

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 10, 2021

9:04 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Roger Holland, Chair  
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair  
Senator Shelley Hughes  
Senator Peter Micciche  
Senator Tom Begich

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: SCHOOL DISTRICT PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC BY SUPERINTENDENTS: DEENA BISHOP~ ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT; KERRY BOYD~ YUKON-KOYUKUK SCHOOL DISTRICT; BOBBY BOLEN~ BERING STRAIT SCHOOL DISTRICT; JASON JOHNSON~ DILLINGHAM CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT; AND JOHN O'BRIEN~ KENAI PENINSULA BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

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

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave her district perspective on education during the pandemic.

KERRY BOYD, Superintendent  
Yukon-Koyukuk School District  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave her district perspective on education during the pandemic.

BOBBY BOLEN, Ph.D., Superintendent  
Bering Strait School District  
Bering Strait  
Unalakleet, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave his district perspective on education during the pandemic.

JOHN O'BRIEN, Superintendent  
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District  
Soldotna, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave his district perspective on education during the pandemic.

JASON JOHNSON, Superintendent  
Dillingham City School District  
Dillingham, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave his district perspective on education during the pandemic.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[9:04:06 AM](#)

**CHAIR ROGER HOLLAND** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:04 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Begich, Stevens, Micciche, Hughes, and Chair Holland.

#### **Presentation: School District Perspectives on Educating During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

[9:04:38 AM](#)

**CHAIR HOLLAND** announced the presentation School District Perspectives on Educating during the COVID-19 Pandemic and that the committee was planning to hear from five superintendents. The committee did not have time to hear from all 54 school districts, but he hoped that the conversations today and Friday will provide an appreciation for the vast differences and unique challenges the state faces. The hearing will be held as a panel discussion to gain perspectives from those with boots on the ground. These superintendents were invited to speak about their experiences in navigating the pandemic. He asked them to first focus on the impact of the pandemic on student learning. He asked the superintendents to provide their insights into how students have fared, positively and negatively, with the

transition to virtual learning or whether any schools avoided any shutdowns and transition to virtual learning.

CHAIR HOLLAND began by calling on Superintendent Deena Bishop and noted he thought the enrollment for Anchorage was around 48,000.

9:05:54 AM

DEENA BISHOP, Ph.D., Superintendent, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, said that the Anchorage School District (ASD) now has about 43,000 students. ASD has had significant outmigration to statewide home school as well as people leaving the state. There were some silver linings with learning during the pandemic. One of the biggest was the growth in teacher competencies with technology, utilizing using machine learning for assessments and building muscle around platforms that share online and blended learning and an increase in creativity and engagement needed in classrooms today with kids growing up online. Being online and social media is not all good and educators want to teach students to use social media skills and technology learning in a positive way.

DR. BISHOP said the district found that certain student groups thrived during this time. Those were in families with the capacity to be at home with students. This were significant impacts with students in pre-K to grade 2 when their parents had to leave to go to work. Older students were at home with siblings during learning. That was difficult. The district is seeing a lag in certain student groups due to that. Children don't do home school on their own. Families that did not have that ability to engage with students suffered more than others.

DR. BISHOP shared that while fast speed Internet is available in Anchorage, for many families it is not affordable. Many families had poor standing with a lot of companies. The ASD board used \$1.5 million of CARES money to take care of the Internet for some children's families. The ASD was the middle man for payment because some families couldn't get the service. She always wants to see the silver linings, but the district learned about access, poverty, working families, and second languages. All that impacted the outcome for children. If public education is to be successful, it needs to give all kids the opportunity to be successful.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Superintendent Kerry Boyd and noted he thought the enrollment for the Yukon-Koyukuk School District was around 1,800 students.

[9:09:57 AM](#)

KERRY BOYD, Superintendent, Yukon-Koyukuk School District, Fairbanks, Alaska, said the Yukon-Koyukuk (Y-K) district has about 4,400 students. The past year there has been exponential growth in its home school programs. Typically Yukon-Koyukuk has about 1,700 students in its home school program. Its special Ed population went up 175 percent, which has created its own challenges as far as providing a strong home school program to students. Trying to find special education staff this year has been one of the district's biggest challenges, along with providing strong programs and supports for many families that may or may not have home schooled before.

MS. BOYD noted that a positive for this year is what she has seen across the nation, the state, and her district, which is a great respect for teachers. Y-K has seen a decrease in student discipline. When schools closed in March and students turned to remote learning, it changed their perspective. Students want to be in school. That has been nice for staff and parents. Y-K has nine remote schools with 300 students. Y-K opened up its schools right after Labor Day. When the district has had to close schools, the district has used paper packets. The district does not have the infrastructure in place for distance learning.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Superintendent Bobby Bolen and noted he thought the enrollment for the Bering Strait School District was around 1,700 students.

[9:12:28 AM](#)

BOBBY BOLEN, Ph.D., Superintendent, Bering Strait School District, Bering Strait, Unalakleet, Alaska, said that enrollment was correct. The numbers stay consistent year after year. The Bering Strait School District (BSSD) challenge is the infrastructure of broadband and internet to reach students when they are not receiving face-to-face instruction. BSSD has been lucky because it has only had to close two schools for any length of time. Now all schools are open except for one in a modified setting due to a couple of cases. The BSSD biggest challenge is working with each village. There is lot of apprehension about the virus. Everyone is trying to keep the virus out. People tend to go to the extreme with the one case. The pandemic hasn't hurt attendance because there are no other options. There is no home schooling except with packets, which are not successful.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Superintendent John O'Brien and noted he thought the enrollment for the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District was 9,000.

9:14:18 AM

JOHN O'BRIEN, Superintendent, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, Soldotna, Alaska, said it has been a journey for districts nationwide during the COVID pandemic. The Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD) has been able to keep most of its schools open for the majority of this school year. The central peninsula area, around Soldotna, Kenai, and Sterling, started with remote learning because of a summer spike and went back to remote around Thanksgiving for most of the entire second quarter. The first quarter was mostly in person. KPBSD is a large district geographically and has been handling things at a geographical level. Since January, the second semester, KPBSD had had in-person learning. The KPBSD started with pre-K through sixth grade students and then on January 11 went to 100 percent in-person learning for all students for families that chose that option. Now that KPBSD has returned to in-person learning, more and more families are returning students to KPBSD schools, which is what the district had hoped as the pandemic progresses and more is learned about the virus.

MR. O'BRIEN said that instructionally, he would echo what Dr. Bishop said. Some families have thrived in a remote, online environment, but that is not the case for most families, especially those that did not choose that option and did not have a parent at home. Even within families, some parents have shared that one child is thriving and loves the remote environment and the other child is feeling socially isolated and depressed. KPBSD is not focusing just on instruction but also the social-emotional wellbeing of students. The staff is reaching out to families. That is easier now that most students are back for in-person learning. It has been a journey getting the community on board for mitigations like masking for athletics to keep students in schools. The goal is to keep students in school, full time for the rest of the school year, so the district is maintaining important mitigation measures. That has ruffled some feathers in the community, but most people are happy students are back in the school and want to keep them in school.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Superintendent Jason Johnson and noted he thought the enrollment for the Dillingham City School District was 500.

[9:18:16 AM](#)

JASON JOHNSON, Superintendent, Dillingham City School District, Dillingham, Alaska, said that the Dillingham City School District has 450 students in a typical year. This year it had a significant decrease in student enrollment, which was to be expected. In 1919 most of the population died because of the Spanish flu. That historic knowledge did not go away. The district honors that and made an extraordinary effort to respect those feelings during this process. The district has been onsite for about 70 percent of the instructional year so far, which has been a blessing. Some of the positive was a chance to build relationships in the community and with partners. The district does extensive outreach with its tribal council, city government, and health corporation. That has enabled the district to provide a litany of supports that would otherwise not have been possible.

MR. JOHNSON shared that the district has seen a tremendous amount of innovation with its instructional teams. Teachers have been put in a situation where they were forced to learn new strategies that can be used in the future. The biggest negative is the social-emotional impact. There is no way to replace the bond between students and teachers. It cannot be done by video. It is not successful in virtual school. The district is seeing that in its community. The district is noting the ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) that many students are having as a result of time away from school. Typically the district is the students' biggest advocate.

[9:20:19 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH shared that he was taken by comments made by Superintendent Bishop. He asked her to expand on what she noted on lower income and single parent households.

DR. BISHOP replied that the ASD is a diverse district; 62 percent of its student body are children of color and 38 percent are White. The ASD is a high-diversity, multicultural community. There are different experiences in homes. The two student groups that were affected the most with almost a doubling of D's and F's were Alaska Native and Pacific Islander students. In addition, economically disadvantaged students also doubled their rates of D's and F's. There was also the student learning data in elementary school. Overall the percent of the increase in negative outcomes, such as failing grades and dropping out, grew 6 to 10 percent, but in some groups, it was 30 percent in that student group, so the experiences were quite different. Many older siblings had to watch the younger ones and that impacted

their learning while they were at home, as well as their siblings'. Learning had to happen at night with parents because parents were essential workers and working during the day. There were very large gaps with accessibility to internet because of the affordability and the ability to get it in the home.

SENATOR BEGICH shared that in Austin, Texas, bus drivers were required to set up remote internet stations on buses to give access to low-income families. He asked if she had considered that.

DR. BISHOP replied that the district had explored many ideas. The district has MyFi and Wi-Fi access, but what would occur is that families would use that data in two days because other family members would use the data. The district learned last spring that once it released the Wi-Fi, whole families were in such need that it was gobbled up. The district had to go to a steady hard line with a modem in the household. That is more economical and feasible and steady for families. The buses for Wi-Fi would go around, park, and then leave and sometimes were not always there at the right time. The district needed a sturdy structure to build equity around students so that the families' poverty did not affect students.

[9:25:37 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS noted to Superintendent O'Brien that legislators keep hearing about ghost students, students who disappear and drop out. He asked if Superintendent O'Brien had any data on that for his districts and whether the district has any plans for summer programming.

MR. O'BRIEN replied that there have been such situations over the last year since the pandemic, especially when the district learning was 100 percent remote. Students disappeared despite multiple attempts to reach out to families. Some families are just extremely hard to reach, families that are typically in transition and transient a lot. It is a struggle to have updated contact information for those students. There have been some of those cases. Now that the district is back to 100 percent in-person learning those students have returned for the most part. The big issue with ghost students was when the district was 100 percent remote for the entire fourth quarter of last year when the governor closed all schools through emergency declaration.

MR. O'BRIEN said that KPBSD's plans for bridging the gap for students who have missed out on instructional opportunities is a robust summer school program and leveraging CARES funding for

additional interventionists during the school day, particularly for literacy and math instruction, where students have experienced gaps. KPBSD plans to bolster afterschool programs. What is key for KPBSD students, because there are many families in poverty and working parents often cannot transport students after school or during the summer, is that transportation will be part of summer school and afterschool remediation.

[9:28:48 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHE asked Superintendent O'Brien if he has considered an exit poll with kids about what worked and what didn't. One of his kids thrived in that remote environment. When Superintendent O'Brien talks about catching up and summer options, he wondered if Superintendent O'Brien would consider what they learned from distance delivery so that options could be delivered at a lower cost for a larger group of kids who may or may not make it to the building. It would be nice to understand what worked and what didn't from a student and parent perspective and to expand distance options for kids who might need some extra help.

CHAIR HOLLAND added that he would ask the other superintendents the same question about an exit poll about what worked and what didn't work.

MR. O'BRIEN answered that the district absolutely has been reaching out to students. The assistant superintendent of instruction worked hard to make sure that student voice is part of the district process to learn and improve. The district does plan to do an exit poll of at least the secondary students and parents before the close of school year. Dr. Bishop talked of a silver lining. KPBSD was on its way to hybrid instruction before the pandemic, but this has provided every teacher in the district an opportunity to learn to how to teach with a digital parallel in a hybrid format. Hopefully the district will not be dealing with the pandemic at the same level in the fall of 2021, but there are many aspects of instruction that will not go back to the way they were. The district will continue to have remote opportunities for families at all levels if that has worked for them. There may be at the elementary and middle school level, like at the high school level, remote-only teachers who work with families who want to be connected to the district and a neighborhood school but through a remote option. The district is planning a summer school online program for students who cannot come in, not only for remediation but also acceleration with a lot of elective offerings for the summer for middle school and high school students.

CHAIR HOLLAND asked Superintendent Johnson about plans for an exit poll.

[9:33:21 AM](#)

MR. JOHNSON responded that his district would not do an exit poll because the beauty of a small district is that it has daily if not hourly communication with parents and can make immediate changes to planning. For example, the district made 12-13 modifications to its smart start plan. The district works closely with student government to let them voice their concerns. A student government representative is on the school board.

DR. BOLEN replied that his district also doesn't necessarily have an exit poll planned. The district has been using advisory education committees a lot more this year than in the past to learn what is and what is not working in its 15 unique communities. The district's distance delivery is paper-and-pencil packets and knows that doesn't work. It is not the best way to engage kids. The district is trying to incorporate other offline technologies and platforms. The district's youth leaders in student government represent their schools and let the school district know what it can do to make things better for them. Most of that has centered on hands-on projects.

MS. BOYD answered that YKSD does have an exit poll planned. The district also has satisfaction polls to continuously find out what can be done to improve services. The district just put another poll out last week and has about 500 responses so far. She tries to get 75 percent feedback. Two polls are going on now to get a better idea of when students are leaving and where they are going and what to do to improve services. The district gets very enlightening information.

DR. BISHOP said the ASD had had a system to look at the 4,000 fewer students to see where they are; 230 students were confirmed dropouts, 149 had no plan, 81 received a GED. The district has 684 students it has not been able to contact. The district continues to do outreach with local partners. The other students did go to different places. The ASD programs were designed with feedback from last year. The first thing was that parents were unhappy that teachers were able to choose their own platforms for online learning. The ASD had allowed innovators to innovate, so it worked with unions to select one platform, which is Canvas. Now ASD has set units that can be used across the state. DEED makes it public to anyone. Number two was that

keeping the same school day did not work out. ASD moved the high school start back by 30 minutes, so the first lesson on Zoom is at 8. Those two items came from parent feedback after the spring semester. The ASD had great success last year with summer school to make sure they matriculated and graduated. The districts heard from students that they needed the ability for teachers to text them. That could be dangerous and so is discouraged by school district policy. The district worked to come up with a system that is safe and that can be searched and keeps record. This lets students use smart phones and teachers have the freedom to communicate with individual devices, but those records are kept and can be accessed. The ASD is planning summer school based on parent feedback and the need for face-to-face instruction as well as an asynchronous ability to enroll in classes. ASD's new programs are based on what it learns from feedback.

9:42:00 AM

SENATOR HUGHES pointed out that Anchorage is the largest school district. Roughly \$180 million of COVID funds was distributed to school districts across the state. She asked how much did ASD receive and how did it spend it. She asked what cost savings did the district have from such things as turning down the heat and turning off the lights and renegotiating bus contracts when schools were closed.

CHAIR HOLLAND said that works for the format as the committee will switch to funding issues. He called on Superintendent Bishop.

DR. BISHOP replied that in the initial CARES Act funds distributed last spring, the ASD received about \$12 million. The funds expended were board approved. That included 3.5 on health teachers, \$4.7 million on information technology and devices for connectivity, \$1.5 million for course development, \$700,000 for summer school, and \$300,000 for PPE (personal protective equipment). In conjunction with the \$12 million, the district used almost \$9 million from its fund balance to add to those PPE, \$200,000 for equitable outcomes working with summer schools, \$600,000 for charter schools, and \$400,000 for private schools. Those were ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund) I funds from the first CARES Act.

DR. BISHOP said the district hasn't received ESSER II yet. It will be moved into next year. The district has built 80 percent of these funds into its budget next year and summer school this year to double down on what it needs to do for kids. There is

quite a learning gap. Kids have experienced the disproportionality of outcomes and suffered in the social-emotional area from depression to suicide. It is more than academics. The district is implementing those funds not only into starting the school year well but having a robust summer school to work on credit recovery and skill building.

DR. BISHOP said that ASD immediately implemented a hiring delay once it knew it was shutting down. It took a two-tier look into every personnel hiring from aides to teachers to executives, knowing that student enrollment was being affected. The district had great savings in substitute use. All sort of things shut down last spring so there were immense savings with substitutes. Now that the ASD is back in school that account is being used this year. The district did renegotiate the transportation contract because of reduced utilization. Regarding utility costs, 53 schools were operating with programs. The district partnered with Boys and Girls Club and with their own programs, and so did have some teachers and students in schools. The district increased the air exchange with HVACS four times, so the air exchange units are turned on four times as much. Some of the mitigation took energy. The district had to dig down to figure out why there were not utility savings because that was a district expectation.

DR. BISHOP emphasized that the district had a big success with last year's summer school and this year there is a planning committee with project management to design this year's summer school to make sure it meets the needs of district families.

CHAIR HOLLAND asked Superintendent Boyd about CARES Act funding for his district and whether there were any cost savings.

[9:48:15 AM](#)

MS. BOYD answered this her district received \$196,000 in ESSER funding and \$148,000 other funding. The district will receive \$737,000 in ESSER II funding and will allocate that at the next board meeting. The district spent a large majority of it on planning, professional development, internet access for schools, and PPE gear for students. The district has spent \$150,000 and \$35,000 is left for this year. That will be looked at for ongoing sanitation when schools are closed. The biggest cost savings have been no travel. Some savings were from substitutes and support staff due to ongoing quarantining in the communities.

DR. BOLEN said that Bering Strait received about \$550,000 in ESSER funds. The district spent most of it trying to increase possibilities for student learning. The district bought Chromebooks for students and computers for teachers. The district bought PPE, hand sanitizer, plastic dividers, and a machine to make its own cleaning solutions. Since the cost of shipping hazardous materials to the bush is so high, it made sense to buy the chemicals and create it onsite. There were cost savings with travel, although the district is starting to be able to get maintenance and itinerant teachers to schools. The district has spent about \$420,000 of its ESSER funds on teaching supplies and equipment. The district also spent \$300,000 on maintenance, supplies and equipment, and about \$65,000 on alternate ways to provide daily meals even when students were not in school. Those numbers are more than what the district was reimbursed, so it did shift funding around. The district also incurred costs for professional development for teachers. The district is trying to do things with this money that are long lasting for the district. That is the plan for the upcoming funds, to make investments in HVAC and systems like that. The schools are older and that is important for their safety.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Superintendent Johnson with the Dillingham School District.

MR. JOHNSON shared that his district received \$138,000 from ESSER I and GEER I (Governor's Emergency Education Relief). The district used that for connectivity and acquiring devices needed for the instructional year and to ensure that homebased students and staff had internet in their homes. The district expects \$430,000 in the second round of funding. The district is going to build a robust summer school. It will not just include remedial education but also enrichment, so a two-pronged approach for the funding. The district is looking at a large literacy push as a result of the funding. Since most of the district's students identify as indigenous or Alaska Native, the district's push for literacy needs to be strong. The district has partnered with its local tribal council and the Alaska Community Foundation. The district has spent around \$1 to \$1.2 million on digital technology to ensure all students have internet in their homes that the district pays for. Equity is a large issue in rural Alaska. The district has not incurred any savings as a result of COVID. With these other grants and partnerships, the district has expended an exceptional amount of money.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Superintendent O'Brien with the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District.

9:55:43 AM

MR. O'BRIEN said that some of the cost increases were because teachers needed a lot more professional development to make the shift to remote learning at a moment's notice. The district spent a lot of time and resources with its professional development team and bought programs and software. That was a significant cost increase. There have not been many cost savings this year other than travel. Only online remote professional development has been approved, and the district has been providing in-house professional development in a remote environment. Last year for the fourth quarter the district did renegotiate bus contract for reduced utilization, but the district rolled out a huge program through the school nutrition services department to continue to feed students throughout the district and had several dropout points, and so used bus routes for food delivery and delivery of computers and laptops and MyFi wireless devices. All spring sports were cancelled so there some athletic savings such as with coaching stipends. The district didn't need substitutes when instruction was 100 percent remote. Overall, there were not huge savings and there were some increases because of COVID.

MR. O'BRIEN said that the KPBSD received \$2,295,953 in the first round of CARES funding. The district used funds for professional development, PPE supplies, and Zoom licenses and bolstered efforts to help families with connectivity. The district rolled out a large scale programs of MyFis for economically disadvantaged families. To address social-emotional learning and the mental health needs of students, the district hired elementary counselors, which it never has had before. The district saw firsthand the impact of needing counselors during the pandemic. The district is having a difficult time recruiting and retaining school nurses. That was a nonstarter in the middle of a global pandemic. The district needed an adequate cadre of school nurses, so the district increased nursing pay by \$5 an hour. That is still far behind what nurses can make in private doctor offices or in hospitals. There has been an increased need for substitutes this year. The district used some CARES money to increase pay for substitutes. The district has purchased electrostatic sprayers and lots of disinfectant and upgraded school HVAC systems. Schools have something called bipolar ionization, which helps create a safer internal environment in schools. It supposedly works with killing coronavirus after half an hour. The nurses have bought many supplies to monitor

temperatures and scanners to have touchless points. School nutrition services spent CARES money on hygienic packaging. The home school did digital advertising to compete with statewide programs. Wireless access points in schools have been bolstered. The district purchased more computers for students learning remotely.

CHAIR HOLLAND observed that some of the answers are wide ranging. He asked that with districts have seen a reduction in enrollment, whether superintendents expect students to come back next year. He noted that Dr. Bishop had said that Anchorage was down about 5,000 students.

10:03:43 AM

DR. BISHOP clarified that Anchorage is down 4,500 students from last year. The district expects 75 percent to come back to Anchorage as it opens and ASD is following up in its budget process with a survey with all parents and families who have left to see if they are coming back. The ASD will have a budget adjustment before the New Year. The budget is built on that 75 percent, but the district is following that up with a survey in April.

CHAIR HOLLAND noted that Superintendent Boyd had said enrollment was up because of COVID.

MS. BOYD answered that enrollment went up 2,400 students. The district expects a 35 percent decline, maybe even more, as the district expects many students to go back to their respective schools. The district is surveying parents now about their plans. About 33 percent are still uncertain and 45 percent who answered said they are returning, but the district is being cautious and mindful that many families will return as schools reopen.

CHAIR HOLLAND commented that Dr. Bolen had said that Bering Strait enrollment was flat.

DR. BOLEN replied that enrollment has stayed flat. There was an increase of about 13 students who returned from communities that were not doing face-to-face instruction and the district doesn't anticipate that they will stay.

MR. JOHNSON said that Dillingham doesn't know but not for lack of communication. The region was severely impacted by the Spanish flu. That trauma is still relevant and real. Until there is clarity with COVID he does not know if the district will get

these families back. The district maintains communication and wants to honor how they feel.

MR. O'BRIEN said the KPBSD had an interesting phenomenon. Its home school program, Connections Home School, normally has an enrollment of 750 students. There was a dramatic increase. At its peak, before the district went back to 100 percent in-person learning, the enrollment was almost 1,800. Unfortunately some families chose a statewide home school program. That was a double hit in revenue. If a student is in KPBSD home school, the district gets at least 90 percent of the revenue for those students. If they choose a statewide program, the funds go to districts where the families don't live. Trying to project enrollment for FY 22 was more difficult for him than any other year. The district took a conservative approach because it did not want to overextend the number of contracts to offer teachers. The district is still considering that many families will be in its home school program. In April the district will do a second recast of its enrollment. It will ask families to enroll in April for the fall so the district can make staffing adjustments in the spring. The district hopes that with vaccines and the state getting COVID in control, more families will be comfortable with bringing students to school in the fall for in-person learning.

10:10:13 AM

SENATOR MICCICHE noted that Anchorage and Dillingham are above the 10 percent fund balance. When money for other programs is distributed most districts will be above the 10 percent. He asked how critical it is for the legislature to act to allow a fund balance to be above 10 percent for the next few years for the temporary, excess funding.

MR. O'BRIEN answered that 27 school districts carried over 10 percent this past year and Kenai was not one of those. The borough reduced its local contribution by \$2.7 million. Authorizing those school districts that need it to carryover the funding will be an important funding mechanism for them.

MR. JOHNSON said that Dillingham had about \$75,000 to carryover. It is not an astronomical amount, but it is invaluable and prudent to have legislation that allows this. With so many unknowns and the needs of students, it is impossible to prudently spend money for the unknown. With flexibility the district can do diagnostic testing to find out and target student needs. The district could be surgical in its spending. With the change in the school bond debt reimbursement, the

anticipated increases in local contribution have not occurred. The district expects the local contribution to stay flat because of that.

DR. BOLEN said it would be helpful to have some type of flexibility because of the uncertainty in rural Alaska about what will come next. It could become an issue with other revenue streams. The district wants to use those before district funds. The flexibility would be vital to school districts so the funds could be available at a future date.

10:14:21 AM

MS. BOYD said that she wanted to speak about enrollment and projections in uncertain times. The department has a nice process in place for districts to send in projections. Superintendents meet on a regular basis and talk about projections. It is so difficult right now to identify what it will look like with so many unknowns, but districts have given it their best shot. Seven districts are looking for some type of floor through hold harmless. They are suffering and will be looking for support from the department and maybe the legislature. As far as the 10 percent carryover, she can speak for many superintendents as the president of the Alaska Superintendents Association and say that passing that declaration is critical so that districts can be good stewards of the funding and have ample time for planning. This will be the first time in her district that it will exceed the 10 percent. Many superintendents would appreciate extending the 10 percent carryover.

DR. BISHOP said that with the Anchorage economy of scale, these look like big numbers. The Anchorage carryover is a little over 10 percent, which is about \$64 million. As a large school district, there is a city ordinance that doesn't allow the district to spend. Six percent of the district reserve needs to be kept in savings for its triple AAA bond ratings. That is by city ordinance, so it is not spendable. That is about \$26 million of the \$64 million. There is \$30 million that is unassigned, which is about five percent. Anchorage has that much money for its savings account emergency; \$8 million of the \$64 million is built into the budget for FY 21 to create a balanced budget. Senators Begich and Holland as local legislators understand the impact of the city vs. district policy and how they work in conjunction to bring taxpayers the best deal possible for bonds. The emergency order is not just essential for the fund balance. The school district just completed 11,000 vaccines for people 65 and older. Commissioner Crum as well as

the local hospitals have donated those. The ability to scale that emergency order has given the ASD the ability to give back to the community.

SENATOR HUGHES observed that all alluded to some learning loss by some students who struggled with remote learning. She asked if they will be able to catch those students up and how long will it take.

10:19:28 AM

DR. BISHOP responded that she appreciated the focus on student learning and achievement. Absolutely there is a gap. As a certificated teacher she sometimes substitutes at schools. In speaking to teachers and looking at data for curriculum-based measures, pre-K-2 students are significantly behind in reading. The amount of vocabulary and learning in a classroom of early fundamentals has fallen significantly. This will be generational when it impacts pre-K-2. Alaska was already suffering in this area. All of them have been dissatisfied with reading achievement. Children learn to read to read to learn. That is why she says that it is generational. Going back to normal is not good enough for Alaska and its young readers. She supports the reading bill and getting kids in as soon as possible. The ASD used \$1.2 million in its reserves of the \$8 million just to boost pre-K learning because of the learning loss last spring. ASD plans on building capacity for learners. Evidence demonstrates that it pays off to get learners in earlier. Nationally, some predict a 15 percent decrease in reading outcomes across the board. Compared to their peers in previous generations, there will be 15 percent impact nationwide. Fifteen million young people have been out of school, not learning to read. It is a crisis. The district intends to build capacity. It has afterschool reading programs now and will continue those through the summer for many years, for as long as it takes.

MS. BOYD shared that it has been a big challenge for her district. The district monitors students at least quarterly and progress monitors. The district saw dramatic decreases in assessment results in rural schools from March and from when students were back in school in September, but not in the home school families. They were already receiving virtual instruction. She is encouraged by what she is seeing now. They are catching up, but there was a significant drop. The district is planning a robust summer school program. The district is putting in infrastructure in villages. When GCI and DRS were generously donating internet and MyFi, it did not help because there was no connectivity equipment in place. The district and

school board have used some of the funding to building that equity in learning so students can have university and Zoom courses and have access to all those resources they have not had before. Some of the things the district is doing now to help students catch up are sending literacy buckets on a regular basis to all families and hiring reading and math specialists. The district has a team of administrators and teachers to look at targeted areas where students may have challenges. The district has a systemic reading program that will only be strengthened if the legislature passes the reading bill. If students go below a certain level, parents are notified and a plan is developed for a tiered learning program. The district is trying to partner with Head Start so it can take part in the district's professional development. The district has offered free rent to Head Start to encourage little kids to get ready for school. The district is seeing what it can do to help Head Start and the Parents as Teachers program. The district has had 90-95 percent teacher retention this year, which is unusual. That has been a priority of the board and administrators. Some administrators and teachers are tutoring one-on-one after school.

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DR. BOLEN shared that his district is also trying to look at MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) data and other checkpoints. The district has struggled getting additional data. If students are not coming into the school as much, it is more difficult. The district curriculum team created lessons to specific standards. All teachers can access that and use that for learning, especially for distance learning. The district purchased FastForWord, which slows down speech and allows students who have difficulty with hearing and speech to more engaged and learn sounds and phonetics. The district is using DEED 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants for K-5 ingenuity classes. These are supplemental to the instruction in the classroom, but it is tied to MAP scores. That is helpful to catch students up who may have deficits. The district does have afterschool tutoring for student with low-risk designations. The district plans to have a summer school, but the challenge is keeping teachers in rural communities once their contract ends. That limits the numbers the school district can address. The Alaska Staff Development Network has done a great job providing online professional development. The district has provided stipends for curriculum instruction facilitators for optional Saturday professional development. The district is trying to address the gaps in multiple ways.

[10:31:13 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND passed on a suggestion from Senator Begich that any superintendents who are listening in can provide their thoughts in writing to the committee.

MR. JOHNSON said he wishes that he could be there in person to answer this specific question so that the committee could see his fire and passion. The district will absolutely catch students up. That is why every superintendent is there today to speak to the committee. In Dillingham the district has an extensive network of afterschool tutors who can work one-on-one with students. The district runs multiple risk assessments daily so that staff can reach out to students falling slightly off pace. The district makes immediate contact with any student who is falling below a C and the student's parents. The district does not wait weeks or months. It is that day. The district is able to do that in a small community. The district did find a group of seniors struggling to get English credits and found a teacher to teach an additional class after school so that cohort will graduate on time. To ensure kids are on track will be a three-to-five-year process in Dillingham. The district will focus on a strong K-2 literacy program. A big portion of kids' development at that age is socialization. That cannot be replicated online or in a virtual format. The districts wants to bring kids in the summer or after school, if it can, for that play-based learning. The district has a robust RTI (Response to Intervention) program. The district has already hired multiple interventionists to work with the students. The district will implement the same strategic approach to support students' social-emotional needs. The district has counselors onsite who are partially funded with a grant. The district has lots of tools and supports in place to elevate kids who are facing these difficult situations.

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MR. O'BRIEN commented that that is the question of the day. He hopes that educators can catch students up in three years. That is an ambitious goal. Dr. Bishop was spot on when she alluded to this being a generational issue that the nation will be facing. A lot can be learned from studies from Hurricane Katrina and the impact on those students in New Orleans. Some students were out of school for over a year. The global pandemic is a Hurricane Katrina on a national and global scale. Kenai will be using a lot of the strategies his colleagues have described. Superintendents meet regularly and are working hard as a united group on this question of how they can address the generational impacts this will have on students. Kenai will leverage CARES

Act funding of about \$9 million over the next year. Kenai is pleased to be able to use that over two years. Its plan is to spend the majority of the funding addressing this question of how to catch students up and provide them with opportunities that have been lost during this global pandemic. The district will hire additional interventionists to address literacy and math skills. Those are the building blocks that need to be immediately address that. He applauds Superintendent Johnson's focus on the social-emotional. No one can forget that there is not only instructional impacts that have occurred because of the global pandemic. Many families are in crisis as a result of the pandemic. Students are experiencing that trauma as well. The district will continue funding elementary counselors and perhaps provide more mental health support for middle school and high school students. The district will offer extensive summer school and afterschool programming. For Kenai transportation is critical for families who cannot get their students to these programs. The district will provide students the opportunity to get there and return home and also be fed and meet their basic physiological needs while they are learning.

CHAIR HOLLAND thanked the five superintendents for their detailed and candid answers. The committee learned a lot today.

[10:38:53 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 10:38 a.m.