

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 28, 2022

8:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Ronald Gillham

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S) UNDERSTANDING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION IN ALASKA

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

LIZ LA QUEN NAAY MEDICINE CROW, PhD, President
First Alaskans Institute
Kake, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented on culturally responsive education in Alaska.

LANCE X'UNEI TWITCHELL, PhD, representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented on culturally responsive education in Alaska.

TERRI WALKER, Superintendent
Northwest Arctic Borough School District
Kotzebue, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented on culturally responsive education in Alaska.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:04:11 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR ANDI STORY called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:04 a.m. Representatives Zulkosky, Hopkins, Drummond, and Story were present at the call to order. Representatives Prax and Cronk arrived as the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION(S) Understanding Culturally Responsive Education in Alaska

[8:05:04 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the only order of business would be a presentation on understanding culturally responsive education in Alaska.

[8:07:20 AM](#)

LIZ LA QUEN NAA Y MEDICINE CROW, PhD, President, First Alaskans Institute, shared her perspectives regarding culturally responsive education in Alaska. She described her experience in the state's education system as very painful, resulting in justified emotions of frustration, hurt, and anger. She referenced a tribunal event where fellow Native Alaskans shared stories about negative experiences in the public school system. She pointed out that the education policy of assimilating Alaska Natives has remained the same since before statehood. She continued that this policy has excluded the Native ways of teaching and caused suffering in Native peoples.

DR. MEDICINE CROW recalled a story her grandmother had retold throughout her life. She stated that with each retelling, she had learned something new, as stories help build connections to ancestors. She said that Native teachings relate that opposites are not adversaries, rather they represent balance, and "Alaska is built on diversity, and diversity is a strength." She stated that connections to Native ways of being are available but have not been tapped.

[8:19:25 AM](#)

DR. MEDICINE CROW listed several distinguished local and international Native leaders and described Alaska Native leaders

as "our local knowledge holders." She said that in the 1980s Alaska Native educators had used innovations to help create an indigenous learning framework for Māori students in New Zealand. She advised that it is time for Alaska to do the same, as the many Native experts in Alaska have not been utilized.

[8:24:22 AM](#)

DR. MEDICINE CROW pointed out that during the last governor's administration an education outreach challenge had created innovative ideas to revamp Alaska's education system. The goal had been to achieve better results for students, especially Native students. She stated that the innovation consisted of compacting with tribes, which allows for tribal knowledge to be centered in education and utilized as a framework, not just as a subject or class. She said that there are education experts in Alaska who could help shape better outcomes for students, because being a Native has been "weaponized against us within the education system in Alaska."

[8:32:37 AM](#)

DR. MEDICINE CROW shared that she had moved to Juneau as a child so that her sister would have access to more educational opportunities. Her sister eventually became the first Tlingit woman to graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She stated that she and her sister's successes are attributed to their mother, who ensured they were not denied the opportunity to be in programs for gifted students. In reference to boarding schools, she spoke of intergenerational issues resulting from Native culture, values, and language not being taught in schools. With the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, she said that she was among the first group of children who were able to sing and dance in their language. She stated that having a foundation of village life taught her to care for the community on the land and waters of Kake. This had helped her learn her identity and allowed her to survive the public school system of Juneau, which she described as having a "soft bigotry of low expectations."

[8:39:48 AM](#)

DR. MEDICINE CROW, for the record, expressed her intention to follow up to the committee with a quote from William Manning in an exchange with Senator Lisa Murkowski. She said that Mr. Manning had expressed the hope that Native children would learn to be stewards of their communities again. She insisted that

mutual and reciprocal respect, along with identity, should be pillars of the education system in Alaska. She said, "In order to go forward, we have to go back to what is meaningful to our people and create a system that reflects it."

[8:50:41 AM](#)

DR. MEDICINE CROW shared a quote by the New Mexico State Senator, Benny Shendo, who said, "Don't teach me about my culture, use my culture to teach me." She also shared a rhetorical question from Atirau Ohia, who said, "What counts as knowledge, what knowledge counts, and who decides?" She questioned which standards should be used for the success of Native students - a cultural framework which supports the ability of Native students to thrive, or a framework designed to continue an assimilationist educational philosophy. She argued that current standards are not constructed for Native students to thrive. She emphasized the importance of reformulating these standards in Alaska because it could help change "the way the educational system has been weaponized against us."

[8:56:41 AM](#)

LANCE X'UNEI TWITCHELL, PhD, representing self, presented on culturally responsive education in Alaska [copy enclosed in the committee packet]. He stated that he is a professor of Alaska Native Languages at the University of Alaska Southeast and a Council Member of the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council. He shared that he has his PhD in Hawaiian and Indigenous Language and Culture Revitalization. He reminded the committee that, based on the accelerating rates in the decline of Native languages, a linguistic emergency was declared in 2018. He argued that, since that time, action has been inadequate because all Alaska Native languages are now endangered. He stated that more than half of the 23 known languages have ten or fewer known speakers.

DR. TWITCHELL advised that, with the help of the legislature, Alaska schools could have more effective programs. He listed the Native language and literacy programs in Southeast Alaska which have produced competent bilingual readers and speakers. He reiterated that a language crisis was announced; however, substantive legislation has failed to develop to combat the crisis. Concerning language, he argued that Alaska Natives deserve a seat at the table of public education. He said that the Alaska Reads Act is positive, but more could be done, because the state's education system has "bloody hands" when it

comes to Alaska Native languages. He spoke about chemical-soaked rags being stuffed into the mouths of children for speaking their own languages and other stories of torture shared by elders. He asked for more than inclusion and culturally responsive education. He expressed the desire for a shift which would give Alaska Natives a home on their ancestral lands. He expressed his support for early literacy and urged increased support for teachers and students through future legislation. He expressed the necessity for a statewide consortium on Alaska Native languages and a graduation requirement of at least one semester in an Alaska Native language for Alaska Native language teachers. He suggested that multinational Native-language leaders should collaborate on a plan to further incorporate Alaska Native languages into the public school system.

[9:06:56 AM](#)

DR. TWITCHELL, responding to a committee question, stated that the standards of education need to be analyzed. He stated that, in his observations, students who succeed are typically non-Native. He recalled that he had asked a group of high-achieving students about William Paul, the first Alaska Native to become an attorney and a territorial legislator. He related that William Paul desegregated Alaska's schools and earned Alaska Natives the right to vote. He emphasized the unlikelihood that students knew of the important Tlingit historical figure. He expressed the belief that schools teach Alaska Native peoples as a "monolith," with no specific names or histories. He gave the example of Hawaiian language schools which had resisted standardized testing. This had risked a loss of funding; however, they now have a 100 percent graduation rate and an 80 percent college placement rate.

[9:16:45 AM](#)

DR. TWITCHELL recommended working with the Alaska Native Studies Council and the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council to develop Native-specific benchmarks for every student in Alaska who graduates high school, and this should include knowledge of regional and state specific historical figures. He added that funding should be put towards early childhood reading in heritage languages, in addition to English.

[9:24:52 AM](#)

DR. TWITCHELL expressed the opinion that the Tlingit Culture, Language, and Literacy program at Harborview Elementary School

is great, as students in the program are at a near conversational level with the Tlingit language by fourth grade; unfortunately, the program ends after the fifth grade. He expressed the hope that the program is expanded to middle schools. He added that language nests are also a part of the solution to bring heritage languages back from the brink of extinction. Not only were heritage languages prohibited, but parents had elected for their children to speak English to keep them from experiencing violence and discrimination. He stated that language nests are promising programs for the future of the Tlingit language.

[9:30:05 AM](#)

TERRI WALKER, Superintendent, Northwest Arctic Borough School District, presented on culturally responsive education in Alaska. She discussed the Inuit Circumpolar Council which established an education steering group. This group led workshops to develop an Alaskan Inuit education improvement strategy, with the goals of defining education success from an Inuit perspective. The workshops reviewed the current state of Inuit education in Alaska and identified recommendations for improvement. She stated that recommendations were then transformed into an educational plan. She listed the six measurable objectives: indigenization of education frameworks, education policy influence, culture-based curriculum, Inuit language education, educational leadership capacity, and traditional parenting skills. She expressed the opinion that through family and community engagement, students can develop pride in self-identity and respect for elders. She continued that culture-based curriculum involves creating a traditional-knowledge clearing house specifically for Inuit research and resources. She added that the sharing of culture-based resources and instructional strategies should be encouraged across regions, and appropriate resources should be created using local knowledge. She suggested that education should focus on the whole child, with parents and elders helping build curriculum.

[9:39:33 AM](#)

MS. WALKER described building a science curriculum for ninth graders, including subjects involving northern lights, snow, and belugas. She stated that curriculum specialists have been hired to develop Native language programs, but funding is limited, and the reading curriculum is a package from the Lower 48 to help teach English. She advised that dual-language programs would

better help students learn. She recommended screening tools over standardized assessments and testing. She stated that the goal should be to create place-based, socially relevant schools which reflect the culture.

[9:51:33 AM](#)

DR. TWITCHELL, in a final statement, emphasized the benefits of a more place-based context for learning. He explained that under the current system, many indigenous peoples reject education because it does not reflect them; rather, it is something to which they must conform.

[10:04:14 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:04 a.m.