

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 21, 2022

8:02 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  
Representative Ronald Gillham

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: UPDATE FROM ALASKA SCHOOL BOARDS

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

KATIE OLIVER, Former President  
Association of Alaska School Boards  
Kodiak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

MARGO BELLAMY, Member  
Board of Directors  
Association of Alaska School Boards;  
President  
Anchorage School Board  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

PETE HOEPFNER, President

Alaska Association of School Boards;  
Vice President  
Cordova City School District  
Cordova, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

IVAN M. IVAN, Former Vice Chair  
Yupit Regional School Board;  
Former Representative  
Alaska State Legislature  
Akiak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

JOHN MARK, Vice Chair  
Board of Directors  
Lower Kuskokwim School District  
Quinhagak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

BARB JEWELL, President  
School Board  
Cordova City School District  
Cordova, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

DAVE DICKASON, Member  
School Board  
Chugach School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

CHARLENE ARNESON, President  
School Board  
Chugach School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

DIANE GUBATAYAO, Member  
Board of Directors  
Association for Alaska School Boards;  
Member,

School Board,  
Ketchikan Gateway Borough School Board  
Ketchikan, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

GEORGE SCOTT BALLARD, Superintendent  
Yupit School District  
Palmer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented on behalf of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:02:28 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR HARRIET DRUMMOND** called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Representatives Gillham, Hopkin, Story, and Drummond were present at the call to order. Representatives Cronk, Prax, and Zulkosky arrived as the meeting was in progress.

#### **PRESENTATION: Update from Alaska School Boards**

[Contains discussion of HB 164, HB 259, HB 272, HB 273, HB 350, HB 220, HB 19, HB 60, SB 111.]

[8:03:09 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND** announced that the only order of business would be updates from the Alaska school boards.

[8:05:16 AM](#)

**KATIE OLIVER**, Former President, Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB), emphasized the necessity of predictable and reliable funding for public education. This includes financial support within the base student allocation (BSA) and recognizing the rising costs of goods and services within communities. The BSA has remained unchanged since 2017, and districts have struggled to attract and retain quality teachers. She expressed her support for HB 272 and HB 273. She urged the committee to prioritize major maintenance because school infrastructure in the state needs significant investment for repairs and replacement. She voiced the opinion that the quality of facilities can impact learning outcomes.

MS. OLIVER said that bond debt reimbursement has a significant impact on schools in Kodiak. Historically, the Kodiak Island Borough has funded the school district at or above 90 percent of the maximum allowable; however, there has been a steep reduction in support from the local municipality because of the veto of appropriation for bond debt reimbursement. She pointed out that in fiscal year 2021 (FY21), the Kodiak Island Borough's appropriation was only 76 percent of the maximum allowable. She urged the committee to support bond debt reimbursement in Alaska. She continued that teacher recruitment and retention is a top issue, especially in rural districts. She added that recruiting is costly and time consuming. She emphasized that the committee should support the recommendations from the Teacher Recruitment and Retention task force, especially the efforts to fund the retirement and benefits program.

MS. OLIVER expressed her support for HB 220. She listed additional strategies, including investment in teacher housing for rural school districts, support for a robust teacher-mentor program, and continuing support for the development of teacher training programs in the University of Alaska system. She stated that teachers from Alaska and individuals from out of state who moved here to be in the education program are more likely to stay longer, working in the state's school districts.

[8:10:07 AM](#)

MARGO BELLAMY, Member, Board of Directors, Association of Alaska School Boards; President, Anchorage School Board, remarked that Anchorage does not represent the rest of the state. She explained that there are some shared challenges; however, Anchorage has innovations and improvements which could be utilized throughout the state. She added that district-wide internet connection and availability of virtual learning creates equity among students. The mission of AASB is to advocate for children and youth by assisting school boards in providing quality public education which focuses on student achievement through effective local governance.

MS. BELLAMY stated that the impacts of the recruitment and retention crisis are felt every day. A goal in Anchorage is to create a diverse and qualified workforce that is culturally responsive. She expressed the opinion that Alaska has the expertise to create quality teachers; however, innovation is necessary to harness new talent. There is a pathway through the University of Alaska Anchorage to train special education teachers, but there are not enough recruits. There are

currently 140 vacant positions throughout the Anchorage School District.

MS. BELLAMY insisted that the current retirement system is no longer a selling point for teachers looking to move to Alaska for adventure. She emphasized that teachers deserve to retire with dignity. She remarked that housing in rural areas for teachers is necessary for successful student outcomes. She stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had caused schools to reimagine school attendance, but it also created inequity for students who were unable to connect to the internet. She emphasized the necessity of internet access for students across the state.

[8:18:25 AM](#)

PETE HOEPFNER, President, Alaska Association of School Boards; Vice President, Cordova School District, addressed student wellness and safe schools. He remarked that currently school districts are seeing more absences and more student behavioral incidences than ever before. He expressed the opinion that trained mental health counselors are necessary in school districts; by engaging mental health needs and developing relationships, student achievement could increase in a profound way. He stated that literacy is a fundamental human right, and students reading by third grade is an aspiration and a target of every school board. He recommended funding of a universal pre-K, as this would help Alaska school districts reach this important goal.

[8:24:54 AM](#)

IVAN M. IVAN, Former Vice Chair, Yupiit Regional School Board; Former Representative, Alaska State Legislature, emphasized that children deserve the best opportunities possible. He explained that his grandchildren live in "two worlds," one of modern education and another of their culture at home. Meshing these worlds would provide an opportunity for them to be grounded in cultural principles, which would help elders and the community. This would help mold the children into "complete human beings" who are prepared for their futures. He suggested there be a subsistence calendar waiver. He stated that for teachers to focus on providing the best education possible for rural students, housing for teachers should include affordable water, sewer, and fuel.

[8:35:01 AM](#)

JOHN MARK, Vice Chair, Lower Kuskokwim School District Board of Directors, mentioned that because of climate change there has been a lot of erosion around the schools near the river. School buildings in Newtok need to be relocated because of environmental conditions, and funding is needed. He stated that as permafrost melts, school buildings and teacher housing are shifting. He reiterated that creating quality housing for teachers by upgrading water and sewer systems would improve teacher retention. He shared that the technology implemented during the pandemic was not reliable and created problems in his district. He emphasized that the Native language immersion programs should be protected and not become impaired by state assessment tools. He said that general funds and grant funds should be used to translate books to make them culturally relevant, providing materials for the dual language program.

[8:43:00 AM](#)

BARB JEWELL, President, School Board, Cordova City School District, highlighted some positive parts of the Cordova City School District, including the recent return to full-time, in-person school. She stated that the pandemic brought up many issues which need addressing with sustainable and reliable funding. She opined that HB 259, HB 272, and HB 273 would move schools in the right direction for Alaska's children. She pointed out that BSA has not kept up with inflation; therefore, does not reflect the costs of schools in the state, especially for rural communities. She suggested that HB 350 may help to solve school bond debt reimbursement. She stated that Cordova High School is very old, and the lack of a bond debt reimbursement system has had an immediate impact on the school district's finances. She stated that the city has had to cover these costs; therefore, it is not able to meet the same level of financial contributions as in the past. As a result, there was no preschool funding for this school year, and there likely will not be any next year. She maintained that the lack of bond debt reimbursement has impaired the district's ability to support students.

MS. JEWELL expressed her support for HB 164 and SB 111, as these bills would directly address literacy training for teachers and the need for universal pre-K. She stated that recruitment and retention of skilled teachers is difficult, and currently there are many vacancies. She added that hiring international teachers is being considered, but this creates an administrative burden. She informed the committee that Cordova City School

District has seen a dramatic increase in student absences, disciplinary issues, and substance abuse. These problems are directly related to mental health issues and attributed to the pandemic. She expressed the opinion that HB 60 would be a good start by addressing the mental well-being of all students. She mentioned that teacher recruitment and retention is a problem nationwide. She pointed out the importance of retirement and benefits for teachers. She said, "I want us to stop holding individual teachers accountable for systemic failures. If we want to recruit and retain teachers, it's important that we hold them in high esteem for the hard work they do, and we treat them with kindness and respect."

[9:10:43 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY pointed out that HB 19 would make it possible for fluent indigenous language speakers to obtain a certification through the school board to teach their language.

[9:12:28 AM](#)

DAVE DICKASON, Member, Board of Directors, Chugach School District, discussed problems with teacher retention. He stated that without teacher consistency it is difficult to create healthy teaching relationships with students. He pointed out the steady decline in test scores over the years, attributing this in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that the Chugach School District manages a statewide homeschool program with nearly 575 students. The district's performance-based system provides personalized support for families. He stressed the importance of funding for families for homeschooling in remote areas. He stated that there is a residential school in Anchorage that teaches life-skills and offers a dorm, commercial kitchen, and classrooms. He continued that it provides classes in science, technology, engineering, math, culinary arts, emergency trauma certification, driver education, and outdoor leadership. He stated that funding for this facility has not been increased since 2013. He stated that the Chugach School District supports priorities for adequate, predictable, and reliable public education funding, literacy education, early childhood education, teacher retention, and recruitment.

[9:16:10 AM](#)

CHARLENE ARNESON, President, School Board, Chugach School District, emphasized the importance of providing students with the skills taught through early education and reading. She

argued that the future of the workforce, leaders, and productive adults depend on learning these necessary skills. She expressed the opinion that reading proficiency will level the playing field for all students. She argued that without a foundation and competency level for reading, many students will fall behind in all subjects. She also provided details on the Voyage School, which provides students with training to gain life skills and career development.

[9:31:31 AM](#)

DIANE GUBATAYAO, Member, Association for Alaska School Boards; Member, School Board, Ketchikan Gateway Borough School Board, expressed anxiety concerning the budget for school facilities. She said that because of inflation and seven years of flat funding for BSA, school districts in the state have lost \$1,385 per enrollment since 2007. She deduced this to a total loss of \$7,479,325 in FY22 for Ketchikan schools, which is equal in spending power to the year 2009. She stated that district health insurance costs have doubled in the last 10 years, amounting to 15 percent of the total operating budget for FY 22. She added that in Ketchikan the pandemic exacerbated this because the city's critical revenue source is derived from the tourism industry. She stated that the capacity of Ketchikan to compensate for inadequate state funding is severely impacted. She stated that Alaska is facing a teacher shortage and hiring crisis, with the Ketchikan School District currently having 40 vacancies. She pointed out that benefits and wages in the state are no longer competitive compared with neighboring states. She estimated that cuts to the budget will cause the loss of 10 teacher positions and 30 classified positions. Timely, reliable, and predictable funding is what school districts need to conduct necessary long-term educational planning. She spoke in support of HB 272, HB 273, increased retirement and benefits for teachers, and bond debt reimbursement. She urged the committee to fulfill its constitutional requirement for all of Alaska's students.

[9:38:49 AM](#)

GEORGE SCOTT BALLARD, Superintendent, Yupiit School District, addressed the request to the commissioner for a waiver regarding a subsistence calendar for the Yupiit School District. He stated that the education system has not served rural students well in the past, and he is looking to shift the paradigm to a Native Alaskan model. To make education more meaningful to rural students, he stated that the district is requesting a

change to the current school calendar. He explained that currently during the months of May and August attendance is down 20 percent to 40 percent. The subsistence calendar waiver would add a half hour to the school schedule from September through April so to allow students to participate in subsistence activities from May through August. He stated that this proposal would meet the statutory requirement of 900 hours per school year. He opined that the system currently does not value the Yupiit way of life.

[9:49:21 AM](#)

MR. IVAN maintained that the purpose of this committee is to educate every student in the state to the highest standard possible. He related the instructions from elders in his community to love oneself, love one's family, extend love into the community, teach all children to be grounded in respect, work together, and help each other. He also said to treat people the way you want to be treated and that all children need instruction for this.

[9:53:38 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND thanked the presenters.

[9:54:06 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:54 a.m.