

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 20, 2020

8:03 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair  
Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair  
Representative Grier Hopkins  
Representative Chris Tuck  
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky  
Representative Mike Prax

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative DeLena Johnson

**OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT**

Representative Geran Tarr

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION: CORONAVIRUS - IMPLICATIONS FOR ALASKA SCHOOLS

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

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

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave a PowerPoint Presentation, entitled "Teaching & Learning Support for Alaska's Educators: COVID-19 Update."

DEENA BISHOP, Ed.D., Superintendent  
Anchorage School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified regarding the implication of coronavirus for Alaska Schools.

DANIEL WALKER, Superintendent  
Lower Kuskokwim School District  
Bethel, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified regarding the implication of coronavirus for Alaska Schools.

BRIDGET WEISS, Ph.D., Superintendent  
Juneau School District  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified regarding the implication of coronavirus for Alaska Schools.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:03:35 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR STORY** called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:03 a.m. Representatives Hopkins, Zulkosky, Prax and Story were present at the call to order. Representatives Tuck and Drummond arrived as the meeting was in progress. Representative Tarr was also present.

#### **Presentation & Discussion: Coronavirus - Implications for Alaska Schools**

[8:04:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the only order of business would be a presentation and discussion on the coronavirus and implications for Alaska schools.

[8:07:12 AM](#)

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), gave a PowerPoint Presentation, entitled "Teaching & Learning Support for Alaska's Educators: COVID-19 Update" [included in the committee packet].

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON announced the agenda he would cover, as shown on slide 2, and then he referred to a message he had written to public school families, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

"The only expectation of public education that eclipses its responsibility to provide an excellent education for every student every day is to take all

necessary steps to ensure the health and safety of every student every day."

- DEED Memo to Alaska Public School Families and Staff, dated March 13, 2020

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON expressed appreciation for and gave examples of people who have found ways to make things work during the pandemic, and he acknowledged underpraised workers, including cooks, bus drivers, and custodians.

[8:12:44 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON directed attention to the information on slide 4, which read [original punctuation provided]:

Major Education Announcements

- First Health Mandate - March 13, 2020
- Second Health Mandate - March 16, 2020

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said "nonstudent contact days" were scheduled March 26-27, with an unprecedented closure of schools; districts were encouraged to dedicate in-service days to fully organize and plan for remote delivered schooling; all residential programs are working to have students home by March 27, another mandate, and that goal is near to being reached.

[8:13:55 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY asked what considerations were made regarding schools that offer access to running water for those homes that do not have it.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that schools offering water, supplies, and in some cases emergency shelter, have staggered when people can come for the supplies. He said DEED is trying to work to address needs on a community by community basis. He confirmed that not only DEED, but also other agencies, were working to provide access to water.

[8:16:19 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON returned to the PowerPoint presentation, to slide 5, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

## DEED Communication Efforts

- DHSS Unified Command Conference Calls
- Internal Emergency Response Team
- In-State:
  - Daily group calls with superintendents (ASA)
  - Individual calls with district and school staff
  - Social media messaging (@AlaskaDEED)
  - Online resources - webinars, videos
  - ...and growing daily!
- Nation:
  - Twice-weekly calls with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and U.S. ED

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON credited districts for their communications on social media and teachers connecting with students. He highlighted a program called "The Den," which is offered on YouTube by an Anchorage district teacher named Mr. Butterfield.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON addressed the information on slide 6, regarding "Health & Safety Information & Resources" made available online by Todd Brocius, a school health and safety education administrator. He said DEED sent letters to superintendents about the coronavirus on February 6 and the online resource is updated regularly.

[8:19:49 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON covered topics on slides 7 and 8, related to student learning and teaching and learning support. He addressed the information on slide 7, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

### Support for Distance and Remote Teaching and Learning

DEED launched a Teaching & Learning Support site to offer information, resources, and leadership to teachers and school leaders across Alaska. The site serves as a clearinghouse where we share great ideas gleaned from a variety of locations and sources.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON shared the website is [www.aklearns.org](http://www.aklearns.org). He thanked the Southeast Regional Resource Center (SERRC) for its willingness to partner with DEED and continually update the website. He said this source offers online learning for educators, with over 300 teachers participating. In response to

Co-Chair Drummond, he confirmed that the web site is available to the public.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said forward-thinking superintendents have been doing a lot of work with their staff and teachers, and teachers have been doing a lot of work with their students. He mentioned curbside pickups and reported that the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) School District would be fully transitioned to online learning by the following week. He said superintendents are sharing information with each other. The web site includes information such as daily schedules, lesson plans, and opportunities in which families can partake from home.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON addressed slides 9, 10, and 11, which listed family resources, remote learning resources, and distance teaching tools, respectively. He said many curriculum providers have been offering their materials at no cost, and those links are included. He talked about Alaska Learning Opportunities, and he said the prior day over 300 teachers were logged on learning how to use Zoom. He mentioned the "ECHO" project, shown on slide 12, and said it is an excellent opportunity for teachers to acquire the skills needed "to function in this environment."

[8:24:56 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND gave a shout out to Alaska's service providers, Alaska Communications Systems, Inc. (ACS) and General Communications Incorporated (GCI), and said she had announced on the House floor what those two service providers have offered to communities.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON acknowledged that the telecommunications industry in Alaska has been ready from the beginning to figure out how it can support student learning.

[8:26:50 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON turned focus to slide 13, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Student Nutrition

- 32 districts have submitted waiver requests
- 23 districts have approved feeding plans for their communities
- 213 sites

- 1 Head Start
- 5 after-school programs have submitted waiver requests

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON credited Jo Dawson, [School Food Coordinator, Child Nutrition Services Section, DEED], for her forward-thinking in applying for a waiver before there were any COVID-19 cases in Alaska. He said the numbers on the slide are most likely old, since they have been "growing by the hour." He said Ms. Dawson and her team have been working to submit waivers related to food service. He gave a shout out to the bus drivers and cooks who have worked to ensure children do not go without food. The services are non-congregate; students can pick up food in staggered fashion or have food delivered by the bus drivers. He said the teachers at St. Mary's School, where Internet is limited, have fashioned a system of picking up and dropping off meals with lesson plans.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON discussed slide 14, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

#### Supporting Students with Special Needs

- #1 Priority: Keep students safe and then provide the services identified in the IEP, making accommodations as necessary.
- District special education leadership has been provided a DEED mobile contact number for 24/7 support
- Daily webinars with DEED

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said DEED's special education (SPED) team, led by Don Enoch, has been working tirelessly and has led web seminars. A service plan for teleservices has been created. He said SERRC has been working with DEED to assess needs of students with disabilities. In response to Co-Chair Drummond, he described the work done by SERRC in general.

[8:31:29 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON turned to slide 15, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

#### Residential School Programs

- Residential schools are committed to maintaining a connection with students and continuing education as students return home.

<https://education.alaska.gov/news/pdf/3-16-2020-DEED-COVID-19-Memo-to-Residential-School-Programs.pdf>

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON noted that most students are at home now, and they will not be able to commute back and forth to school in the interest of preventing community transmission [of COVID-19]. He recognized some of the programs and communities keeping students safe.

[8:32:56 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON, in response to a question from Representative Zulkosky regarding the transport of students from schools back to their communities, said schools such as Mt. Edgecumbe work under the guidance of health officials at the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS). For those flying home, chaperones were provided, and students were given rooms at hotels to reduce the amount of time they would have to be in the airport. In response to a follow-up question, he said Mt. Edgecumbe has about 400 students, and work has been done to bring students home each day. He said he did not know, but could find out, how many students had been transported to date.

[8:34:33 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded to a question from Representative Hopkins regarding the continued education and transcript outcomes of students who have returned home to areas that may not have adequate Internet connectivity. He noted that although people may wish for certainty in answers, it is not always possible in uncertain times. He said the answer to Representative Hopkins' question is different for each area. For example, the students in Nenana are utilizing "cyber links," the Nenana School Districts' correspondence program, while Mt. Edgecumbe is sending computers home with students. He said he has heard of some school districts ensuring students can connect to the Internet when not in the school building, for example, by driving up to the school. He said most students have access to cell phones, which can become "hotspots" to access Internet. He said DEED is working through the issue of transcripts.

[8:37:01 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON returned to the PowerPoint presentation, to the issue of "Statewide Assessments," beginning on slide 16. He said several days ago Governor Mike Dunleavy directed him to

seek waivers from the federal government on assessments and other federal requirements, specifically so that teachers will have time to reorient the delivery of instruction to students. He said he would have more information soon on the outcome of this conversation.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON moved on to slide 17, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

High School Seniors  
Graduation Requirements [&] APS Eligibility

- Educators across Alaska are currently preparing for possible distance delivery of instruction
- DEED expects the education of our students to continue

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said this is an especially stressful time for seniors transitioning from high school to either college or a career. He said Stephanie Butler, Executive Director of the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE), is researching what authority [the state] has to waive the requirement for the SAT and the ACT on the performance scholarship. He said with the support of the governor, he would be waiving that requirement for the performance scholarship. He explained that he does not want seniors to feel that the current situation is jeopardizing their opportunity to access that scholarship. He reiterated that transcript and graduation requirement issues are being worked out for high school seniors.

[8:39:11 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON, in response to Representative Hopkins, said a decision related to the transcripts would be made "as soon as possible."

[8:40:33 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON turned to slide 18, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Supporting Educators Teacher Certification

Current Online Support:

- Educators applying for certification can utilize DEED's Online Payment Center

- Educators renewing certification can utilize DEED's Online Certificate Renewal process

Looking Ahead:

- Certification expirations
- Emergency certificates

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said that under AS 14.20.020, he has the authority to issue emergency certificates and waive requirements for renewal of certification. He said he would be issuing emergency certificates to any student teachers who "were unable to complete their student experience" and extending certificates that would expire. Further, he would be authorizing emergency certification for individuals unable to satisfy testing and coursework requirements.

[8:41:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS opined that that was an excellent decision.

CO-CHAIR STORY said, "I think we probably all agree with that."

[8:42:27 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON brought attention to slide 19, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

#### School Calendar Waivers

- The Commissioner has the authority in Statute to waive the school term requirement if necessary (AS 14.03.030)
- At this time, non-student contact days are to be used as in-service days for educators

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he is currently looking at that authority. He said he converses with unified command on a regular basis. He expressed his appreciation for the willingness to talk extended by Commissioner Adam Crum, Dr. Anne Zink, and Governor Dunleavy. He said he would have an announcement to make on Monday as to whether the current pause and noncontact days will continue after the end of the month. He explained the normal process for waivers for school closures and said the department is working on preparing that letter for everyone so that individual districts don't have to do that and can focus instead on how they will deliver instruction.

[8:44:11 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON, in response to a question from Representative Tuck as to what was being done to prevent the spread of COVID-19, said the answer varies across the state. He said in some districts, teachers are working from home; others are working in the classroom with social distancing; teachers arriving in smaller communities from hub communities are first isolating; and DEED recomunicates the advisories and mandates posted by Dr. Zink. In response to a follow-up question as to the likelihood of brick and mortar schools not being open for students this year, he said the answer changes daily because of what is happening nationwide. He said there are already some school districts that will not be returning at the end of March. He expressed that although he holds out hope that the situation will improve, it is not unlikely that the statewide closure will continue after the end of the month.

[8:47:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS urged Commissioner Johnson to evaluate how an extended closure would impact teacher evaluation timeframes.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he has had a conversation about that issue, and it will be on his list of things to consider.

[8:48:32 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON stated his belief in the ability of Alaska students to continue to learn through this pandemic, and he emphasized the importance of them doing so in order to fill important occupations and roles in their communities. He asked students to be "the face of hope" and to show the world that "learning is not tied to a specific location." He thanked students for being flexible and excelling in the face of challenges and making this a story of triumph rather than tragedy.

[8:51:36 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND commented on the slide showing students, and she said she was happy "to see these kids sending us a signal that they're going to be okay."

[8:52:31 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON, in response to a question from Representative Tuck, said the other day he signed on to an ECHO Zoom meeting, and there were over 300 teachers participating. He said the [Behavioral Interventions for Early Childhood (BIEC), called ("ECHO")] project has many ways to instruct on Zoom. Many of the courses are recorded and can be watched at a later time. In response to Representative Drummond, he offered his understanding that these courses may be available to the public.

[8:54:54 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON, in response to a question from Representative Zulkosky, said he does not know how many students in Alaska participate in residential schools, but he speculated it was fewer than 1,000.

[8:55:18 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON, in response to Representative Hopkins, regarding recommended steps for continued payment of support staff, such as bus drivers who may not be delivering food [or transporting students], said he advises "to make every minute count for every kid." The situation that has not changed is the ability for students to learn. He said there are teachers and support professionals who can support that learning. He said converting student contact days to in-service days keeps districts from having to extend the school year. The budget has been allocated, and school districts can continue to pay "all those employees." He said he has heard of creative ways that support staff are being used. He said he has not heard reports of anyone not working; conversely, he hears stories about how people are working. He concluded, "There's something for everybody to do, even in this situation."

[8:57:35 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Commissioner Johnson, "Will monthly payments go out to districts, just continue to be made as we do under the foundation entitlements?"

[8:57:48 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON confirmed yes. In response to a query as to how the legislature can help, he told Co-Chair Story that having invited the department to do this presentation was

helpful. Further, he said the more the legislature can do to get information out to constituents, the better.

CO-CHAIR STORY noted that some districts had opened facilities to accommodate childcare for families of public health workers who are employed in hospitals and medical clinics, and she asked if that would be an option in Alaska.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON deferred to DHSS but said he knows "they sent out guidance to those providers."

8:59:50 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY expressed her appreciation for the work being done on behalf of students. She said the committee would now hear from superintendents.

9:00:48 AM

DEENA BISHOP, Ed.D., Superintendent, Anchorage School District (ASD), stated that ASD is focused on keeping students, employees, and members of the community safe and healthy. She talked about the steps ASD has taken since February 28, 2020, including cancelation of international, then domestic, travel. She explained that without this decision, over 880 students and employees would have traveled domestically and out of Alaska, with 130 of those traveling overseas. She said a large number of students have traveled, for example, during spring break, and ASD is doing assessments on them to ensure those coming into the buildings are low risk.

DR. BISHOP said teachers were given the option of teleworking or teaching from their classrooms. She said this is in conjunction with the low-, medium-, and high-risk categories defined by the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC). Other employees are also working from home. She said as long as staff is "on-call and ready to work" they are being paid. She said ASD is doing administrative leave for those who have to stay home because they are medium-, to high-risk individuals who cannot be around others. The district sends out communications and has a medical update from its administrative team. Its nurses are coordinating with the city. She mentioned drive-through sites for testing. She talked about restrictions on those nurses who have traveled with students and the medium-risk status on those who travel. She indicated that [those nurses who cannot be in the school] have been working to answer "211" calls for the city

to answer questions city-wide. Nurses are also providing in-home visits. Meals are being provided.

DR. BISHOP said ASD is part of the Municipality of Anchorage's (MOA's) emergency command operating seven days a week. That operation is going to relocate to West High School to provide for social distancing. She said Deputy Superintendent Mark Stock is participating on a national panel for Hannover Research to share information with large school districts, ASD being one of the hundred largest in the nation. She said the number one issue cited is the equity of free and appropriate public education (FAPE). The focus is to ensure equitable services are available for all students.

[9:06:22 AM](#)

DR. BISHOP said teachers collectively made over 47,000 calls to reach out to students, and she shared the following data: 79 percent responded to the calls; 88 percent of those said they are "okay with child care" currently; at least 95 percent of ASD's families have at least one "device" - at least 15 percent of those are phones with Internet, and the rest could be a laptop or computer; 86 percent are connected directly to the Internet; 90 percent can connect wirelessly; and only 63 percent of those who responded have a printer at home. Dr. Bishop credited General Communications Incorporated (GCI) and Alaska Communications Services (ACS) for their generosity in offering discounted and free service, respectively, throughout the school year. She said ASD's goal is to provide Chromebooks to families that need them.

DR. BISHOP related that the ECHO network came from a rural Midwest university and was created so doctors could connect regarding healthcare. She offered further history explaining how ECHO became used in Alaska. She said ECHO in Alaska can help teachers troubleshoot around the state, and it connects teachers and parents. She indicated that committee members could use ECHO if they want to learn more about Zoom. Over the weekend, ASD deployed ECHO to all its teachers and students and worked on testing it. Principals are using it; teachers are learning how to use it. She said teaching is a social event, and the relationships that form around "the water cooler" need to be kept strong. She described ideas for socialization.

DR. BISHOP said many teachers go into their classrooms if they are low-risk. She said ASD is focusing on "long-term offering of instruction." It is focusing on graduating seniors and tying

in what they are doing now with what they do after graduation, whether that be college or the workplace. She talked about focusing first on the core subjects with electives coming two weeks later. She spoke about alternate ways to help students be successful. At the elementary level, ASD is focusing on English, language arts, and math. The goal is to get the right resources to those who need it, when they need it. Dr. Bishop said ASD is sharing its resources with other districts; districts are learning from and helping each other.

DR. BISHOP, in regard to special education, said ASD is looking at tutoring, expanding school days, and expanded learning models. She said there would be home visits. She said ASD wants to provide equity and "keep moving with learning." She said many districts across the nation are shutting down because they are afraid of the equity issue or "want to stand away from the equity issue if they can't deploy it." She emphasized that ASD wants to continue learning, and she said Alaska is "a prime place to demonstrate that this could work." She said the legislature could help with approval for teletherapy, which requires licensure. She talked about training teachers' assistants (TAs), and she emphasized the importance of people continuing to work either on "the operational side" or on continued learning. Regarding Internet technology (IT), she said a Zoom account was set up for every student and staff member in the district, and updates are given at 11:00 a.m. every weekday. She noted that hacking has increased threefold across the nation, and she said teachers should be set up with the necessary protocol "so that nobody in Alaska breaks down."

[9:15:38 AM](#)

DR. BISHOP indicated that human resources (HR) is setting up telework agreements with the various collective bargaining units and answering leave and pay issues. Regarding operations, she reported that 4,500 meals were delivered on Monday and Tuesday; 7,000 were delivered Wednesday. There are approximately 10 bus routes into neighborhoods for deployment of food services, and nurses are on the busses to offer socially distanced assistance. She said this Friday meals for the entire weekend would be deployed. She said ASD is working closely with MOA regarding operations, setting up space for the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and considering Campfire or other small groups coming in to run childcare. She said no one in childcare is allowed to have traveled within the last 14 days. She said ASD has been lending out its electrostatic sprayer for sanitation purposes. Shelter operators around the city are asking to use the

sprayers. She related that ASD had to set up emergency procurement in order to get resources deployed; warehouses are operating as they would during summer when they deliver to buildings even when there is not large staff in them. Regarding communications, she said ASD is broadening its social media presence in order to "capture" families, students, and staff to give public service announcements, highlighting meal service and community partnership. She indicated that she had submitted a presentation with photos.

[9:18:00 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY confirmed the PowerPoint presentation was included in the committee packet.

DR. BISHOP said slide 2 shows the agenda topics covered daily in the EOC. Every day there is an update. She said slide 3 is a photo showing how heating instructions for meals are on the bags delivered. She described the next several slides, which depicted bus deliveries, children excitedly watching for the deliveries from their windows at home, and people dispatching meals. Slide 8 shows a virtual board meeting. Slide 9 provides a link to resources. Slide 11 shows a teacher in a captain's hat, sitting in his classroom while creating a fun resource for YouTube. Included in the PowerPoint is a video promoting handwashing.

[9:23:35 AM](#)

DR. BISHOP, in response to Representative Zulkosky, said in order to have teletherapy count as therapy that meets the needs of students, the district needs to license its specialists. She added that generally there is licensure in Alaska that is given, but ASD just has not deployed it with, for example, its occupational therapists and speech therapists, because they did not need it before. She said Commissioner Johnson indicated he would offer assistance on this matter.

[9:24:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY said her office has heard from private providers about the need to get licensure for tele-support, and she expressed an interest in finding out how this issue works out for ASD.

[9:25:12 AM](#)

DR. BISHOP, in response to Representative Drummond, gave more details regarding the aforementioned use of Chromebook. She said the district purchased wi-fi hotspots, which they will deploy to families; therefore, logging in on the Chromebooks will be through a safe account. She indicated that families without wi-fi will get it for free through ACS, while families with wi-fi will have it boosted at no cost by GCI. The Chromebooks will be deployed by the bus drivers. Instructions on video or written instructions will assist with how to get the system up and running. She said, "We have over 20,000 of them."

[9:27:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY thanked Dr. Bishop. She then noted that Commissioner Johnson had just heard important news, and she asked him to state it for the record.

[9:28:21 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON announced that the US Department of Education (DoE) will be granting waivers for statewide assessments in the accountability system. He said there is a process that must be followed. He said the announcement indicates that DoE will work with states to ensure the waivers are put in place, and there will be a 24-hour turnaround time. He said DEED will be working on this in order to make an announcement as soon as possible.

[9:29:27 AM](#)

DANIEL WALKER, Superintendent, Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD), said LKSD is the largest regional educational attendance area (REAA), with approximately 4,000 students in 29 schools and 23 communities covering 22,000 square miles. He said he had expressed the following to his staff: "At the end of the day, we will never know if we are overreacting to this global pandemic; but it will be crystal clear if we underreacted or did too little." He said this is magnified in the remote communities where access to services is difficult. He emphasized the need to "err in the extreme" in terms of social distancing, caution, and isolation in order to mitigate the spread of the virus. Right before Governor Dunleavy issued the health mandate, LKSD had closed its schools for a week; the district has now extended that closure and has mobilized its leadership team to figure out how to provide services while mitigating risk to communities. He said food services to students will continue; in Bethel, bus drivers will deliver to

bus stops; and in smaller communities, students are coming to schools for pickup. He relayed that currently the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires students themselves to pick up their meals in order for the district to be able to qualify for reimbursement.

9:32:54 AM

MR. WALKER addressed the issue of technology. He said LKSD is working with all schools to distribute technical devices and anticipates being able to provide a device for every student. He said access to the Internet is quite limited in rural Alaska. He said the district is working with GCI to get Internet access set up in all students' homes so that those without Internet can get it for free through the end of May.

MR. WALKER said the director of Special Education is working with Special Education teachers through LKSD to continue to provide services. With the shutdown of job fairs, the district is working toward online recruitment, which he said was a pretty easy transition. Directors of elementary and secondary education are conducting meetings across the district in collaboration with teachers and principals. School counselors and social workers continue to provide services through telework with students. All teachers are contacting students by phone.

9:35:14 AM

MR. WALKER related that he and his assistant superintendent, Kimberly Hankins, have focused their work on communication with site administrators and the public; they make Zoom calls to keep administrators updated; and they held a district-wide Zoom call with all classified and certified staff - well over 400 LKSD staff attended. He noted that Zoom is providing its basic service at no cost to educators, and LKSD has an updated account that allows for 1,000 simultaneous connections.

MR. WALKER said travel in his district is difficult and will become more so when communities begin to close to visitors due to the pandemic. The district is working with communities to ensure goods and services can continue to be delivered. He said LKSD sends packets and materials home for students; online instruction is done when possible, with the capacity to do so increasing as more homes receive Internet. He emphasized the importance of equity. He said the district is looking at class audio conferences established by teachers and individual phone calls to students, parents, and guardians. He mentioned other

opportunities to get content out to students, including the use of thumb drives.

MR. WALKER said LKSD is utilizing all staff and asking its sites to creatively find ways to keep staff employed, working, teaching students, and receiving paychecks. He said there is "immense opportunity" to work on projects while practicing social distancing and keeping everyone safe. He said the district is working to meet the mental health needs of its staff and is working to provide district resources for the Employee Assistance Program, because the anxiety of staff members is high due to isolation and uncertainty. He said one issue is those who come from Outside [Alaska] and are far from their families. Mr. Walker said the district is providing options for teachers to work from home and work flexible schedules to accommodate childcare.

[9:39:25 AM](#)

MR. WALKER said LKSD would like legislators to know that its staff is working hard to deliver high-quality, continued education services during the school closure. Staff are anxious, isolation is real - especially in village communities. He said separation of families weighs heavily. He stated, "The knowledge that all of us in the state of Alaska are navigating this situation together is helpful. There is great concern for the health of our elders and the capacity of our local healthcare system to meet the needs once COVID-19 comes to Bethel and to the remote areas." He said many of the district's communities are closing down inbound travel, which will impact the district's ability to deliver services. Many communities are worried about basic services, such as access to water. Construction projects are being put on hold, which can increase construction costs. The long-term impact on the district's ability to recruit and retain teachers is real, he said, and people are scared. He said LKSD is focused first and foremost on the health and wellbeing of its communities, especially its most vulnerable living in remote communities where access to healthcare is more difficult. To that end, he said the district is providing maximum flexibility. He said there is concern that communities may run low on basic supplies, and he has charged everyone to remember that "we are all in this together." He said, "If we need to provide goods and services to our communities, we're dealing with them on a case by case basis." He expressed his gratefulness to GCI for its help in digital access. He said LKSD has incredibly innovative options being considered by teachers. He said he knows the district will get

through this, and it is doing everything it can to keep a positive attitude and lower folks' anxiety levels. He opined that Commissioner Johnson has done a great job of keeping superintendents informed through regular meetings. He said he knows it will help if the state could expediently make decisions about what future closures may look like; it will be important for the district to know whether the school year will be extended, since that is a budgetary consideration. He offered to answer questions from the committee.

[9:43:39 AM](#)

MR. WALKER, in response to Representative Zulkosky, confirmed that there have been a number of people extremely concerned about isolation, access to healthcare and groceries, and whether there will be travel restrictions that prevent them from getting to their homes in the Lower 48. He said this matter is of great concern to LKSD. In response to another query, he reiterated his admiration of GCI's cooperation and said all options for Internet access are being considered, including the use of cell phones as Wi-Fi hotspots. He said he did not have the statistics on how many do not have Wi-Fi and may need to use hotspots; however, he offered anecdotally that there would be more households in Bethel [with Wi-Fi] compared to the village communities. He said he has heard of families coming together to buy and share the service, using a hotspot. He said he thinks most of the district's families cannot afford the cost of broadband in rural Alaska, and it will take awhile to provide the free Internet.

[9:48:45 AM](#)

MR. WALKER, in response to a question from Co-Chair Story as to whether the district uses telehealth, said the district has been doing telework, which includes teletherapy for speech language and "other sorts of social services." He said there are nine masters-level social workers employed by the district, as well as an additional six counselors - all are using various modes of teletherapy to provide services to the communities. He said the district is transitioning to Zoom so students can have access on a phone line. The district will continue to use phone, audio, and video to maintain connections.

[9:50:49 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY expressed her gratitude for Mr. Walker and his staff.

[9:51:39 AM](#)

BRIDGET WEISS, Ph.D., Superintendent, Juneau School District (JSD), stated that JSD is using many of the same tactics already discussed by previous superintendent speakers; therefore, in the interest of time, she would highlight a few keys points. She listed key concerns as: feeding children, continuing instruction, and communicating with families and students. She emphasized that the increased level of stress and anxiety among families and staff impacts the work being done. She said it is necessary to "rethink every structure."

[9:53:53 AM](#)

DR. WEISS directed attention to a PowerPoint presentation [included in the committee packet]. As shown on slide 3, she said JSD scrambled to get meals provided starting Monday, and by the end of the week had served over 4,400 meals. She said regulations are changing rapidly, and she works closely with JSD's food services director in changing how the district can get food to its families, particularly the special needs population. She said the requirement to have the student present [for pick up of meals] is just not possible for some of the district's students. She said she is excited about the progress being made in this area.

DR. WEISS directed attention to the next slide, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Instruction

Equity

Rapid Response

Varied approaches

Personalized

Technology available for all who need it

Poised for success because of previous PD opportunities (last night budget approved minus all previous PD support)

DR. WEISS, regarding equity, said, "We don't want to not [emphasis on "not"] do something for some kids because we can't do that exact same thing for all kids, but we want to make sure that all kids have access." She said teachers have done an incredible job responding quickly; paraprofessionals have been engaged reading stories to children via Facetime and phone

calls; packages are being delivered and are available for pickup; and instruction is being delivered online.

DR. WEISS said one of the district's biggest challenges is concerning its special education population, which she said is comprised of vulnerable families with complex needs. She said JSD has made phone calls and teachers have reached out to their students. She acknowledged the Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) and the Alaska Superintendents Association (ASA) for their support. She said part of what has been possible is due to professional development and its impact on students. She said some of the professional development and much of the curricula support had to be cut in the final reading of the [JSD] budget last night. She stressed that these are heart-wrenching decisions, and "all those things get exposed" during any crisis, such as this major [pandemic] crisis.

DR. WEISS noted that the next three slides depict a "celebration" of the efforts that have been made over the last few days. She said people have really come together. She reflected that "the unknown is unnerving." She stated that somehow JSD is going to have to rethink what it has to do this summer and fall to make up for lost ground, because the district will not have delivered the same amount of instruction as it would have with children in school every day. She thanked DEED and the community for the support, as well as all the staff for their hard work. She said JSD is supporting every employee as much as possible in terms of individual needs, such as being at work or working from home, and it is reassuring people that they will be paid, and they do play a critical role in providing for needs during a complex time.

[9:57:54 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY expressed her hope that JSD communicates with First Students' bus drivers and staff, as well as paraprofessionals regarding their roles and job security. She said it is heartening to see everyone pulling together. She thanked Dr. Weiss for her testimony, as well as all the presenters that took the time to tell their story. She said there is nothing more important than the wellness of students, and she expressed her hope that the legislature would do everything it can to support them.

[9:59:12 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND expressed that the testimony heard today would demonstrate to Alaskans how important schools are, and the cooperation demonstrated throughout the school system would be "a shining star in this state." She thanked the testifiers.

[10:00:02 AM](#)

**ADJOURNMENT**

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