environment would benefit from HB 181 by learning peer support strategies and mechanisms.

[9:32:55 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND addressed Mr. Sundown to ensure his awareness that Representative Zulkosky was in seventh grade at the time of the 1997 school shooting. She noted that the Bethel shooting happened before the 1999 Columbine High School Massacre. She noted the exigency to resolve House Finance subcommittee matters so that the legislature may address legislation such as HB 181.

[9:34:28 AM](#)

BART MWAREY, Superintendent, Hydaburg City School District, shared that he is a second-generation educator and has worked at several sites around the state. He explained that the Hydaburg School District is overwhelmed with mental health issues that teachers and counselors are ill-equipped to handle, and he noted that technology - cell phones in particular - contributes to the problems. Mr. Mwarey explained that their district needs qualified therapists, as many students in Hydaburg and beyond lack parental support. He stated his support for HB 181.

MR. MWAREY addressed concerns regarding SB 6. He explained that Hydaburg City School District has recently implemented a language immersion program and is concerned about testing of preschoolers enrolled in the program and how progress will be measured. He also expressed concern with the retention portion

of SB 6. He explained that the community of Hydaburg, including the tribe, city, corporation, and school, assemble to collectively make decisions regarding the labor needs in the community. He went on to explain that this "united front" has resulted in students actively engaging in hands on, community service activities including assisting in building housing for teachers, and many of the students have responded well to this teaching method. He emphasized that he is hopeful that future funding will include provisions for local control and expressed concern that SB 6 is a top-down plan that would present many challenges to implementation.

[9:40:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS thanked the witness and applauded the united community in addressing its needs and encouraged Mr. Mwarey to take advantage of opportunities for public testimony on SB 6, whether on behalf of himself or on behalf of his professional organization.

[9:41:34 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY opened public testimony.

[9:41:46 AM](#)

Patrick Williams, Teacher, Bethel Regional High School, Lower Kuskokwim School District, introduced himself to the committee as a teacher, married to a science teacher who was part of the grow-your-own program in LKSD. He testified that he and other teachers wish very much to stay in the communities in which they are teaching; however, the benefits structure encourages teachers to leave after five years of service. He suggested that there is a disparity between teachers with better retirement plans and those who have less-desirable plans. He described the two as the "haves" and "have-nots." He concluded that should the district offer a better retirement plan, it would allow for teachers such as himself, his wife, and other colleagues to stay in the communities long term, and would provide for a more meaningful teaching experience.

[9:46:36 AM](#)

GREGORY SLATS, Board Member, Kashunamiut School District, addressed the committee with two concerns facing the district: teacher shortage and the risks involved in distance learning for students. He noted that the district has sufficient teacher

aides, and in order to cut costs, the district is considering eliminating some. He explained that teachers who have worked for decades in the district are retiring and those positions are extremely difficult to fill. He noted that distance learning can be negatively impacted by unstable Internet connections and a lack of interpersonal interaction between instructors and students in a virtual classroom environment.

[9:49:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked Mr. Slats to confirm that his district has enough teacher aides, as it is a very unusual circumstance for districts in Alaska.

MR. SLATS confirmed.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked Mr. Slats if his district had considered any programs to qualify aides working in the district as teachers.

MR. SLATS indicated that the district is examining available resources to train aides to become teachers.

[9:51:01 AM](#)

WILLIAM SPROTT, Superintendent, Yakutat School District, opened his testimony by explaining that he left retirement status to take on the role as superintendent of Yakutat School District (YSD). He explained that YSD has had persistent financial difficulties and has sustained cuts to teachers and programs to try to bring the district to operating within budget. He noted that this school year, YSD has realized a 25 percent increase in enrollment, which he attributed to local economic growth. He reported that math and English language arts proficiency in the district are at 40 percent or more. Mr. Sprott testified that YSD's top strategic goal is to increase language arts literacy, and that the introduction of SB 6 comes at a very opportune time for the district. He pointed out concerns including the retention piece of the bill and suggested that this component should remain under local control. He concluded by encouraging that funding for local districts accompany the passage of the bill.

[9:54:01 AM](#)

MR. SPROTT continued that YSD has been granted funds for Internet access and awarded a "huge" grant for technology

upgrades to a computer lab. He indicated that current internet speeds are too slow to fully support program activities. He explained that YSD is building infrastructure and awaiting the increased Internet speeds to deploy use of the new technology. Mr. Sprott requested any advocacy that the legislature may provide for Internet infrastructure improvements.

[9:54:46 AM](#)

MR. SPROTT suggested that increased literacy leads to increased graduation rates. He noted that graduation rates have increased from 66 percent to 74 percent.

[9:55:27 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS encouraged Mr. Sprott to take advantage of opportunities for public testimony on the Alaska Reads Act, whether on behalf of himself or on behalf of his professional organization.

[9:55:45 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked whether YSD has implemented any social/emotional learning programs.

[9:56:06 AM](#)

MR. SPROTT indicated that, after literacy, the top priority is social/emotional learning. Mr. Sprott shared that YSD received a grant that was sufficient to cover the cost of the entire staff - including paraprofessionals - to attend a certification program in September [of 2019]. He added that YSD is also using "early-outs," in-service days, trauma-engaged schools, and working with the community, with aid from the Steps Grant to bolster the social/emotional curriculum.

[9:57:44 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND requested explanation of early-outs.

MR. SPROTT indicated that YSD dismisses students one hour early, one day per week for staff to engage in social/emotional learning programs and training and take care of other housekeeping.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked how many students are enrolled at the site.

MR. SPROTT answered that total enrollment was 103 as of last week, and YSD had budgeted for 83 students.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND inquired what in the local economy precipitated the increase in enrollment.

[9:58:50 AM](#)

MR. SPROTT indicated that a local logging company and a new clinic that is under construction have contributed to the growth. He added that, in light of the new clinic, the district is working with high schoolers to consider health-related career paths. He indicated that Yakutat is a unique community, and that teacher retention is not a problem.

[10:00:46 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.