ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT MEETING
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE
April 24, 2019
8:31 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

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

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair
Senator Shelley Hughes, Vice Chair
Senator Chris Birch

MEMBERS ABSENT

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative Josh Revak

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Senator Mia Costello
Senator Tom Begich

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Hannan

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: K-12 FUNDING CONSIDERATIONS

HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

MARK FOSTER
Finance Performance Analyst
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered the presentation on K-12 funding considerations.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:31:25 AM

CHAIR GARY STEVENS called the joint meeting of the House and Senate Education Standing Committees to order at 8:31 a.m. Present at the call to order from the House Education Standing Committee were Representatives Hopkins, Johnson, Story and Drummond; Representatives Tuck and Zulkosky arrived as the meeting was in progress. Present from the Senate Education Standing Committee were Senator Hughes, Birch and Stevens.

Presentation: K-12 Funding Considerations

CHAIR STEVENS announced that the only order of business would be a presentation from Mark Foster titled "K-12 Funding Considerations."

8:32:54 AM

MARK FOSTER, Finance Performance Analyst, Anchorage, Alaska, began his presentation by giving an overview of what he intended to present.

Overview (slide 2)
- How are Alaskan students doing on standardized tests?
  NAEP and PEAKS, 4th and 8th grade reading/ELA & Math
- What drives the variation in standardized test scores?
  Poverty and standardized test scores
- How do we measure effective teaching?
  Growth and Proficiency
- Which schools have students who are performing well above expectations?

- What do local superintendents report as the key factors driving student assessments?
- What does the national/international research say?
- Recommendations for Alaska

MR. FOSTER highlighted the caveats and limitations (slide 3). National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools (PEAKS) are both standardized tests which measure a student's success. Variations of test scores are usually contributed to influences outside of the school's control, with poverty being a prominent one. The Gates Foundation Project, "Measuring Effective Teaching", found that pertaining to student and teacher performance, growth and proficiency are one domain. Other important domains are peer reviews of teachers and assessment of student engagement level. The research supports that it is not just test scores that determine a student's success; there are other factors to consider.

8:35:20 AM

CHAIR STEVENS asked how a student's success in life is identified.

MR. FOSTER explained there is published peer review data since 2014 that discusses administrative data on how kids performed in school. The data follows those students through graduation and into their careers looking at their incomes during their 20s and sometimes further. He noted that this research has contributed to identifying what factors lead to a student's success in life.

CHAIR STEVENS asked if there was Alaska-specific data on student success.

MR. FOSTER responded there is no Alaska data on that specific measure. However, there is some Alaska data that is part of national datasets that is being explored to begin creating those assessments.

8:36:44 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND pointed out Alaska has the workforce database that the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education maintains. The database is called a P20. It contains data from preschool to postsecondary and early workforce. She said that Alaska does have its own research in place to answer Senator Stevens' question.

8:38:02 AM

MR. FOSTER explained that the chart on slide 5 demonstrates 4th to 8th grade growth and achievement in reading according to NAEP. Alaska is one of the high growth states with students moving rapidly to higher levels of performance from where they started. In math, there is a different result. A similar chart shows that Alaska remains in the low growth and low base quadrant, persistently putting the state in a challenging spot (slide 6).

8:40:40 AM

SENATOR HUGHES told a story about an award she received as a child for being the most improved, but not the best. She asked where Alaskan 8th graders land according to achievement in reading. Is Alaska in the quadrant for achievement or is it just showing growth, she asked.

MR. FOSTER replied the chart shows Alaska is behind in proficiency for both 8th grade reading and math compared to other states.

SENATOR HUGHES asked for clarification that further to the right on the chart equals higher proficiency.

MR. FOSTER confirmed that was correct. He highlighted that math remains a challenge. The results show that Alaska remains in the low growth and low base score quadrant.

MR. FOSTER reviewed the Alaska Performance Evaluation for Alaskan Schools (PEAKS) 2017-18 test results for 4th and 8th grade English language arts and math. The data is plotted by school using a map of the state to display specific schools within school districts. The proficiency scale goes from red to green. He said it is noteworthy that schools in Unalakleet and rural Southeast Alaska continue to be high performing in 4th grade reading. When looking at success, this data can be used to further understand what those keys to success were, he said.

8:44:46 AM

REPRESENTATIVE TUCK asked what determines the size of the bubble on the map.

MR. FOSTER responded the size of the bubble reflects the number of students taking the test.

REPRESENTATIVE TUCK asked if there are any reasons why students would not be taking the test.

MR. FOSTER explained that data was only reported where the number of students taking the test was statistically significant.

8:45:31 AM

MR. FOSTER discussed that in 8th grade English language arts there are new stories of success with some schools still behind. Although there are statewide patterns, growth varies across the state. He said the results pertaining to 4th grade math in schools across the state show there is some proficiency. However, when looking at the results for 8th grade math, there is a significant reduction in proficiency (slides 10-11). This reflects consistent findings between NAEP and PEAKS. Alaska is lacking in growth and proficiency in math, relative to other states.

8:47:42 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND said she noticed significantly fewer bubbles in the 8th grade results for both math and English language arts. She asked if that means fewer students are taking the tests.

MR. FOSTER clarified that each bubble represents a school. The number of schools with 8th grades is considerably smaller than the number of elementary schools in the school districts.

8:48:14 AM

MR. FOSTER continued to discuss what drives the variation in test scores (slide 12). Frequently, when trying to understand test scores across the grade spans, it is found that poverty/affluence drives the variation. Half the variation in test scores is due to household and neighborhood challenges associated with poverty. He noted that the Gates Foundation recommended the efficiency of teachers be assessed by factoring out poverty and looking at how teachers are growing their students. Student growth then becomes the primary measure in how effective teachers are, regardless of where students might start.

8:49:37 AM

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY asked if teacher retention and cultural differences in the classroom have been identified as factors that contribute to variations in test scores in Alaska.

MR. FOSTER responded that the short answer is yes. That is addressed later in the presentation. High performing schools in rural communities were interviewed. The findings show that the challenges these schools faced were exactly the issues Representative Zulkosky mentioned of teacher retention and cultural differences within the classroom.

8:51:09 AM

MR. FOSTER discussed data from 2009-2013. It shows that in grades 3-8, the percentage of children in poverty within school districts corresponds to the average test scores (slide 13). Stanford reviewed data from all states' standardized tests and mapped it to a common scale compared by grade level. This shows a correlation between poverty and below grade level performance.

8:52:25 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND inquired if Alaska and Hawaii were ignored in the Stanford data, since they are not shown on the map (slide 13).

MR. FOSTER responded that Stanford did not produce the map. He said there is data that will be evaluated and added to the map in the future.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND mentioned a fascinating presentation she heard last week discussing how the state of Washington gives bonuses to teachers who have National Board Certification. This benefits students and aids in teacher retention within poverty-stricken districts. She highlighted that the number of certified teachers in Washington grew from 9 to 35 percent per school after these bonuses were given. She noted that in Alaska, there are only 90 certified teachers in the entire state. She said she was excited about these findings because it could help bring and keep highly qualified teachers to poverty-stricken school districts in Alaska.

8:55:17 AM

MR. FOSTER continued that when looking at the data between 4th and 8th grade for math and English language arts there is a correlation between poverty and test scores for Alaska schools. Poverty is the single most important factor for driving variations in proficiency. He noted the charts on slide 15 show proficiency scores improving in English language arts from the 4th to 8th grade in rural Alaska, especially for districts not facing high poverty levels. Southeast and Railbelt communities generally maintain proficiency across the grade spans from 4th to 8th grade although math remains a challenge across the state.

MR. FOSTER further explained that superintendents at high performing schools were asked how they were doing better than expected given their economic disadvantages. In the Railbelt and Southeast it was consistently found that highly effective teachers, parents who value education, and a generous and supportive municipality are all critical in making the difference. The biggest threat these schools faced was instability in policies and finances. Furthermore, rural school districts have high teacher turnover rates combined with low proficiency scores. He noted teachers are trying to find ways to engage students on a local and cultural level but still face a challenging environment. (Slides 17-20)

9:02:54 AM

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked if there are any specific school districts or schools in rural Alaska that have done a good job with their culturally relevant curriculum.

MR. FOSTER stated that the short answer is yes. He offered to follow up with information pertaining to specific schools and districts that are doing well overall and doing well with a culturally relevant curriculum.

9:03:26 AM

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY asked if local subject matter experts have discussed any barriers in providing a culturally relevant curriculum and if it could also be a resource issue.

MR. FOSTER responded that he was unsure the barriers are characterized as a resource issue. Rather, they are better characterized as an understanding of what is culturally relevant for a community relative to the standardized tests and what it is measuring. The tension lies between standardized testing being relevant to students within both suburban and rural

environments. The concern is that the test might not be adapted to measure what is culturally relevant in the various communities.

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY pointed out that there is an unspoken understanding among policy makers that communities face significant challenges finding a balance between meeting their specific cultural and economic dynamics and the ideals of standardized testing.

MR. FOSTER offered a personal observation. He said one of the most culturally relevant instructions in one of his science classes was teaching hunting and fishing. By rethinking what is locally and culturally relevant to all Alaskans, especially related to science, could be very interesting and engaging for students. He said he would like to see this model transfer to rural areas because more engagement is possible.

9:07:39 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY added that last year the new Next Generation Science Standards were adopted in Juneau. The standards are place-based, pertaining specifically to kids in Southeast Alaska.

9:08:05 AM

MR. FOSTER stated that much of what is being heard from people in the field in Alaska, matches the national/international studies regarding the factors related to student achievement.

9:08:56 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked if he could explain what he means by "students ready to learn."

MR. FOSTER responded by directing attention to slide 24. Reports from principals and teachers show that kids are motivated, they come to class wanting to work hard and do well because education is held in high value within the community and household. In places where education is not as highly valued, teachers sometimes make up for that by helping kids become "ready to learn" by focusing on social and emotional skills.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND pointed out that all the studies she's seen on reading proficiency are focused on kids being ready to learn when entering the school system. Students are tested in 4th

grade but it could be more effective to test kids when they enter Kindergarten. Testing at this time could give insight into what makes a difference in students being "ready to learn." She mentioned waiting 5 years to test children only shows a teacher what the student should have been known when he/she entered school. She asked how being "ready to learn" translates to a 5-year-old and how readiness is measured such that students are prepared for the reading assessment in 4th grade.

MR. FOSTER highlighted the factor of teaching students developmentally appropriate material at the appropriate time. The critical element of a student's success is setting realistic expectations and aligning the material to a specific student across grade spans. The challenge is to teach effectively to meet each student's level. This is a greater challenge in Alaska because of the greater diversity between schools, within schools and within the classroom.

9:14:23 AM

SENATOR HUGHES pointed out the Finnish model waits until kids are seven to teach them to read. She offered her belief that assessing students before or after Kindergarten could set them up for success because this would show whether they were "ready to learn" or if some children should be held back. She asked if this type of assessment would be helpful and if any other states do this and have seen success.

MR. FOSTER stated he wasn't aware of the nature of a specific assessment but there is a discussion in literature about when it would make sense to determine if students are developmentally ready to move on to the next grade level. There is evidence of the positive impacts of evaluating a student's work in a group setting, especially pertaining to behavioral issues, to determine whether a student is ready to move on from Kindergarten to the 1st grade.

SENATOR HUGHES followed up by saying there has been a lot of research regarding reading and literacy. She wondered whether there should be a retention component in the assessment process, to determine whether a child should repeat Kindergarten. She said she believes there would be fewer social and emotional impacts on students if they were held back earlier rather than later. By ensuring students are ready to progress, they could avoid being labeled as a poor reader/student. She encouraged lawmakers to consider this issue when creating new policies.

9:18:57 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY questioned if there has been any discussion about adverse family experiences and how those stresses impact a student's readiness to learn. She commented that many schools in Alaska are becoming trauma-informed schools and are educating staff in how to provide aid to students who are under stress.

MR. FOSTER answered that looking at students experiencing family stresses was not high on the list. There was a self-selection of students doing well above expectations and the focus was on the factors that drove that success. There were no questions about what factors students had to overcome. This was primarily because the dataset was small. Another primary focus of study was creating a stable environment for teachers and students within rural communities. This study reflects the concerns of that were high on the list for schools. However, there are conversations outside this study about trauma and how it impacts students and how to adjust instruction to take that into account.

9:22:04 AM

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS observed that on slide 26 there are three factors pointing to effective measures that support a student's success in life. Then on slide 27, the same factors relate to student achievement. He questioned if that means home support and early literacy plus culturally relevant education are not as critical for student's success in life and have a low correlation to student achievement.

MR. FOSTER replied no; all factors are critical elements to success. What it shows is that there is a collaboration of the national datasets reinforcing what subject matter experts are finding locally, which is that all factors play a role in a student's success.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked if the top factors contributing to a student's test scores and success in life are a student's readiness to learn, home and community support, and effective teachers.

MR. FOSTER replied that all five factors shown on slides 26 and 27 are essential. The three factors mentioned by Representative Hopkins just happen to map to the research that has large effects. Mr. Foster said he wanted to validate what is being found by subject matter experts alongside other research. Seeing

the correlations between the two datasets affirms what is making a difference for a student's success.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked if class size factors into a student's success just as much.

MR. FOSTER responded that the research done on the effects of class size are on slide 28.

9:25:01 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND mentioned that she was on the Anchorage school board when charter schools were established and one of the first applicants was a Waldorf school model. The Waldorf approach focuses on music and art. The students would paint and draw to promote brain development. Reading was taught at age 8 when a student was developmentally ready. She said she believes Waldorf had it right in their approach. She noted, looking ahead in the slides, that cutting classroom size from 30 students to 15 would increase total student earnings by $600,000. This shows that class size is critical.

9:26:38 AM

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN pointed out that Finnish universal reading programs focus on sound development and auditory speech starting at age 3. Since Alaska doesn't have universal pre-K, the expectation is that all those skills will be developed in Kindergarten and first grade. Identifying speech defects and sound recognition issues at ages 3 or 4 aids in student success because those issues can then be focused on before moving on to written language instruction. She wondered if there was data showing that the high performing districts were the ones that have focused on pre-K programs to help kids develop those pre-reading skills and become ready to learn.

MR. FOSTER replied that he had not looked at the data. He questioned whether the dataset was rich or deep enough to draw any significant conclusions. The pre-K program in Anchorage is predominantly funded through special education funding. It's descriptively interesting but perhaps not statistically significant, he said.

9:29:46 AM

MR. FOSTER highlighted information on slide 28 regarding large datasets that demonstrate what makes a difference in

accomplishing better outcomes within schools. Better teachers, smaller classes and better technology are the influences focused on within the study. There is good evidence to support the need for effective teachers in small classrooms. Small class sizes are giving the greatest return for investment. Research found that by dividing a classroom of 30 into two classes of 15 increases the total earnings of those students significantly. He noted this is interesting research that may be worth considering for Alaska.

9:32:17 AM

REPRESENTATIVE TUCK commented that he used to teach at Alaska Electrical Apprenticeship School, and even though he was teaching adults, going from 15 to 21 students made a difference. In the larger classes, adequate attention could not be given to everyone that needed it. He mentioned that once someone falls behind in their math skills, it impacts the rest of their learning career.

9:33:53 AM

SENATOR BIRCH pointed out "the success in life" aspect is shown as a financial component, but that may not apply to all Alaskans. Some Alaskans believe success is having a moose or fish in the freezer or it could be just holding a job for several years. He asked Mr. Foster how he considers and defines success for the outlier communities within Alaska.

MR. FOSTER answered that he engages local communities to assess what success for their students might look like. It's about shifting perspective and ensuring success is defined and connected to local and culturally relevant issues.

9:36:32 AM

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN stated that by looking at the people/student ratio, districts frequently get stymied by having a second adult in the classroom. She offered her belief that having two identically certified teachers in a larger classroom will produce results equivalent to dividing the class into smaller groups.

9:38:04 AM

MR. FOSTER stated that the key takeaway is ensuring the group of new teachers being hired to shrink class sizes are highly

effective. Being able to attract and retain highly effective teachers is a challenge in Alaska, he said.

MR. FOSTER concluded that according to the research, a student's success is attributed to the five factors discussed. These are: a supportive community, engaged students that are ready to learn, effective teachers, small class sizes, and early literacy plus culturally relevant education as the foundation.

9:39:52 AM

CHAIR STEVENS commented that homegrown teachers are the best option, so it is concerning to him that the university is closing its School of Education in Anchorage. He asked if it would be better to have more Alaskans teaching Alaskans.

MR. FOSTER responded that it is possible if the preparation programs in Alaska are robust and effective. However, he was uncertain that progress had been made in recent decades. The UAA performance and financial statistics show that in 2008-2009 there was an influx of quality teachers from the lower 48. He suggested the committee not dismiss the ability for Alaska to attract high quality teachers from out of state. He said he found it interesting that the data from 2000 to 2014 shows that UAA, UAF, and UAS prep programs produced good quality teachers, equating to outside schools/programs.

9:42:57 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY asked if he intended to continue to presentation since there were remaining slides related to return on investment.

MR. FOSTER pointed out that when he did comparisons, he was adjusting for the cost of living no matter what sector (slides 32-34). The charts on slides 35 and 36 indicate "return on K-12 investments" according to cost of living adjusted dollars per NAEP score growth. This shows how Alaska is doing in relation to other states as an investment. From 2013 to 2017, in terms of the state's dollar investment, Alaska was very close to the high value/high growth quadrant for 4th to 8th grade NAEP test scores. He noted schools in Alaska are providing reasonable value that is comparable to the high growth of the other 49 states. He concluded that in reading, Alaska is doing well regarding investment. However, math remains a challenge, as the chart on slide 36 indicates.

9:45:03 AM

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS referred to slide 29 that says, "Highly effective equals growth across skills and knowledge plus social skills to prepare students for success in life." He then referred to slide 3 and the discussion that social skills are often a better indicator of success in life than tests scores. He asked Mr. Foster to explain what those social skills look like and how they are measured.

MR. FOSTER referenced slide 39 that shows that test scores are a measure of progress, but not necessarily success in life. He stated that this study is building on the social and emotional datasets to see how that correlates to success in life. The study is showing that motivation and self-restraint are critical factors for success. Research shows that the probability of graduating from high school is highly correlated to behavior, motivation and self-restraint while only moderately related to test scores. Mr. Foster emphasizes that on slide 38, early test scores only account for 5 percent of the variation of earnings across student ages 25 to 27, so the social implications in a group setting are of high importance.

9:48:54 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY returned to the point that having effective teachers is one of the most important qualities of success for students. She discussed the factors that make teachers more effective and emphasized the importance of funding education at the appropriate times. The lack of timely funding leads to higher teacher turnover, which then affects teacher continuity within schools and across districts. She asked how districts measure teacher effectiveness.

MR. FOSTER replied that specific criteria was not set. Subject matter experts who identify effective teaching have indicated that they rely on the analysis of teacher peer reviews to determine how well teachers ready their students for the next grade progression.

9:52:55 AM

MR. FOSTER thanked the committee and Senator von Imhof who enabled him to do this research and expand the data across the state to better understand the different and similar challenges Alaskan communities face. A correlation can begin to create a

statewide perspective of how this system can work together, he said.

9:54:29 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND added that Alaska has fiscal uncertainty and a benefits package problem which is leading to teachers leaving the state. She suggested having joint meetings this summer to continue the discussion.

9:55:54 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY asked how the study was funded.

MR. FOSTER responded that a large portion of it was done using Anchorage baseline information. Senator von Imhof engaged her staff Jonathan King to do some of the follow up and then she asked Mr. Foster to finalize the work.

9:56:34 AM

CHAIR STEVENS commented that the committees from both bodies have expressed interest in holding meetings during the interim to work together to further discuss these issues.

9:57:03 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced there will be a demonstration on April 25, 2019, discussing the importance of computer science in Alaska schools.

9:57:35 AM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the joint meeting of the Senate and House Education Standing Committees at 9:59 a.m.