

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 24, 2021

9:01 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**

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S) :

Professional Teaching Practices Commission  
Lem Wheelles - Anchorage  
Adam Reid - Anchorage  
Jamie Burgess - Nome

- CONFIRMATIONS ADVANCED

University of Alaska Board of Regents  
Dale Anderson - Juneau  
Ralph Seekins - Fairbanks

- CONFIRMATIONS ADVANCED

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

LEM WHEELLES, Appointee  
Professional Teaching Practices Commissioner  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as an appointee to the  
Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

ADAM REID, Appointee  
Professional Teaching Practices Commissioner  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as an appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

JAMIE BURGESS, Appointee  
Professional Teaching Practices Commissioner  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Nome, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as an appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

DALE ANDERSON, Appointee  
University of Alaska Board of Regents  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as an appointee to the University of Alaska Board of Regents.

RALPH SEEKINS, Appointee  
University of Alaska Board of Regents  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as an appointee to the University of Alaska Board of Regents.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[9:01:38 AM](#)

**CHAIR ROGER HOLLAND** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:01 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens, Hughes, Micciche, Begich, and Chair Holland.

#### **CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)**

#### **Professional Teaching Practices Commission** **University of Alaska Board of Regents**

[9:02:14 AM](#)

**CHAIR HOLLAND** announced the consideration of the governor's appointees to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission. He called on appointee Lem Wheelles.

[9:02:28 AM](#)

**LEM WHEELLES**, Appointee, Professional Teaching Practices Commissioner, Anchorage, Alaska, said he was born and raised in

Anchorage. He graduated from Dimond High School and received degrees from the University of Alaska Anchorage, including a Master of Arts in teaching. He taught social studies at Dimond High School for his entire 17-year teaching career. For the past decade he has also taught U.S. history and government online. In the last 11 months he supported the Anchorage School District (ASD) in its transition to online teaching. He was the 2018 Alaska History Teacher of the year, a BP Teacher of Excellence, the Alaska World Affairs Council Teacher of the Year, and the Alaska Model United Nations Advisor of the Year two times.

MR. WHEELS said he is the sponsor of the Model United Nations Club and the Christian Club. He has been the student government advisor for 11 years. He related that Dimond student government was awarded the National Gold Council of Excellence Award, currently the only school in Alaska with this top national distinction. He has also served on many ASD committees and served as the Elections Chair for the Anchorage Education Association and parliamentarian for the NEA-Alaska Delegate Assembly. For the past two years, he has served as a subject matter expert for the U.S. Census Statistics in Schools program and he is currently a Statistics in Schools ambassador.

[9:05:45 AM](#)

MR. WHEELS said his mission as an educator is to inspire students to be engaged citizens. His ultimate objective is to challenge his students to not just learn about their government, but to be an active part of it. As a government teacher, he is often asked about his political views. He said that he does not share his political views with students because it would be unethical to do so, but it could also potentially sway them. What is important is that students form political views and have the ability to articulate them. He teaches a variety of political beliefs and ideologies so students can form an educated opinion and engage in civic discourse with each other. He noted that members on this committee come from different political parties, yet the committee meets regularly, members respect one another, engage in thoughtful discourse to achieve the goal of doing what is best for Alaska. His goal as a government teacher is to prepare his students for those same conversations, whether in their homes, social media, their workplace, or in the state Capitol.

MR. WHEELS said that his goal as a teacher leader and member of the Professional Teaching Practices Commission (PTPC) is to hold his colleagues to high standards. As an appointee, he has attended the last two commission meetings. At the last meeting,

he proposed putting reminders in the PTPC newsletter to inform educators about appropriate ways to handle politics in the classroom. His goal is to be proactive and address issues before they become a complaint before the PTPC. However, if it reaches that level, then he is prepared to act appropriately.

[9:07:34 AM](#)

MR. WHEELLES explained that as a quasi-judicial body, the PTPC is asked to adjudicate complaints against certificated educators. He appreciates that the legislature created the PTPC over 50 years ago to allow educators a means to hold their colleagues accountable, but also so they can be judged by a jury of their peers. The PTPC is made up of five teachers, a principal, a superintendent, a representative from higher education, and a representative from the Department of Education and Early Development. This is a group of education professionals who understand the challenges of teaching and want public education to be esteemed throughout Alaska. As a body, the PTPC works to promote professional and ethical behavior by all Alaskan educators through proactive education and outreach and by responding to complaints when a violation has occurred. The pandemic has created a number of new situations that pose potential ethical dilemmas for educators. Widespread virtual learning blurs the line between school and home, and educators have engaged in more electronic communication with students and families. His goal is to increase PTPC outreach and education efforts to ensure that all educators are familiar with the code of ethics and what it means for their professional practice, especially during these unprecedented times. As a lifelong Alaskan and career educator with statewide connections, he said he is an ideal nominee for the PTPC. He is well informed on current education issues in the state and is respected by educators throughout Alaska.

[9:10:18 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS congratulated Mr. Wheelles on being an outstanding teacher and being recognized throughout his career. He is impressed with Mr. Wheelles' civic education and how he helps students become citizens and voters who are part of the political process. Nevertheless, the nation is falling down in creating citizens among students. He asked what can be done about that.

MR. WHEELLES replied that civics education is important. He noted that he and Senator Stevens have spoken a number of times on this topic. It is embedded in the curriculum. There is a government requirement for high school graduation. Part of it is

attracting quality educators and ensuring there are good teacher education programs so teachers have the ability and freedom to teach to encourage students to take part in civic activity.

SENATOR STEVENS said that he wished the state had more teachers like Mr. Wheelles.

[9:12:00 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked Mr. Wheelles if he was nominated by a recognized Alaska teacher organization or by more than 25 teachers who have no affiliation with an organization.

MR. WHEELLES replied he was nominated by NEA-Alaska.

SENATOR BEGICH reminded the committee of the requirements for appointees and said Mr. Wheelles meets the requirement for the teacher position. The court ruled that recess appointees were not empowered to hold their positions between roughly December 15 and January 19. He asked Mr. Wheelles if he conducted any PTPC activity during that time period.

MR. WHEELLES answered that the PTPC did not meet in that time. The January meeting was at the end of January and there were no interim activities subject to that judicial order, as far as he can determine.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on appointee Adam Reid.

[9:14:31 AM](#)

ADAM REID, Appointee, Professional Teaching Practices Commissioner, Anchorage, Alaska, said he has been teaching at the King Tech High School (formerly King Career Center) for the past 20 years. He graduated from a rural Iowa high school. In 1997 he graduated from college with a degree in environmental sciences. He got the opportunity to continue his studies and basketball career at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). He fell in love with Alaska and raised three children here. All have been part of the ASD. He brings a background of service to the PTPC. He has served in leadership roles in the ASD and serves on three nonprofit boards for youth sports. He is prepared to work with other commissioners and look at each case in an impartial way with a thorough consideration of each case. It is imperative to provide students professional educators and an outlet for Alaskans to participate in the process of protecting students' rights to the best education.

[9:17:02 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked if he was nominated by a recognized Alaska teacher organization or by more than 25 teachers who have no affiliation with an organization qualified to submit nomination lists.

MR. REID answered that he was nominated by NEA-Alaska.

SENATOR STEVENS commented that in these unusual times districts are having trouble finding teachers and are hiring uncertificated teachers under emergency disaster declaration orders. He asked Mr. Reid if he had any reflections on that.

MR. REID responded that has been discussed for a few years. As far as teacher recruitment and retention and attracting the best, a lot of it comes down to money and Alaska is not as competitive as it used to be. He is Tier II [in the Teacher Retirement System]. He suggested looking at the retirement system for Tier III employees to figure out how to incentivize those teachers to stay in Alaska. King Tech has a partnership with the Lower Yukon School District to show students what King Tech has to offer. He sees potential for statewide programs to share not only with technology and distance learning but also to provide more opportunities for exchange programs with rural areas of the state for students and teachers.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on appointee Jamie Burgess.

[9:19:52 AM](#)

JAMIE BURGESS, Appointee, Professional Teaching Practices Commissioner, Nome, Alaska, said that as superintendent of Nome Public Schools, she was nominated to fill the superintendent seat by Governor Dunleavy and the Alaska Council of School Administrators. This is her 18th year in education. She was a high school chemistry teacher for 10 years and an alternative high school principal for two years. She launched virtual learning in her high school of 7,000 students in the west valley of Phoenix. Prior to beginning her education career, she worked in finance for small, independent oil and gas producers in the Denver area. She has a broad background in education combined with a passion for ensuring that teachers are held to the highest ethical standards as all Alaska students deserve for school to be a safe place with teachers who model positive relationships. She prides herself on building relationships, including with students, administrative colleagues, community partners, and superintendents across Alaska. She is always interested in opportunities to be of service to the education committee. Serving on the PTPC is more than passing judgement on

teachers and administrators. It offers insight on how superintendents can better prepare and support the ethical practices of education practitioners within their districts. She wants to work with fellow superintendents to ensure professional development and training for both teachers and principals to address ethical issues before they rise to the level of a complaint before the PTPC. Her personal goal is to serve as a voice for children in her community. She wants students in all of Alaska to have access to high-quality, effective teachers, research-based teaching practices, safe and culturally responsive classrooms, and to be well prepared for life after school. She will advocate for well-funded schools that are financially efficient and increased access to affordable bandwidth and universal pre-K to support the goal of all students reading at grade level by third grade.

SENATOR BEGICH shared that when Ms. Burgess worked with the Yupiit School District, he was under contract with Yupiit. He commended her for the work in the Nome school district and all her work for kids across the state. He thanked her for stepping up to take on this important role.

9:24:20 AM

SENATOR MICCICHE said he was interested in two pieces of her extensive resume. She worked in 2011-15 in growing a summer school program that included programs for reading and gifted and talented. He is concerned about the issue of Alaska being last in reading. He asked if she sees opportunities with her experience there and with her online learning work in 2013-2015. He asked how that can translate into progress in Alaska.

MS. BURGESS replied a comprehensive program is important when it comes to addressing the challenges of students learning to read. It starts with early learning preparation. Prevention is better than trying to correct, so provide the best possible early learning opportunities so that students are reading on grade-level by third grade. That is a combination of high quality pre-K and ensuring all early elementary teachers have a strong expertise in teaching reading. If students continue to struggle as they get older, research-based, effective practices are important. Her summer school program used an effective middle school program called READ 180. It is used in Nome now.

9:26:40 AM

MS. BURGESS said that with well-trained teachers using the READ 180 program, Nome has seen good success in closing learning gaps. Virtual learning has a place in the educational system. It

is not in any way, shape, or form, a complete replacement of the interaction between students and teachers. However, it offers an alternative opportunity for learning that can be successful for some students. In order to make sure students all have access to virtual, online learning, the state needs to address the access inequity for high-quality bandwidth. In Nome unlimited bandwidth is \$350 to \$400 a month. She paid \$99 a month for the same or faster Internet from her home in Wasilla. Everyone wants students to achieve more, so there are a couple of things superintendents can work on in partnership with the legislature.

SENATOR STEVENS asked what PTPC does if someone has shown unethical behavior. He asked what the worst case result is.

[9:29:05 AM](#)

MS. BURGESS answered there are a variety of sanctions to place against an educator's certificate. The lowest level is a warning when the circumstances are not quite egregious enough for a stronger sanction, but it is a formal warning about someone's behavior. PTPC can suspend a certificate for a defined period of time, usually a year. The PTPC can revoke a certificate permanently. PTPC reports these actions against an educator's certificate to a national clearinghouse, which reports that to any employer if someone seeks employment in education elsewhere. The PTPC members take their actions seriously. They talk long and hard about each particular case before taking action, but in terms of keeping students safe, if the PTPC thinks an individual should not interact with students or other staff members they do not hesitate to carry out their duty.

CHAIR HOLLAND thanked the three PTPC appointees and moved to the University of Alaska Board of Regents appointees. He called on Dale Anderson.

[9:31:42 AM](#)

DALE ANDERSON, Appointee, University of Alaska Board of Regents, Juneau, Alaska, said he was reappointed to another term on the Board of Regents (BOR). Since the committee has his resume, he will focus on his personal background. He has been in Alaska almost 70 years. He has served on the board for the past nine years and has enjoyed every moment to give back his time and efforts to further the success of the University of Alaska (UA) system. He is a private sector entrepreneur at heart and owned nine successful businesses. He has been a commissioner on the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, a Juneau assembly member, and a legislative assistant and House Finance Committee aide. He

currently works in the financial services industry at Merrill Lynch.

MR. ANDERSON said it would have been easy to retire from the board, but he asked the governor for another term because there is a real need for consistency in leadership at this time to ensure that a successful track for UA will be led by strategists who know how to maintain flexibility and continuity and can envision and prepare for the ever-changing future. The challenge of the board is to position the institution to remain competitive in a changing environment. The board needs members who can ask challenging, relevant, and fair questions and deal with facts and data and all the time appreciate the complexity of running an education institution. His job is not finished yet. He has been involved in many projects that are not yet completed. Many major decisions must be made to set the path for a more efficient institution more focused in specializing in workforce and academic areas of expertise, enhancing specialized courses unique to the university system.

[9:36:23 AM](#)

MR. ANDERSON said this is a difficult time in the university and the state. As academic needs, wants, and delivery strategies change, the board must change with them and understand that members are committed to a long-term strategy of looking to the future. The university is not in a downward spiral; it will come out stronger, leaner, and more focused. It will be a university system that serves all Alaskans and everyone can be proud of.

SENATOR BEGICH asked what the unfinished projects are and how they fit his vision of the UA role in the education continuum. He also asked his opinion on the agreement between the governor and the board to severely cut the university budget.

MR. ANDERSON said the agreement to cut the budget has been difficult. Many choices made in the last two years resulted in cutting jobs, positions, and programs, but in reality, his personal view was this was not about cutting jobs or positions. He is looking forward to saving jobs and programs by reallocating resources. This whole move of cutting back might make UA a stronger, leaner, and more focused university that is more efficient in the future. He is not totally opposed to the idea of streamlining and becoming more focused at what the university does best. His position is that they are doing the best they can with what they have and learning to live within their means.

[9:39:20 AM](#)

MR. ANDERSON said that one project is to strengthen the School of Education and the administration in that school. The College of Education was placed in [the University of Alaska] Southeast (UAS) because of its history of good work in the past. The loss of licensure in Anchorage was a setback, but there still are, even at UAA, strong core courses at UAS, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), and UAA. The three are collaborating to put a strong foundation under the College of Education. The board's goal is to bring opportunity and a quality education to Alaskans in the teaching industry. The goal is to position those graduates in Alaskan schools in urban and rural areas. That is a big goal for the board. The regents want to prepare teachers to take positions in the state. Alaska is a different teaching environment, especially in rural areas. When teachers from down south come, they stay for two to three years and then move on. The regents want to educate teachers in Alaska who stay in Alaska.

[9:41:55 AM](#)

MR. ANDERSON said another pet project is fisheries. He wants that program to expand at UAS. He wants to strengthen that productive relationship with the fisheries program shared between UAS and UAF. He wants to expand the undergraduate work at UAS. The former NOAA facility has been donated to UAS. It is an incredible spot to build an oceanography/fisheries campus. Looking to the future, he would like to develop a maritime academy for the north Pacific to train for the opening of the Northwest Passage, which will be open. Alaska needs to have a part in that. The nearest maritime academy is in San Francisco. His pet projects are education and fisheries/oceanography. There are big choices to make in the next couple of years. The top administrative positions need to be selected for the university, from chancellors to the president. He wants to be involved in that as well.

[9:44:45 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHE said that as a graduate and someone who has been watching the painful decisions in the last few years, he wonders if it is too late. The legislature had a parochial approach in expanding campuses in their own communities years ago such that there are redundant programs on several campuses. He asked if it is too late to reorganize to focus programs in one place to bring down costs yet offer an excellent education in those areas. He mentioned engineering, education, and fisheries. He asked if the state could pull back and deliver a

better quality education while cutting costs or is that die cast and it would it be too difficult to do that.

MR. ANDERSON replied it is not too late. UA has cut and consolidated programs and the board did extensive research about what they have and how to do it better. The board worked hard on the redundancy of programs and the three chancellors have made a strong effort to work together to streamline what the university had in the past. The idea is to be more focused in what the university does best. He opined that the board has done an excellent job of coming together and collaborating.

[9:49:59 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS mentioned the loss of accreditation and shock that was to the legislature. There should have been lots of warnings from the accreditation agency and it seems that the administration and even the Board of [Regents] were asleep at the switch. He asked how legislators could be reassured that it will not happen again. It is a black eye that the university will have until it is straightened out.

MR. ANDERSON agreed that it is a black eye. He opined that there was a failure of communication between the faculty and administration at UAA and a severe lack of communication between UAA and the accreditors. He thanked the administration and faculty at UAF and UAS for taking up the slack such that no classes were lost. The board has instituted more checkpoints for the process than before. UAF and UAS have gained accreditation since that happened. The faculty has stepped up as far as preparing for accreditors. The board is also working on getting that reestablished at UAA, but it will take a couple of years to reaccredit. Interim President Pat Pitney has created a new communication process between administration and faculty. She has done an incredible job creating trust again.

[9:56:14 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES followed up on Senator Micciche's response to focusing on fewer programs saying she has always been concerned about the college rankings by the U.S. News & World Report, which have been mediocre for Alaska. Unless a student is drawn to something unique that the state offers, the university doesn't get national or international students. The state also loses the brightest and best who go out of state. She asked if he saw the potential, if the university narrows the focus to concentrate on what it does best, to increase the rankings, and then draw more students, and increase research dollars for the university system.

MR. ANDERSON offered his belief that as the university gets better and more focused it will be putting resources into what it does best. The unique programs that are found no place else will draw in national and international students. The board just had an enrollment report that shows the university maintained pre-COVID enrollment. Interestingly, because students down south are attending class online, the university is attracting students from the lower 48 and internationally. They are working online and the faculty did a phenomenal job switching to eLearning. They were nimble and quick to put courses online and attracted more nonresident students. The university will be mediocre if it tries to be all things to all people. The span is too wide. The quality will be reflected in those ratings.

MR. ANDERSON said in closing that his commitment is to work side-by-side with the faculty, administration, and political and community leaders to drive long-term sustainable change around economic opportunity and racial equality, all within a balanced budget, living within their means. This is the core of who he is and how he drives responsible growth.

CHAIR HOLLAND thanked him for his positive comments about the future of Alaska. He called on appointee Ralph Seekins.

10:02:00 AM

RALPH SEEKINS, Appointee, University of Alaska Board of Regents, Fairbanks, Alaska, said that he is the owner of Seekins Ford Lincoln in Fairbanks. He previously served with Senator Stevens in the Senate and chaired the Judiciary Committee. He took a temporary job in a car dealership to get his wife through nursing school. He still is doing that temporary job 51 years later. His automobile dealership has been one of the largest businesses in Alaska in terms of revenue. He has received many recognitions for business accomplishments. He has been involved with many activities with the Ford Motor Company. He has been around the business a long time and has done a lot of things in the industry. He has a lot of other local, state, and national interests. All four of his children went to the university. His grandson is enrolled. He cheers for and works to develop a strong university. He has served his community in many ways. He was the chair of the Board of Trustees for the Permanent Fund Corporation. He left over disagreements about how to invest funds with Governor Knowles.

10:07:40 AM

MR. SEEKINS said he has a strong background in business organization and reorganization and efficient operations. When he was asked to consider the board, his family noted that he has always been a strong supporter of the university system. He was a guest lecturer at the business school. He has supported sports at the university. He can be found at university sports events with many grandchildren. He now has the opportunity to apply some of his strengths and background to the Board of Regents.

[10:09:20 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked how he feels about the agreements and the process between the board and the governor that bypassed the legislative prerogatives. He asked his opinion about the budget process that left the legislature out and the cuts it entails. He asked what the role is for arts and humanities in the university system.

MR. SEEKINS replied that he is a fan of the governor but would have approached it differently. The three-year budgeting span was a decent compromise. He would have considered a different stepdown basis. It was a huge target that had to be implemented quickly and that is difficult. He admires the folks who went through that. It created a lot of instability within the organization. Probably some left the university system for more stability. It was difficult with how rapidly the cuts had to be done without any prior warning. From a business standpoint and having had to go through those challenges himself, he would have used a more phased-in, prior warning system, but that did not happen. As the chair of the board, he is in a position to work with audit and finance and facilities and land management. Those are areas that he could contribute to because of his past experience.

SENATOR BEGICH said he didn't address the issue of bypassing the legislature, but that's ok. He asked his vision of the role of arts and humanities.

[10:14:33 AM](#)

MR. SEEKINS replied that he is an amateur photographer and artist. He has been a long-time supporter of the humanities. He has supported the summer music, arts, and literature programs. He likes sports and had an athletic scholarship, but a balance is important, as long as the arts and humanities are pulled into the target of providing a good, all-around education. He went to a liberal arts college and was introduced to the arts. His literature classes helped to put him on a pathway that he has

enjoyed for the rest of his life. Those are important. His hope is to not lose focus on that. It is an important part of life.

SENATOR STEVEN commented that Mr. Seekins was always a great advocate for Fairbanks, but the university is much bigger than Fairbanks. He asked Mr. Seekins if he can take a bigger view of the university than just the Fairbanks campus.

MR. SEEKINS responded that Fairbanks is his community, but he also understands that Alaska is more than one community. He is not as familiar with UAA, but he would agree that the university should not become parochial. He acknowledged the need for a strong university system in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Southeast. He commented that regional competition should not affect the quality of education in Alaska.

SENATOR BEGICH noted that Mr. Seekins had referred to the political interference issue with Governor Knowles and also included it in his resume. He asked how he would respond if this governor put pressure on him to follow a political agenda that might be contrary to the mission of the university.

MR. SEEKINS replied he would try to do the right thing. He would not do something political that would be bad for a program. He understands politics but understands honor and doing the right thing.

[10:22:54 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND commended all of the appointees and their accomplishments. He opened public testimony and after ascertaining that there was none, closed public testimony. He asked the will of the committee.

[10:23:33 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS stated that in accordance with AS 39.05.080, the Senate Education Standing Committee reviewed the following and recommends the appointments be forwarded to a joint session for consideration:

Professional Teaching Practices Commission

Lem Wheelles - Anchorage

Adam Reid - Anchorage

Jamie Burgess - Nome

University of Alaska Board of Regents

Dale Anderson - Juneau

Ralph Seekins - Fairbanks

CHAIR HOLLAND reminded members that signing the reports regarding appointments to boards and commissions in no way reflects individual members' approval or disapproval of the appointees; the nominations are merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.

10:24:01 AM

At ease

10:25:45 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 10:25 a.m.