

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

January 24, 2019

3:29 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair
Senator Chris Birch
Senator Mia Costello
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Shelley Hughes, Vice Chair

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: STATUS OF ALASKA'S K-12 EDUCATION SYSTEM

- 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: Presented on Alaska's K-12 Education System.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CHAIR GARY STEVENS called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:29 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Begich, Costello, Birch, and Chair Stevens.

Presentation: Status of Alaska's K-12 Education System

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CHAIR STEVENS announced the presentation by Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) Commissioner Michael Johnson: Status of Alaska's K-12 Education System.

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MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, said he wanted to update the committee on DEED's work over the interim. First he congratulated Danielle Riha, the 2019 Alaska Teacher of the Year, for being selected as one of four finalists for the 2019 National Teacher of the Year. She is a teacher at the Alaska Native Cultural Charter School in Anchorage. The last time Alaska had a finalist for National Teacher of the Year was 1995. He noted that in 2018 Alaskan Sherry Shaw of Tanaina Elementary School in Wasilla was named the National Education Association Support Professional of the Year.

SENATOR BEGICH noted that Danielle Riha's school is in his district and he was present when she was given the award last year in front of the students. He is thrilled about her being chosen as a finalist.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON started by saying he wanted to describe what happened in February 1956, a few days before Alaska's constitutional convention ended. A delegate expressed his hope of a pledge to Alaska's children.

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CHAIR STEVENS reconvened the meeting.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON quoted the delegate asking for a committee to draw up a pledge to Alaska's children to be placed in every school room, a pledge that says they call upon the children for their cooperation as they move to statehood, because they will be the future citizens.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the state constitution starts with, "We the people of Alaska." This is relevant to discussing any education policy, especially any ideas to reform the education system. The constitution states in Article 7, Section 1, that the legislature shall establish and maintain a system of public schools open to all children of the state.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said that if they are to meet the educational challenges in Alaska, it will start with "we the people of Alaska." He noted that civics education and education reform go hand in hand. If they want reform, they must have civics education.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON noted that although they are 53 school districts and Mt. Edgecumbe [High School], they are one state. They must have clarity that they are one state system as called for by the Alaska constitution, but they are also 53 locally controlled school districts. When they talk about the education system, "we the people" must do so in a way that supports learning first and foremost by whatever means necessary. The statewide mission and vision for education should make local missions and visions more possible, not more difficult. That is the reality of local control in statewide system.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said most of them had probably heard of Alaska's Education Challenge, which they have been working on for several year. He described it as just a question, an inquiry for all Alaskans: How will we meet the educational challenges in Alaska?

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COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said so many people want to rush by the question, but they should let the question lead them. By posing the question they do two things. One is state the truth. The fact is they have challenges in their education system. And secondly, they offer hope that they can meet those challenges. Leaders tell the truth and offer hope. As commissioner, he refuses to let this question go unasked.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the mission from the State Board of Education is an excellent education for every student every day. That is their moral imperative for education in the state. The mission statement is not just a logo. For far too long, Alaska has performed too low compared to other states in the country. Because it has been so long, they as leaders must recognize that some may have become numb, passively accepting that some students in the state aren't going to perform well academically. This attitude impacts their conversations and most harmfully, changes expectations for kids. They must state over and over that they will not be satisfied until an excellent education and educational options are available for every student in the state.

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COMMISSIONER JOHNSON asked what does an excellent education look like. The legislature beautifully articulated this in AS 14.03.015. State Education Policy:

It is the policy of this state that the purpose of education is to help ensure that all students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he wanted to review this statement phrase by phrase to take the opportunity to be reminded of the legislature's clarity in describing the purpose of education.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said that is the why, the answer to why they invest over a billion dollars in the education system. The system must be purposeful and centered on kids.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said there are three ways they are answering the question of how to meet Alaska's education challenge. The most important thing is that they are answering the question together.

1. Public Commitments
2. Positive Trajectories
3. Prioritized Strategies

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the public commitments is the "we the people." They invite the public into this process and say to them, "How are you going to increase student success? How are you going to cultivate safety and well-being? How are we going to support responsible and reflective learners so that their learning does something?" As they start education reform, they will remember that it starts with "we the people." Everyone has to work together.

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COMMISSIONER JOHNSON displayed a slide of the positive trajectories:

- All students read at grade level by the end of 3rd grade
- Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs
- Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources

- Prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals
- Improve the safety & well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities and tribes

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said this is where work happens to make this all a reality. He call them positive trajectories. He could have used the term measurable goals, but trajectory implies an upward path, continuous improvement year and after year. The governor talked about third grade reading often on the campaign trail. Multiple efforts around this are underway now. There is broad consensus around this issue. A reading task force took place last year. There have been bills on prekindergarten. The common element in all proposals is some kind of screening. Most districts are already doing this, as well as professional development on reading instruction and aggressive intervention if students are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade. If students are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade, everything for them after that becomes more difficult and more expensive for the system.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said students who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are likely to drop out of school. Many prisoners were not reading proficiently at the end of third grade. There is a lot of data about the importance of reading proficiently by the end of third grade. Alaska ranks at the bottom of the country on the fourth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for reading. NAEP tests at fourth and eighth grade, and Alaska is at the bottom for fourth grade proficiency. This is a goal they cannot avoid. DEED will be working with districts to guide the effort on third grade reading proficiency.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said that the trajectory increase career, technical, and culturally relevant pathways is important because students who participate in two or more career and technical education (CTE) courses or pathways graduate at 20 percent higher rates than students who do not. They can increase the graduation rate by involving students in these pathways. DEED is offering two new pathways, or curriculum, to districts. One is coding. Coding offers an opportunity for building and developing an economy, including in rural Alaska. It can be part of efforts for cultural preservation and communication by preserving artifacts and creating apps around language. Coding is important for national security. Another pathway is technical writing, another need in the state. They will increase dual credit and they want to increase apprenticeships.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the leadership team at the Department of Labor and of DEED met that day. They can have a great partnership with that department. They are working with the Alaska Council of School Administrators, which is leading the effort with Code.org. That is just one of the career and technical pathways that they can explore for students. They know this will have an impact on graduation.

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COMMISSIONER JOHNSON addressed the achievement gap trajectory by noting that Alaska also has the largest achievement gap in the country. The governor's directive addressing algebra proficiency by ninth grade fits in here. Assessments, tribal compacting, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) work is all about closing the achievement gap. Their new school designations and accountability system are all about closing the achievement gap.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the importance of the fourth trajectory, prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals, is highlighted by problems with recruiting and retention. The revocation of the accreditation of the University of Alaska Anchorage [School of Education] is another indication of how important this is.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said there are so many examples regarding safety and well-being. DEED recently worked with other agencies to produce a framework for trauma-engaged practice. If they want every student to be reading proficiently by the end of third grade, they have to address the issues of ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences). More DEED announcements around this topic will be coming. The governor expressed in his State of the State Address that this is a priority for him in terms of public safety.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the third way to answer Alaska's Education Challenge is through prioritized strategies. Kids are not wave pools. They don't all crest the same way. They are oceans. Schools and the educational system must reflect that beauty and diversity. Not every strategy works the same way in Alaska. Over the course of the session, superintendents and principals will be sharing great ideas and the great things happening in their districts to address these five priorities. Some state school boards start every meeting around the Alaska Education Challenge and how they are addressing these priorities. Districts are forming partnerships around career and technical education priorities. Districts are providing new and

innovative professional development about reading intervention. Each district will prioritize strategies and they will figure out how to support districts.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said that on last day of the Alaska constitutional convention, the same delegate stood up and proposed a charter for Alaska's children. He quoted, "We trust you; you are our future. We ask you to take tomorrow and dream; we know that you will see visions we do not see. We are certain that in capturing today for you, you can plan and build."

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said, "Back in 1956, they were talking to us. We were their future. We were the children they were talking to." They chose to have a vision to pass on to them. They must choose what to do with the vision. They have to ask whether they would be proud of them. They trusted them. "Trust is a treasure. And once lost it is hard to get back. If we decide to be less clear and less articulate and less deliberate about our vision now, it won't be any easier later, even if we do have a lot of money someday. So are we trustworthy to articulate and lead a vision for Alaska's children? I sure think so by the work we've done this past year."

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON reflected on this quote posted at Pacific High School in Sitka:

Even from long ago we cherish our grandchildren; no matter what we value, we offer it up to them."
Sitka elder Chief Charlie Joseph

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said as a state, they value student success, safety and well-being, purposeful and responsible learning. They result in citizens with character who contribute to the quality of the world about them. They will meet Alaska's Education Challenge together. They cannot ignore their responsibility. Essential to meeting the challenge is clarity about the role of the Department of Education. Information is fundamental to "we the people." First, DEED has a responsibility to provide as much information as possible about schools and educational options. Second, DEED is a hub of resources. That includes connecting constituents to trainings, to contacts, and other educational support agencies and associations. Third, they must provide leadership by focusing all energy on the five priorities.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON introduced DEED staff at the presentation: new Deputy Commissioner Karen Melin, who worked in the

department in the past and in the Fairbanks School District; Director of Educator and School Excellence Tammy Van Wyhe, who was the Copper River School District superintendent; Chief of Staff and Legislative Liaison Brittany Hartmann; and Director of Administrative Services Heidi Teshner.

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CHAIR STEVENS said he liked the idea of the trajectories. The issue of helping kids to learn to read by the end of third grade is so crucial. He sat in on the task force this summer on increasing the ability to read. He heard that there are lots of ways to teach reading, but some of them are not effective as others. He asked how they make sure that teachers teach reading in the most effective way possible.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that they know a lot about how students learn to read. There are some key benchmarks they need to hit. Deputy Commissioner Karen Melin, a reading expert, is leading that effort. Professional development must be big part of this effort. That will be an element of their work with the University of Alaska teacher preparation program. There are more effective ways of teaching and of intervention. Any effective program has to be based on phonics.

CHAIR STEVENS said they must help teachers in the state do the best job they can.

SENATOR BEGICH said he has noticed in DEED's own data something to address all students reading proficiently by the end of third grade and closing the achievement gap. When he looks at the results of departmentally-approved pre-kindergarten programs at Lower Kuskokwim, Nome, Mat-Su, and Anchorage School Districts, those kids seem to enter school with more skills in reading and continuing to show in third grade. He asked if that data is correct.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON answered that he was not sure which data Senator Begich was referring to. In general they can say that some students benefit a great deal from opportunities to learn before kindergarten. The Kindergarten Developmental Profile shows students show up for kindergarten with a variety of different skill levels and some don't have the skills they need. Clearly some opportunities to learn those skills before kindergarten are advantageous.

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SENATOR BEGICH said he is speaking about the data the department has been collecting from the various experimental pre-k programs for the last eight-to-ten years. The data provided by the department is showing that where they have applied those particular efforts, which are evidence-based and take culture into account, they are seeing results. Those kids are doing better than kids who haven't been exposed to that in the same district. It is hopeful to him that there is a way to meet the challenge. He asked if it is the intent of DEED continue with those pre-kindergarten programs.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that conversations around pre-k and early learning are essential to get kids reading by third grade.

SENATOR BIRCH said that Commissioner Johnson talked about a single state system, but 53 districts, which means 53 superintendents and 53 boards. He asked if this would be the way he'd draw this organization, should it be more streamlined, particularly when the state of Alaska is writing most of the check, especially for rural communities. In South Anchorage his constituents write big checks for property taxes for education. He asked for Commissioner Johnson's perspective.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that this is a regularly occurring conversation. At a time when they are performing at the bottom, every conversation is worth having. It is a complicated conversation. In many of those districts, superintendents are also the principal and business manager and special education director. The superintendency does not look the same in every district. If two districts are combined, that may require more people to address all the roles. Ongoing conversations about collaboration and sharing personnel is something the governor is interested in, but some districts have been doing this. Lake and Pen and Bristol Bay are doing collaboration around career and technical development. Some districts work with SERRC [Alaska's Educational Resource Center] to share business services. There's a great foundation for the conversation to move forward. As technology develops, as the state develops and the economy changes, they will continue to discuss whether the current structure of public education system still fits.

SENATOR BIRCH said the most important person in the education realm is the classroom teacher. He's always interested and intrigued about how many dollars filter to where the rubber hits the road, in the classroom. As an engineer, he looks at those metrics. There have been many discussions about distance education and learning and breakthrough technologies.

Considering Alaska's vast geography, he would like Commissioner Johnson's insights on the merits of distance education and what role that could play.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON answered that he is big fan of distance education. Technology is getting better. It gives students more opportunities to have access to great teachers. He gave the analogy of flying into Juneau. They fly and land in weather that would have been illegal for a pilot to do so 20 years ago because of technology. The technology did not replace the pilot, but it did allow him to do things he couldn't have done before. Educational technology will never replace great teachers but allows them to do things they couldn't do 20 years ago. A teacher can connect students in engaging learning opportunities. Northwest Arctic, Copper River, and several other districts are doing great things with this. In Northwest Arctic he met a student who was participating in a collaborative activity with students in other villages. Everyone needs access to good broadband to make that happen. In 2019 students in Alaska can have more access to a variety of courses with more quality than they ever have before.

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SENATOR COSTELLO said that as a former classroom teacher and parent of two boys in the Anchorage School District, she is happy to be on the Education Committee. She wanted to focus on reading by third grade. This is such a foundational milestone. Alaska has been at the bottom of this list for a while. She appreciates him talking about the good along with the challenges. She asked whether there has ever been a discussion about declaring an emergency regarding reading proficiency.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he has had some of those conversations periodically. When every other state ranks above Alaska, it is an emergency for their students.

SENATOR COSTELLO said she wanted to touch upon his comments that students see relevance in the real world, so they know why they are being asked to learn, particularly in reference to coding. She took two students to a hackathon in Seattle sponsored by the U.S. Navy. The students were the youngest in the room. Young people are underestimated and will often rise to a challenge. She challenges DEED to find those opportunities. King Career Center is an outstanding example. "Having worked with students have dropped out of school, oftentimes they've dropped out because we have failed them," she said. They are intelligent and ready to learn. Often they are in classrooms with 40 other kids.

They are not challenged. She has seen that hands-on learning will engage students like nothing else can. There are pockets of that across the state. She has looked at involving school-business partners in more relevant relationships. She asked how they move from classrooms of books and paper/pencil tests to a classroom of the world where students can be participants in solving problems.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that there is no place like Alaska to provide hands-on opportunities to apply the academics they are learning in school. Today a team of people from the Department of Labor and DEED met to develop a plan to provide coding opportunities. Code.org, which is promoting computer science standards and coding opportunities for all students, is partners with the Alaska Council of School Administrators. His vision is that coding is economic opportunity for students who want to remain in rural Alaska.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said many tribal organizations are focused on apps for language preservation. Coding can be part of recording elders speaking and documenting artifacts. Coding is also a huge issue for national security. Alaska has a military presence, and cargo from other countries comes through Alaska. Coding should be big part of future efforts and is high on the list of the governor's priorities.

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CHAIR STEVENS asked about health and well-being.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said they did host a safety summit in Anchorage. Also, four or five years ago the legislature appropriated \$22 million for school safety. They did a gap analysis to determine where they are today in terms of school safety. That will be coming out in next few weeks. Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice is a result of partnerships with a whole host of organizations, led by a grant from the Association of Alaska School Boards. The framework addresses how schools can handle well-being issues and threats students face. DEED will have more information in coming weeks about specific efforts and strategies to address those issues.

SENATOR BEGICH said that he will continue to work to support DEED so that it can fulfill the constitutional obligation Commissioner Johnson described at the beginning of his presentation. Those 60 words in Article 7, Section 1, matter. They get to the heart of what Commissioner Johnson's job is. DEED support for the 53 districts is the essential component of

that mission. In the past they have teetered close to not being able to provide that support. Senator Begich said he is looking forward to seeing the governor's budget and seeing that it meets the requirement of that constitutional support.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 4:34 p.m.