

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

March 16, 2022

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

SENATE BILL NO. 225

"An Act relating to a paraprofessional training program; creating a teacher resident certificate; creating a teacher residency program; relating to requirements to issue a teacher certificate; relating to subject-matter expert limited teacher certificates; relating to limited teacher certificates; creating a teacher registered apprenticeship program; and creating a teacher registered apprenticeship program fund."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 225

SHORT TITLE: TEACHER REGISTERED APPRENTICE PROGRAMS

SPONSOR(s): EDUCATION

03/04/22	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/04/22	(S)	EDC, L&C, FIN
03/07/22	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/07/22	(S)	Heard & Held
03/07/22	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/09/22	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/09/22	(S)	Heard & Held
03/09/22	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/14/22	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/14/22	(S)	Heard & Held

03/14/22 (S) MINUTE (EDC)
03/16/22 (S) EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

PATRICK MAYER, Superintendent
Aleutians East Borough School District
Sand Point, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 225.

TERRI WALKER, Superintendent
Northwest Arctic Borough School District
Buckland, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 225.

BOBBY BOLEN, Superintendent
Bering Straits School District
Unalakleet, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 225.

KIMBERLY HANKINS, Superintendent
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Bethel, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 225.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[9:04:57 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, Micciche, Stevens, Hughes and Chair Holland.

SB 225-TEACHER REGISTERED APPRENTICE PROGRAMS

[Contains Discussion of SB 111]

[9:05:32 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 225 "An Act relating to a paraprofessional training program; creating a teacher resident certificate; creating a teacher residency program; relating to requirements to issue a teacher certificate; relating to subject-matter expert limited teacher certificates; relating to limited teacher certificates; creating a teacher registered apprenticeship program; and creating a teacher registered apprenticeship program fund."

CHAIR HOLLAND said this is the fourth hearing on SB 225. Today, four rural school district superintendents will provide insight into their district's problems. He asked the superintendents to introduce themselves.

[9:06:37 AM](#)

PATRICK MAYER, Superintendent, Aleutians East Borough School District, Sand Point, Alaska, introduced himself.

[9:06:59 AM](#)

TERRI WALKER, Superintendent, Northwest Arctic Borough School District, Buckland, Alaska, introduced herself.

[9:07:40 AM](#)

BOBBY BOLEN, Superintendent, Bering Straits School District, Unalakleet, Alaska, introduced himself.

[9:07:56 AM](#)

KIMBERLY HANKINS, Superintendent, Lower Kuskokwim School District, Bethel, Alaska, introduced herself.

CHAIR HOLLAND requested that each superintendent answer the questions posed and describe the problems they face when hiring qualified classroom teachers.

[9:08:51 AM](#)

SUPERINTENDENT MAYER said supply and demand is a problem, especially in special education, math, and science. The expense of getting teachers to rural Alaska is also an issue. Airfare can cost \$1,000 round trip, and there can be issues with the ferry system. A defined benefit would decrease teacher tourism by incentivizing teachers to stay. He gave an example of a reading teacher who stayed for five years but would be leaving after her sixth year. He jested that reading teachers are like unicorns, very hard to find. He stated that in the Aleutians East Borough School District (AESB), there is also a need for 21st-century infrastructure such as high-speed internet. Rising prices are also a concern. A gallon of milk is eight dollars, and housing takes \$12,000 from a teacher's salary. Quality mentors and teachers are becoming more difficult to find. For example, on the Alaska Teacher Placement website, there were 28 applicants for elementary education, but only two were certified. In 2021 there were four vacancies, and in 2022 there were eleven. It is exponentially harder to recruit teachers from urban areas to remote areas.

[9:12:53 AM](#)

SUPERINTENDENT WALKER said she agreed with everything Superintendent Mayer stated. It is difficult to find quality candidates who are willing to leave their homes to work in rural areas where they often must share housing with other teachers. Kotzebue has a lack of housing for sale and renting a one-bedroom apartment is \$1,800 per month. Last year the district had twelve unfilled positions. Salaries are no longer as enticing because they have not kept up with those of other states.

SUPERINTENDENT BOLEN said that in the Bering Strait School District (BSSD), a gallon of milk costs \$15, and the district has about 65 teacher openings yearly. SpEd and counselor positions are difficult to fill. Alaska's beginning teacher salary is only \$2,000 more than Washington state. It is difficult to convince teachers to leave their hometowns and build a career in an area where living conditions are substandard, and the cost of living is five times more. The district is trying to develop triplex housing to avoid paying premium prices for land.

[9:17:55 AM](#)

SUPERINTENDENT HANKINS said she is facing the same challenges as her colleagues. She said the Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) loses teachers to road system school districts every year and recruiting is made difficult by salaries that are no longer competitive. She stated that in Bethel, milk costs \$9 per gallon and apples are \$5.49 per pound. However, produce is not always available in villages in her district.

[9:20:02 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHE asked what kind of partnerships might be available with municipalities, villages, or regional organizations that want their children educated over profiting from the sale of land.

[9:21:03 AM](#)

SUPERINTENDENT BOLEN replied that grants are filled out with the Alaska Housing Federation, and the Bering Strait School District (BSSD) works with tribal organizations to try and find land. Recently the BSSD returned some land to a village that needed it for housing. Kawerak Inc. and the Rural Alaska Community Action Program (RurAL CAP) are partners with the Bering Strait School District (BSSD) but do not have available land. There is a lack of land as villages grow. Having outsiders educate village children is not a big incentive for land-holding entities to offer discounts to the school district.

[9:22:39 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked, of all the problems rural districts face, what would be the most important thing the legislature could do to help get qualified teachers into rural schools.

[9:23:22 AM](#)

MR. MAYER said that in answer to Senator Micciche's question about housing, the Aleutian East Borough School District (AEBSD) has housing for teachers that is provided by tribes, villages, and the government through subsidized housing. It works with partners to provide a teacher package. AEBSD offers quality housing, but the cost is high and reduces the teacher's annual salary. In answer to Senator Steven's question, the most important thing the legislature can do is increase funding within the base student allocation (BSA) as school districts face rising operating costs.

[9:25:33 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked the other superintendents whether the BSA is the single most important way the legislature can help rural schools.

[9:25:51 AM](#)

MR. BOLEN said the BSA, and defined benefits are not the only things the state could do. The legislature could help rural districts by finding a way to subsidize expenses, such as travel and shipping if salaries are not competitively increased.

[9:27:23 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS said that LKSD owns most of the teacher housing within the district. The average rent for teachers is \$900 - \$1,200 per month. LKSD does not own housing in the Bethel South area where rent is \$2,000 - \$2,700 per month, not including utilities. Teachers once moved from outer villages to the hub of Bethel when positions became available, but that tendency has reversed due to the higher costs of living in Bethel. The school district reaches out to the community to assist teachers when there is a housing shortage. LKSD has good relationships with the tribes, which strengthened during the pandemic. She agreed with Senator Stevens that a general increase in the BSA would help school districts since every district has particular needs. Changes to the retirement system also need to be considered, such as having a defined benefit.

[9:29:46 AM](#)

MS. WALKER said the Northwest Arctic Borough School District (NWABSD) provides subsidized housing to village teachers for \$900 - \$1,200 per month. Kotzebue has a subsidized ten-plex for new teachers, who must find another place to live at the end of their first year. Leaving the subsidized ten-plex increases their monthly rent from \$900 to \$1,800. Many teachers do not renew their contracts because of the increased cost. She stated that employee insurance benefits would increase by \$2,000 per individual, costing the district \$650,000. The district is also facing negotiations for certified and classified positions, and staff salaries will be adjusted for inflation regardless of whether the BSA increases. Inflation-proofing the BSA is the most important thing the legislature could do to help school districts.

[9:32:15 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked the superintendents if the central concept of SB 225 to "grow your own" apprenticeship would assist them in retaining teachers. He also asked whether a secondary focus of support through a teacher recruitment and retention grant program could be beneficial since money for subsidized housing decreases the operating funds available for instruction. He said a wide variety of solutions are necessary because education faces many problems. He cautioned superintendents against putting all their eggs in the BSA basket because the governor intends to veto the increase in the absence of a reading bill.

[9:35:32 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS replied that "grow your own" programs are beneficial, and LKSD has had several. LKSD has established practices that support teacher retention and recruitment. She stated that rural school districts that do not focus on retention first would be missing the mark; retention limits the need to recruit. To retain teachers, LKSD offers robust professional development, state mentorship programs, instructional coaches, the Supporting Teachers Across the Years (STAY) program, the Lower Kuskokwim Rise program, and exit surveys to learn how to improve retention. For example, distance from family is a reason teachers give for leaving. Since LKSD cannot control distance, it focuses on staff collaboration to build employee support.

MS. HANKINS said part of retention is considering how a candidate would fit in the community because when teachers feel they belong, they stay. All new teachers can participate in culture camps. The TEACH, Two and Done, community career ladder, and LKSD scholarship are "grow your own" programs that LKSD has

successfully developed over the past fifteen years. The programs reduce staff turnover and provide staff for the dual language and cultural immersion program. LKSD's "grow your own" programs have produced 28 certified teachers. LKSD also offers assistance for teachers to receive endorsements in high-need areas. LKSD also has an education career pathway for middle school students that encourages entering the teaching profession. She supports offsetting costs through a teacher retention and recruitment grant.

[9:41:31 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked if Ms. Hankins supported SB 111 because the reads bill is a way to increase the BSA.

[9:42:18 AM](#)

MS. HANKINSS replied that LKSD supports expanding high-quality early education for all children in Alaska and the targeted investment of effective evidence-based K - 3rd-grade reading instruction. She appreciates the addition of culturally responsive language and other amendments made by the House Education Committee and stated her belief that they strengthen and protect dual language and immersion programs. She then described areas of SB 111 that LKSD already addresses.

[9:43:35 AM](#)

MR. BOLEN said the BSSD has made efforts to "grow their own" teachers. It applied for and received two \$7 million grants through a foundation. BSSD allows paraprofessionals to go on a year-long sabbatical to become teachers because it is challenging to work full-time and attend school. The district pays for their salary, tuition, and other educational expenses. Seven BSSD paraprofessionals received education degrees and became teachers. The legislature could assist school districts by providing grant support so school district staff can focus time on other issues.

MR. BOLEN stated that BSSD utilizes Educator Rising to encourage high school students to enter teaching. However, BSSD still loses education students to larger districts after they become teachers because of housing costs and outside opportunities. Superintendents have organized a mentorship program for new superintendents through the Alaska Superintendents Association (ASA) and Alaska Counsel of School Administrators (ACSA). A similar model should be used to support local teachers because school districts are now asked to pay for in-person mentors. The legislature could fund a mentor program for rural areas because in-person mentorship is better than online.

MR. BOLEN said teachers at Title I schools receive federal student loan forgiveness. Additional loan forgiveness from the state for teaching at a rural school longer would be beneficial. He opined that state forgiveness should be for all certified personnel because administrators are not eligible for federal government reimbursement unless they teach in the classroom. He described the longevity bonus system that BSSD established for teachers who stay three, five, seven, and ten years. The bonuses are paid from general funds that BSSD then replaces by acquiring outside grants. He stated he partners with Superintendent Hankins to run a Gear Up grant that encourages kids to go to college and return to the village. Rural school districts are finding and acquiring grants and then running the programs. Grant assistance from the legislature or state would be beneficial to improving student educational outcomes by allowing school districts to focus on instructional programs. The first question village students ask a teacher is, "How long are you going to stay?" Student engagement depends on teacher stability.

[9:51:55 AM](#)

MR. MAYER stated he supports "grow your own" programs. Both students and employees in the Aleutians East Borough School District (AEBSD) are interested in programs to become teachers. He opined that a substantive teacher recruitment and retention program is worthy of consideration. He supports SB 111 and stated his belief that other superintendents also support it. AEBSD was awarded the Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grant and put a reading program in place. He appreciates the governor's priorities. As superintendents responsible for running the school districts and providing for students' safety, well-being, and instruction, they understand the governor's concerns. He also supports new principal cohorts. There are many ideas to move school districts in the right direction, but funding for the BSA is critical.

[9:54:12 AM](#)

MS. WALKER said NWABSD supports "grow your own" programs. NWABSD utilizes Educators Rising, and three students from NWABSD qualified for nationals. She stated that when students leave to attend college, many do not return to their hometowns. Paraprofessionals are the individuals likely to remain a long time with a district once they become teachers. Correspondence programs enabling them to obtain an education degree without leaving home would allow them to become teachers since many have family responsibilities and cannot leave their villages. A grant program to fund a cohort of twelve individuals would be helpful.

All districts support SB 111 and understand the importance of early childhood education.

[9:56:18 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHE asked the superintendents to elaborate on how successful teacher recruitment and retention affect students' learning outcomes. He stated his belief that tying teacher recruitment and retention to learning outcomes is key to understanding the discussion. He said some legislators think Alaska has a higher BSA than other states yet have lower scores and therefore want to withhold additional funding.

[9:57:40 AM](#)

MR. MAYER said there is a direct relationship between teacher retention and student learning. When teachers remain at a school for many years, students learn their expectations. Continuity of instruction is lost when village students experience three math teachers in five years. Relationships are also damaged as students realize teachers are not a part of their community. It is a big issue.

[9:59:15 AM](#)

MS. WALKER said retention matters because when teachers first arrive in rural Alaska, they do not know the culture and do not connect with students by using the curriculum. She graduated from a local village where scores do not determine the value of a child.

[10:00:48 AM](#)

MR. BOYLEN said the key to educating all children is establishing relationships built on trust so that children feel safe and secure. Sometimes the only safe and stable person in a child's life is a classroom teacher. He said that upon moving to Alaska, he taught in Savoonga for seven years. When someone from Savoonga sees him on the street, they ask him when he is coming home because he became an accepted member of the community, and hopefully impacted students' lives.

[10:03:18 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS said multiple studies find that lower teacher turnover leads to higher student achievement and vice versa. She said she considers this finding when working to retain teachers because inconsistent staffing decreases student learning. Building relationships with a community and school takes time. Building trust with students who have experienced trauma takes even longer. At LKSD, high teacher turnover often means a school is hiring less experienced teachers or operating understaffed.

She said that in the last five years, she has yet to fill all the positions at LKSD.

[10:06:25 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHI stated that the superintendents' responses would make an excellent op-ed because it would explain to the public that more money is needed to fund better relationships, continuity, success, and housing. More money is needed to create better outcomes for kids, not teachers.

[10:07:35 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES opined that the goal of the Senate Education Committee is to prepare students to enter the world as educated as possible, which makes focusing on academic achievement important. Therefore, based on what the superintendents stated about student-teacher relationships being the key to success and teacher turnover rates affecting student achievement, recruitment and retention of quality teachers should be the top priority for improving achievement. She asked if the superintendents agreed with her statement.

[10:09:59 AM](#)

MR. BOLEN replied that he agreed with the statement. Only 107 candidates registered to attend the Alaska Teacher Placement (ATP) fair in Anchorage; there used to be hundreds. Recruitment takes time and money away from focusing on other matters such as curriculum, instruction, and relationship development. He has spent fourteen days traveling to find teachers and only hired one.

[10:11:3.7 AM](#)

MS. WALKER stated that recruitment and retention are key to high-quality learning short-term. She said recruitment will become less of a problem twenty years from now as "grow your own" programs are incorporated into school districts.

[10:13:11 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND asked the superintendents if SB 225 would benefit their school districts and if they would like anything.

[10:13:30 AM](#)

MR. MAYER said that the big problem that needs addressing is teacher tourism. He wondered whether being able to transfer contributions to a defined benefit plan after a teacher has taught in Alaska or at a school district longer than five years might offer a solution. He opined that the problem of recruiting

and retaining teachers could not be resolved without increasing the BSA.

[10:15:22 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS stated that teacher retention is critical to student learning outcomes. There are many costs associated with teacher recruitment and retention. Student outcomes suffer, and the administration becomes fatigued from the constant cycle of onboarding new teachers, beginning forward movement, and returning to onboarding before progress is made. An increase in the BSA rather than a specified allocation is critical because it will allow districts to target areas to best impact change and improve retention. She stated that she supports "grow your own" programs and that LKSD has experienced success with them. Locally grown teachers are incredibly valuable because they are from the region, have grown up in the culture, are familiar with the community, and have connections. LKSD found that locally grown teachers serve as role models to students and help mentor other staff.

[10:18:02 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH noted that his wife is the director of the Coalition of Education Equity that Ms. Hankins mentioned, and he receives no benefit from the conversation. He asked for the work by the Senate Finance Committee to be looked at because it incorporates into SB 111 all the cultural competency changes that the House made, including additional protections around culture that would be valuable.

[10:18:50 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated his belief that local school districts and school boards know their needs and how to solve them better than a committee or the state. That is why the BSA is the right place to put money. He asked whether teachers statistically remain in-state when leaving a district because if they remain in-state, it may be bad for a district but not Alaska.

MS. HANKINS replied she could provide the committee with the results of LKSD's 2021 exit survey.

[10:21:01 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND asked the superintendents to provide in their closing comments how many students and schools are in their districts. He also asked how many of the schools in their area are isolated from a road system.

MS. HANKINS stated there are 4,000 students in LKSD, which covers a land area of 22,000 square miles. LKSD has 29 schools in 24 different locations, most of which are grades K - 12. LKSD's hub is Bethel, which has six schools and is accessible via Alaska Airlines. Visiting schools in her district is done by small plane, boat, ice road, and snow machine, which is all weather dependent.

[10:23:14 AM](#)

MR. BOLEN said Unalakleet is the district office for BSSD. It serves 15 PreK - 12th grade schools that surround Nome. However, Nome itself is a district. All the schools are accessed by plane, except Diomedea, which residents reach by helicopter. Although located in Nome, Northwestern Alaska Career and Technical Center (NACTEC) is part of the BSSD. There are 1,900 students in PreK - 12th grade. BSSD has 250 certified staff and 280 classified staff. He thanked the committee for taking the time to hear about rural Alaska and explore innovative ways to address concerns. Both urban and rural schools want to see students improve academically. He said he and his predecessors have found it disappointing not to make academic improvements. He supports reading grants from the state, SB 111, and any other program that would positively impact students. He invited legislators to attend the ASA legislative fly-in meetings held in Juneau.

[10:26:50 AM](#)

MS. WALKER said NWABSD serves 11 villages, with Kotzebue as the hub. There are no roads to the villages. Summer travel is by airplane or boat, and winter travel is by air or snowmachine. The district covers 39,000 square miles. There are 1,800 students in K - 12th grade. She strongly supports SB 225 as it will help grow teachers locally, which will help stabilize turnover while increasing cultural compatibility and student/teacher relationships.

[10:28:32 AM](#)

MR. MAYER said there are four schools in AEBSD across 12,500 square miles. Travel is by plane, helicopter, or ferry. There are 230 students in the district. He thanked the committee for advocating for students.

[10:29:30 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND stated that urban and rural schools were markedly different. Rural school concerns about high-speed internet, running water, and sewage are challenges on steroids. He thanked the superintendents for the work they do in rural Alaska.

10:30:10 AM

CHAIR HOLLAND held SB 225 in committee.

10:30:22 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Committee meeting at 10:30 a.m.