

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 21, 2023

5:17 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Jamie Allard, Co-Chair  
Representative Justin Ruffridge, Co-Chair  
Representative Mike Prax  
Representative CJ McCormick  
Representative Tom McKay  
Representative Rebecca Himschoot  
Representative Andi Story

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT**

Representative Sara Hannan  
Representative Andy Josephson  
Senator Scott Kawasaki

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE BILL NO. 65

"An Act relating to education; increasing the base student allocation; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 65

SHORT TITLE: INCREASE BASE STUDENT ALLOCATION

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) ORTIZ

02/08/23	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/08/23	(H)	EDC, FIN
02/20/23	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
02/20/23	(H)	Heard & Held
02/20/23	(H)	MINUTE (EDC)
03/06/23	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

03/06/23 (H) Heard & Held  
03/06/23 (H) MINUTE (EDC)  
03/21/23 (H) EDC AT 5:15 PM DAVIS 106

**WITNESS REGISTER**

ANDY HOLLEMAN, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

DANIELLE LOGAN, representing self  
Fairbanks, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

IRENE BOLL, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

JANICE BANTA, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

MANETTE STANLEY, representing self  
Seward, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

MEMPHIS STANLEY, representing self  
Seward, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

ALEX RUSSIN  
Cordova School District  
Cordova, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

DIANE GUBATAYAO  
Ketchikan School Board  
Ketchikan, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

SAVANNAH FLETCHER, representing self  
Fairbanks, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

DENIS GARDELLA, representing self  
Fairbanks, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

BRIDGET WEISS, Superintendent  
Juneau School District  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

BRIAN HOLST, Director  
Juneau Economic Development Council  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

CRYSTAL HOFFMAN, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

VICKI HEWITT, President  
Matanuska-Susitna Education Association  
Palmer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65

JENNIFER PALMISANO  
Anchorage School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

JAMIE BURGESS, Superintendent  
Nome Public Schools  
Nome, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

RODNEY DIAL, representing self  
Ketchikan, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

LESLIE JACOBY, representing self  
Seward, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

MARY TOUGAS, representing self  
Seward, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

ERIKA BURR, representing self  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

BETH ZIRBES, representing self

Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

CINDY GLASSMAKER, representing self

Kenai, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

RANDY DALY, representing self

Kenai, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

EMILY FERRY, representing self

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing of HB 65.

REGINA WRIGHT, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65

STEPHANIE WILLIAMS, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

LORRIE HEAGY, representing self

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

C.J. KOAN, representing self

Wasilla, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

PETER HOEPFNER, Vice-President

Cordova School District Board

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

MIKE COONS, representing Concerned Citizens of Alaska

Palmer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

DEBBIE CARY, President

Kenai Peninsula Borough School Board

Ninilchik, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

HEATHER BARDARSON, representing self

Seward, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

TYLER MALLORY, representing self  
Seward, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

RON JOHNSON, representing self  
Matanuska-Susitna

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

JANET JOHNSON, representing self  
Matanuska-Susitna

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

MICHELLE HODEL, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

MARIANNE NELSEN, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

SAHAR FOSTER, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

LORI RUCKSDASHEL, Principal  
Anchorage School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

KELLY KING, representing self  
Kenai, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

JOSHUA GIRARD, representing self  
Seward, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

PATTY WISEL, representing self  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

JENNIFER SAMPSON, representing self  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

BARBARA TYNDALL, representing self  
North Pole, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

SALLY DUNCAN, representing self  
Two Rivers, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

WILL MULDOON, Member  
Juneau School Board  
Juneau, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

ROBERTA ZIPAY, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

MICA VAN BUSKIRK, representing self  
Seward, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

CINDY ECKLUND, Assembly Member  
Kenai Peninsula Borough  
Seward, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

EVELYN DALTON, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

ALEXANDER RENO, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

BERNADETTE WILSON, State Director  
Americans for Prosperity  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

ERIC GODDEN, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

DARREN SNYDER, representing self  
Douglas, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

MICHELE ELFERS, representing self  
Juneau, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

VALERIE BROOKS, representing self  
Ketchikan, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

RAY IMEL, representing self  
Douglas, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

BILL BURR, Superintendent  
Wrangell Public Schools  
Wrangell, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

JENNA FABIAN, Principal  
Nikiski North Star Elementary  
Nikiski, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

KEVIN BANKS, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

GENE STONE, Superintendent  
Lower Yukon School District  
Mountain Village, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

CHRIS REITAN, Superintendent  
Craig City School District  
Craig, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

NATHAN ERFURTH, President  
Kenai Peninsula Education Association  
Soldotna, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

KEVIN SHOVE, School Board Member  
Haines Borough School District  
Haines, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

JOSHUA GILL

Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals  
Bethel, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

RITA TROMETTER, representing self  
North Pole, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to HB 65.

LILLY BORON, Principal  
Haines Borough School District  
Haines, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

LEM WHEELLES, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

PATTY BROWN, representing self  
Haines, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

TIM ELDER, Employee  
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District  
Soldotna, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

SANDI RYAN, President  
Fairbanks Education Association  
Fairbanks, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

KIM HAYS, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

PEGGY COWAN, representing self  
Juneau, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

ESTON JENNINGS, Director  
Teaching and Learning Alaska Gateway School District  
Tok, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

MIKE GRUNST, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

SUSAN NEDZA, Chief School Administrator  
Bering Strait School District  
Unalakleet, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

TREVOR STORRS, President/CEO  
Alaska Children's Trust  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

LAURA ANDERSON, representing self  
Anchor Point, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

FRANK HAUSER, Superintendent  
Sitka School District  
Sitka, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

TED EISCHEID, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

SUMMER KOESTER, representing self  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

ERICA KLUUDT-PAINTER, Superintendent  
Petersburg School District  
Petersburg, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

CRISTEN SAN ROMAN, representing self  
Homer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

SARAH NUGENT, representing self  
Kodiak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

TERRIE GOTTSTEIN, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

ROY GETCHEL, Superintendent  
Haines Borough School District

Haines, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

REED DAVIDSON, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

JAY GIBSON, representing self

Kodiak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

LUANN MCVEY, representing self

Douglas, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

HEATHER CONN, Principal

Petersburg School District

Petersburg, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

JASON TAURIAINEN, representing self

Nikiski, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 65.

ROBYN CAPP, representing self

Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

DAN POLTA, Superintendent

Denali Borough School District

Healy, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

CYNDY MIKA, Superintendent

Kodiak Island Borough School District

Kodiak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

REBECCA INGALLS

Teacher's Union of Bristol Bay School District

Bristol Bay, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

CHRISTY JORDAN, representing self

Lowell Point, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 65.

## **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[5:17:32 PM](#)

**CO-CHAIR JUSTIN RUFFRIDGE** called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 5:17 p.m. Representatives Story, McKay, McCormick, Himschoot, Allard, and Ruffridge were present at the call to order. Representative Prax arrived as the meeting was in progress. Also present were Representatives Hannan, Josephson, and Senator Kawasaki.

### **HB 65-INCREASE BASE STUDENT ALLOCATION**

[5:18:19 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 65, "An Act relating to education; increasing the base student allocation; and providing for an effective date."

[5:19:04 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE opened public testimony on HB 65.

[5:19:50 PM](#)

ANDY HOLLEMAN, representing self, stated that he wished to speak to what happens when there are occasional increases in funding followed by years of no increases. He offered his belief that good programs have to be trimmed a little every year, or they may disappear. He said that in the Anchorage School District (ASD), every spot goes to support running the organization or working directly towards kids in a positive way; one cannot expect an organization to be dynamic and doing new and different things when the programs are constantly being trimmed.

[5:22:26 PM](#)

DANIELLE LOGAN, representing self, testified in support of HB 65. She stated that support staff are routinely on the short end of the stick during budget cuts. Paraprofessionals are being asked to do jobs outside of their areas of expertise, and when staff are being pulled in many different directions, the students suffer. Support staff are essential to running a school, she said, and flat funding is not working anymore; therefore, she opined the base student allocation (BSA) needs to be raised.

[5:25:16 PM](#)

IRENE BOLL, representing self, stated that she was running for the Anchorage School Board and wished to address the critical issue of public education funding. Despite the fundamental importance of public education, public education funding is severely lacking in many areas, she said, which is why she supported the proposed legislation. In many areas, the current allocation is not enough and inadequate funding leads to a myriad of issues in the education system. She opined that increasing the BSA would improve the quality of education for students and provide educators with the resources they need.

[5:27:29 PM](#)

JANICE BANTA, representing self, testified in support of HB 65, and related that she was a retired school counselor and raised three children who attended school in ASD. She spoke to her concerns about proposed cuts to educators across the state and the schools having extraordinarily difficult challenges, she said, and she provided brief examples. She questioned how student's needs can be adequately met while one person is expected to do the job of two. She related one of her children, after receiving higher education outside Alaska, may not return to Alaska to practice in his selected field due to dwindling population and stagnant financial support for education. She implored the committee to vote yes on HB 65 to increase the BSA and improve the quality of education in the state.

[5:30:26 PM](#)

MANETTE STANLEY, representing self, testified in support of HB 65. She said Alaska is the foundation of future success, and success comes in the guise of well-educated youths who are given a wide variety of skills; however, that cannot happen at schools that are not appropriately funded. She stated that she hoped the committee had done their research and found that Alaska's schools are vastly underfunded. She related that 15 states have higher BSAs than Alaska's, including four more that are above \$10,000. She said she hoped to convey the reality that schools are in demand to provide high quality education with a fraction of the necessary funding which, she said, is simply not possible. Students, in addition to communities across the state, would be devastated if they lose access to facilities and resources as a result of underfunding. She thanked the committee for their consideration.

[5:32:26 PM](#)

MEMPHIS STANLEY, representing self, testified in support of HB 65, and offered a personal story of attending a school swim program, which opened more opportunities for learning and taught him lifesaving skills. He said that schools have lost so much in recent years that it would be detrimental to lose any more.

[5:33:53 PM](#)

ALEX RUSSIN, Cordova School District, testified in support of HB 65 and relayed that he was the Cordova School District superintendent as well as the director of curriculum, human resources, special education, federal programs, and many other areas. He said he shared this information to exhibit the multitude of roles that administrators play in small school districts. The current rhetoric generalizing that school district financial resources are bloated with administrative costs need to change, he said, as it is inaccurate. The BSA had only increased \$30 since 2016 and the rise in costs and services created significant loss in purchasing power for school districts, he explained. Passage of HB 65 would provide the Cordova School District with a majority of the funding necessary to meet its budgetary shortfall for fiscal year 2024 (FY 24) due to increased costs, and he said he looked forward to following the committee's conversations on education.

[5:36:48 PM](#)

DIANE GUBATAYAO, Ketchikan School Board, Testified in support of HB 65. She related that she served as a school board member for the Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District for seven years and she said she had a lengthy perspective of the impacts of flat BSA funding. Districts, she said, have scraped along partially due to special COVID-19 funds but cannot continue this. She opined the number one duty of the state, and the legislature is to adequately fund and support education. She noted that from 2012 to 2022, the BSA had only increased 4.2 percent, while overall inflation during the same time period increased 24 percent. She said that all school districts need a significant increase to the BSA, and said she appreciated special appropriations, but one-time special funds do not compensate and restrict the ability to strategically plan for the future. She urged the committee to support HB 65.

[5:39:27 PM](#)

SAVANNAH FLETCHER, representing self, testified in support of HB 65, and agreed with prior testimony that "one-time things" are no longer effective. She mentioned the burden her school district faced just to keep flat funding, and opined flat funding is negative funding as the cost of everything else in the community rises. There must be sustainable growing support from the state for students, or families will be forced to live somewhere more affordable. Supporting the bill would be a step in the direction of fixing the problem, she said.

[5:41:29 PM](#)

DENIS GARDELLA, representing self, Testified in opposition to an increase in the BSA. He acknowledged that his position was likely unpopular, but wished to explain why he is not in favor of the bill. He said Alaska is ranked number 45th amongst states for overall educational achievement. He pointed out how Alaska compared in other rankings, such as fourth grade math, resulting in below proficiency placement. He brought up other states' "education savings account" where state money goes into a student's education account to be used in the school of their choice. He said public education has become too big and expensive and no longer teaches what most of America values, he opined. Continuing to fund public education is not producing satisfactory results and should be re-thought; therefore, he reinforced his opposition to a BSA increase, but said yes to a conversation to overhaul public education.

[5:44:04 PM](#)

BRIDGET WEISS, Superintendent, Juneau School District, informed the committee that she had served as an educator for 39 years. She emphasized the importance of adequately funding public education and questioned why it would even be a consideration not to move in that direction. She said budgeting without adequate funding is a challenge, and she related line items that students are not even aware of. She opined that it was imminent for Alaska's children that HB 65 passed.

[5:47:36 PM](#)

BRIAN HOLST, Director, Juneau Economic Development Council, stated he is here to advocate for a much stronger investment in public education and supported HB 65. He pointed out many hardships educators in Alaska face compared to other states; however, he stated that Alaska is ranked number one in one item: fiscal stability. He said fiscal stability measures the ability

of a state to ensure the success of government sponsored programs and quality of life for the state's residents. The state has the ability to choose to invest more in its students and he encouraged the committee to increase the BSA.

[5:50:06 PM](#)

CRYSTAL HOFFMAN, representing self, testified in opposition to HB 65. She related that included in her property taxes is a sum that goes to ASD, which equates to \$1,000 per month. She said she felt she was investing in the students of Alaska but expected a better return; therefore, she questioned why more money should go into an investment that currently does not have a good return in terms of the low ranking of Alaska's schools. She opined that a better system should be developed where the money follows students, and she asked the committee to consider alternatives other than additional funds for something that has not seen success yet.

[5:52:18 PM](#)

VICKI HEWITT, President, Matanuska-Susitna Education Association, stated that she was honored to represent nearly 1,200 certified teachers, nurses, and other providers. She offered her observations about the impact of the last seven years of flat funding. First, she said, student class sizes have grown, and teachers have to adjust by teaching many different levels within the same classroom, also resulting in students getting left behind. Flat funding has also limited the ability to recruit and retain the best of educators. She relayed hearing from educators who consider leaving Alaska due to its non-competitive wages and incentives. As someone on the front lines educating students, she said, without this investment, students would continue to suffer, and outcomes cannot improve. She urged the committee to pass HB 65 and make an investment in Alaska's students.

[5:54:44 PM](#)

JENNIFER PALMISANO, Anchorage School District (ASD), offered her testimony in support of HB 65. She said that school districts across the state are in need of stable and predictable funding, which is crucial to attract qualified educators. She noted that the BSA had not been increased since 2016, and the impact has created a loss of purchasing power for the ASD, as well as resulting in negative funding. She said finding teachers is a daily struggle for every school, and she noted there are at

least two unfilled positions a day in her district. She urged the committee to consider raising the BSA so Alaska schools can continue to serve students with quality education they deserve.

[5:57:20 PM](#)

JAMIE BURGESS, related that she was the Superintendent for Nome Public Schools for seven years, and she stressed her passion for the achievement of students and the wellbeing of staff. With only \$30 increase to the BSA since 2016, there are no easy cuts to make, and struggles to find appropriate staff continues. She requested that the state make a significant investment in education, which is an investment in children's futures, as they are the future. She added that districts have done their best with flat funding the past seven years but the decline in funding resulted in a decline in education outcomes, she said.

[6:00:57 PM](#)

RODNEY DIAL, representing self, noted that he is the mayor of the Ketchikan Gateway Borough, and that he testified to ask for fairness. He explained that half of the state is considered organized boroughs, and the other half is unorganized. In the organized areas such as Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Matanuska-Susitna, the state imposes a broad-based mandatory tax called a required local contribution. He described that in Ketchikan, families are contributing thousands of dollars per year in support of education, whereas the unorganized areas will pay nothing in support of their schools. Because of this truth, he said, fairness should dictate at a minimum the legislature's consideration of inflation proofing the education spending it authorizes. It is not fair to continue to ask half the state to pay more local taxes each year, he said. For the state to have a sustainable budget, he opined "organized borough formation" must be encouraged.

[6:03:12 PM](#)

LESLIE JACOBY, representing self, testified in support of HB 65 on behalf of herself, the Seward Tsunami Swim Club, and her daughter Lydia who was an Olympic swimmer. She stressed the need to keep the community's pool open year-round, adding that currently, the pool is closed for two months in the summer making training difficult for high achieving athletes. Closing swimming pools hurts kids, seniors, and community members who need it the most, she said. She described the many benefits of having skills in swimming, and that the rates of drowning in

Alaska are one of the highest in the nation. The pool provides a safe space, a healthy outlet, and she noted that when students learn swimming, it improves other areas of their academic lives, as well as teaching discipline and goal setting. She opined that swimming is a life skill and essential for public safety and mental health.

[6:06:12 PM](#)

MARY TOUGAS, representing self, testified during the hearing on HB 65 and stated that she supported more money for education, but she would also support how smaller schools can be funded differently than "so many dollars per student." She stated that pools were installed so that children could learn how to swim, as well as being a safety and health issue. She reiterated her support for education funding but shared her belief that all borough schools should be kept open, particularly in Seward.

[6:09:29 PM](#)

ERIKA BURR, representing self, testified in support of HB 65 as a former student in Fairbanks, Alaska, a current teacher, and a future parent. Relationships between students and teachers have utmost importance and lack of funding undermines these relationships by creating large class sizes. As a teacher, she said she only gets to know the students who actively strive, which leaves teachers to feel less satisfied with their jobs. Young people deserve to have teachers' energy, time, and attention, and when that is lacking, some students "check out." She urged the committee to pass HB 65 and show kids that they matter.

[6:12:09 PM](#)

BETH ZIRBES, representing self, stated that her worry is related to the class sizes proposed for students. She said that her daughter's preschool had a student teacher ratio of ten to one, and there was then a proposed 27 students, which she found unacceptable. As a teacher, she said she found it hurtful to be accused of failing, adding that a fourth-grade test is an inadequate measure of how students are doing; however, she highlighted other areas where her students ranked above the national average. She said is it hard to motivate people to come into the field and do a good job when the situation is dire and poorly funded.

[6:15:02 PM](#)

CINDY GLASSMAKER, representing self, testified in opposition to HB 65, and offered her belief that raising the BSA does not guarantee students will have or receive the needed tools from the educational system to provide better outcomes specifically through the test scores. She stated that Alaska is fifth lowest in the nation for test scores, and dead last in fourth grade reading. She opined that Alaska's kids should be funded by allowing families to create an educational voucher system that works for them. Moving a spending bill with the revenue issues the state is facing is irresponsible, she said, and she asked the committee to oppose HB 65.

[6:17:02 PM](#)

RANDY DALY, representing self, provided his professional background, and stated that he is a massive proponent of education so much so that he volunteered his time to educate children in many areas, including teaching them the economic system. He said he expected outcomes, value for the dollars, and offered his belief that it was not the time to increase the amount of money [to the BSA] until the state can ensure there would be some output. Looking at alternative ways to provide education must be investigated, he said.

[6:20:53 PM](#)

EMILY FERRY, representing self, related that in her work world, she has heard a lot from employers who cannot find qualified workers, and said she is also deeply alarmed by the statistics heard tonight. When the state invests, there are better outcomes, she said, and when the budget is cut, the outcomes worsen. She questioned where citizens of Alaska want to go as a state. To develop the work force of tomorrow, she opined the state must invest in middle school and elementary students. She brought up an example of a classroom size of 180 students and one teacher [in a gym] because there were not enough teachers or substitute teachers ("subs"). She expressed her joy at having the choice to send her kids to various types of schools in Alaska and reiterated the need to invest to provide a vibrant future to Alaska's students.

[6:24:28 PM](#)

REGINA WRIGHT, representing self, testified in opposition to HB 65 and expressed concern that education spending was the second largest category in Alaska's budget. She said studies revealed

that higher spending did not lead to better outcomes and urged the committee to oppose the bill.

[6:25:27 PM](#)

STEPHANIE WILLIAMS, representing self, provided her background as an educator for 20 years in both public and private schools, and taught students from low economic areas to economically well off. She said when she came to Alaska, she was impressed with the public schools her daughters attended. She relayed that she went into the Alaska school system as a substitute teacher and saw wonderful teachers, but her concern was the mismanagement of funds. She recalled seeing 30 Apple computers against a wall, which was money that was spent in the school system, but the computers were not up and running. She explained that she asked why that was, and she was told that there was only one technician in the school district that could service the computers. She also noted the turnover rate for teachers who went into administrative roles. She offered her belief that the money was there but allocated wrong. She opined money needs to be better managed and the state must dig into where that money is going.

[6:29:23 PM](#)

LORRIE HEAGY, representing self, offered her background as an educator for 26 years in the Juneau School District with a PhD. She noted that she was heartened by Governor Dunleavy's speech at the beginning of legislature that focused on children. She stressed all the hardships that teachers go through on a daily basis with very little prep time. She added that she heard a lot about Alaska's investment in teachers, who are in turn going to the Lower 48 due to no retirement system and class sizes, among other reasons. She asked the committee to think of the future and support the children.

[6:32:48 PM](#)

C.J. KOAN, representing self, testified in opposition to HB 65. She related her passion for Alaska students and their successful education. She added that recently, she was provided an explanation to BSA calculations and expressed that she was amazed at how it actually worked. She said it was eye-opening to learn how the math was done and she gave brief examples of her perception of it. She reiterated that as much as she supported education, a new method should be created around the use of monies to give kids what they actually need. She opined

that there is mismanagement going on and that it should be tweaked.

[6:36:46 PM](#)

PETER HOEPFNER, Vice-President, Cordova School District, testified in support of HB 65, and offered his background with the Alaska Association of School Boards (AASB). He acknowledged the continued decline of education funding along with the rising cost of health insurance. He added that the continued decline of funding means that the state is always looking at cutting in more districts. He noted the difficulties in hiring even substitute teachers, as other jobs pay more. He said [from a 2019 study] Alaska's spending on K-12 education falls below the U.S. average, and he opined the state needs to invest in the future of education.

[6:39:40 PM](#)

MIKE COONS, Concerned Citizens of Alaska, stated that he was the president of the Concerned Conservatives of Alaska and testified in opposition to HB 65 and the \$1,000 increase. He said HB 65, along with SB 52, "could care less there are any means to ensure those standards are met," and all the while Alaska is dead-last in all states in education. He offered his belief that teachers' salaries do not reflect that they are underpaid. He asked the committee to vote no on the bill and "kill it here and now."

[6:42:21 PM](#)

DEBBIE CARY, noted she was the president of the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, and she had 4 children who attended and graduated from Alaska schools. She said 30 years ago many things were not thought of, such as cyberbullying and social and emotional development, but today it is imperative not to only think about it but to allocate resources to support the well-being of students. She noted her district's current deficit in their budget and various cuts projected. She said she was not asking the committee to fund a failing system but to think of the future of education and support the children through HB 65.

[6:45:06 PM](#)

HEATHER BARDARSON, representing self, testified in support of HB 65 and to raise the BSA to \$1,250. She provided her family's background of being educated in Alaska and said Seward schools

cannot afford to lose any more educational funding. She belief that the community needed competitive teacher salaries and maintained infrastructure. She said she hoped she and her family's voices would bring further funding for future educational opportunities in Alaska. She implored the committee to pass HB 65.

[6:47:21 PM](#)

TYLER MALLORY, representing self, related his background as a police officer in Seward and a high school football team coach and affirmed his support for funding the BSA. He offered examples of kids' success stories who excelled in school and went on to be successful students. He said when extracurricular activities are taken away, such as football that attract certain kinds of kids, those kids lose out on the opportunity to teach them how to be functioning adults. He opined that the BSA should be raised and eliminating athletics on the [Kenai] peninsula is something that cannot happen.

[6:49:49 PM](#)

RON JOHNSON, representing self, stated that he had a keen interest in education, but his biggest concern is the lack of results for the money spent, as statistics show Alaska ranks amongst the lowest in the states for performance results. He said he did not believe that throwing more money into the education system was going to improve it, and he also questioned where the money would come from. As a taxpayer, he said he would be willing to increase the BSA if the results could be shown.

[6:52:11 PM](#)

JANET JOHNSON, representing self, reflected on previous testimony opposing the bill, and opined that there was definitely something wrong with Alaska's education system when children are not being taught what they need to know to function in an adult world. It does not take more money, she said, to teach math, writing, and English. She reiterated her opposition to HB 65 and said she hoped the committee would strongly consider not passing the bill.

[6:54:16 PM](#)

MICHELLE HODEL, representing self, testified in opposition to HB 65. She said she agreed with prior testifiers who said the

state needed to get back to the basics. She added that the "woke ideology," that she saw posted all over the school, which she called propaganda, needed to stop. She said all this should not be tied to money, and she stated it would limit those who cannot afford to send children to a private school or homeschool them.

[6:55:56 PM](#)

MARIANNE NELSEN, representing self, said she is testifying as a concerned citizen, mother of four, and a small business owner. Education spending is the second largest category of Alaska's budget, yet the outcomes do not support that investment, she said. She reiterated prior testifiers' information given on Alaska's statistics in education nationwide that she stated was "quite concerning." Higher spending did not lead to better educational results, and if the state could get creative and figure out how to educate students differently, she said she would be in support of the bill. She reinstated her opposition to HB 65 and asked the committee to consider what she had presented.

[6:59:05 PM](#)

SAHAR FOSTER, representing self, provided her background as a student in public schools in Juneau. She said that after her freshmen year it became apparent to her that the public school system did not meet her needs and she enrolled herself in a boarding school. She stated that she firmly believed in education, but after her son had been enrolled in the public education system, she discovered that the school system could not meet her child's needs, and he was being asked to underperform on a daily basis. She said the [school] system does not meet everyone's needs, nor does it need more funding; there is a systemic problem that can't be portrayed on what the issues are. Raising the BSA while parents are pulling their children from the system creates a financial gap the state thought it could meet by raising the base level, she said.

[7:02:54 PM](#)

LORI RUCKSDASHEL, Principal, Anchorage School District, testified in support of HB 65. She relayed that in her district, she saw the impact of flat funding in all aspects of staffing, including high turnovers for not only teachers, but paraprofessionals. She acknowledged the want for highly trained staff in the classrooms, especially in K-3 to build strong

foundations, but it is all directly due to funding, she said. She opined that reliable funding is an absolute necessity, and urged the committee to consider increasing and inflation proofing the BSA to ensure Alaska schools can continue to serve students.

[7:04:50 PM](#)

KELLY KING, representing self, testified in support of HB 65, and noted that public schools are often some children's one constant through uncertainty. At risk students, she said, need positive and consistent relationships with school staff as well as captivating school programming. She offered her belief that if the state cannot attract and retain quality educators and mentors, a constant for vulnerable young would be removed.

[7:06:50 PM](#)

JOSHUA GIRARD, representing self, offered his professional background, adding that he was a paraprofessional at Seward Middle School. He said he witnessed cutbacks that included the loss of music, classes being forced to merge, and teachers taking on more work with the same pay. Teachers, he said, left for better employment and benefits elsewhere. The funding does not allow for competitive pay and in turn affects the staffing and students. He questioned how the needs are to be met with limited faculty and expressed support for raising the BSA.

[7:09:34 PM](#)

PATTY WISEL, representing self, explained that her concern was what may happen to her grandchildren in regard to their education and who will pay down the road. She mentioned Alaska's .7 percent drop in enrollment, adding that since 2002, Alaska had grown its education revenues and spending by nearly a third while enrollment has declined. She reiterated Alaska's place nationwide in education and said that the numbers are critical and should be repeated. She opined it is time to fund students, not systems, and she urged the committee to vote no on HB 65.

[7:11:41 PM](#)

JENNIFER SAMPSON, representing self, offered a brief personal background and related that she had come across a statistic that said Alaska spends about \$18,000 per student. She explained that her son is a college student and his tuition is about half

of that, which she found "mind-blowing." Public schools, she said, are much less expensive and she questioned why they are only funded at 90 percent. She noted charter schools cost less to operate, yet they are thriving. She said she is not against funding schools, but asked that the students be funded, not the system.

[7:14:07 PM](#)

BARBARA TYNDALL, representing self, provided background on her children's education in Alaska, adding that sometimes, she would take her children out of the public school and put them in a private school. She stated that one can get a very good education with very little money, as seen in the private schools, but she acknowledged not everyone can afford that option. She confirmed her opposition to raising the BSA because of the outcomes; the money is not doing what it is meant to do, she said. She believed that educators are producing the product, and everyone else receives whatever they are giving, and she stressed the shortages of teachers here as well as throughout the U.S. The available money should be stewarded and follow the student, she opined. She urged the committee not to pass HB 65, and to examine ways to steward the funds, as she opined a lot can be done with very little.

[7:19:22 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 7:19 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

[7:30:51 PM](#)

SALLY DUNCAN, representing self, testified in opposition to HB 65, and stated that kids are not benefiting from increases. In the 1970s, she said, kids were at or near being top performers, and only an average was paid out of the budget. Now, kids are last in most subjects and top dollar is being paid out of the budget, which is why, she said, she opposed HB 65.

[7:32:37 PM](#)

WILL MULDOON, related that he was a member of the Juneau School District Board of Education as the finance chair, where he said they passed their budget recently, and he noted a \$3 million deficit as well as other financial hardships the district faced. He brought up examples of other states who proposed similar legislation to HB 65, and opined the Alaska State Legislature

could emulate them. He reiterated his support for the bill and thanked the committee for their work.

7:35:45 PM

ROBERTA ZIPAY, representing self, said that she appreciated the passion for helping students, and she related stories about public versus private schooling. She stated that she can only speak directly and personally about ASD and what she saw as not adequate, she opined. She gave examples of her children in public schools being taught subject matter she did not want them to learn. She added that there were posters and literature in the offices of the school she did not find appropriate. She said she appreciated the ability to place her children in a private school system where she praised the education they received there, and she noted she also taught there. She asked the committee to find a better way to support students, because "this is not it."

7:41:51 PM

MICA VAN BUSKIRK, representing self, testified in support of HB 65. She said the lack of predictable and adequate increases of the BSA caused the inability to retain and recruit quality teachers. She added that impacts in Seward schools included consolidated classes, loss of core classes, and the reduction of high-level classes. Many students, she said, are being forced to take distance education classes and noted the possibility of the school's pool closure. She related that families have moved out of the community to find schools with more opportunities. There are no private schools in her community, so there are no other options except for homeschooling, which is an option a lot of parents cannot take. She requested not just one time funding, but sustainable and predictable increases to the BSA.

7:44:57 PM

CINDY ECKLUND, Assembly Member, Kenai Peninsula Borough, related that she was a District 6 Kenai Peninsula Borough assembly member. She said that the borough assembly adopted a resolution requesting that the state make a meaningful increase to the BSA for public schools. The district, she said, is facing a \$13.1 million budget deficit for fiscal year 2024 (FY 24) requiring an increase to class size and elimination of programs. She added that the BSA is at the lowest it has been in 20 years adjusted for inflation. She reiterated that the assembly requests a meaningful increase to the BSA for Alaska's students to bridge a

fiscal gap created by a lack of inflationary increases to the BSA over the last several years.

[7:47:01 PM](#)

EVELYN DALTON, representing self, provided her background in education, and stated she is testifying because the education system is in crisis. She said she saw the disenfranchisement all around her when she went to work, both in the faces of students and staff, and in addition, enrollment and performance was down. She stated she would love to say that increasing money would fix things, but there are no up to date systems or regulations, and the issue of what is being done with the districts needs to be addressed. Families are pulling kids out of the schools because they are not getting the outcomes, and until the "model" is fixed, there is no sense in throwing money at something that is already broken, she opined.

[7:50:07 PM](#)

ALEXANDER RENO, representing self, testified in opposition to HB 65, and opined that it is not an issue of if more money is needed, it is a matter of optimizing the money already in the system. He provided his background of being educated in Alaska, and that he currently worked with the state. He relayed the importance of parents being involved in their child's education and in the system, and he expressed his opinion that it did not make sense fiscally to throw more money at a problem when there is a debt with the state. Reallocation of funding can benefit the issue, he said.

[7:52:34 PM](#)

BERNADETTE WILSON, state director, Americans for Prosperity, said that among those represented are single mothers and fathers who cannot afford to travel to Juneau to testify, as well as kids who have learning disabilities that do not have the nerve, to be here and testify. She stated that the amount of money being put into education does not match the dismal placement results Alaska's students produce. She urged the body, when they look at funding, to fully vet the bill. She expressed her shock to have found out that legislators who sponsored the bill did not know the teacher to administrator ratio is four to five in nearly every single school district. She said she was told that number was not accurate and explained that the statistic can be found to back it up. She opined it is low-income kids the state is discriminating against by continuing to throw money

into a program that does not work. She expressed her belief that students need to be funded, not systems that have failed for more than a decade.

[7:56:17 PM](#)

ERIC GODDEN, representing self, said he opposed the passage of HB 65 and began by asking how much money would be enough, to which, he said, he did not think there was an answer. He said it may not be a money issue since there are successful schools as well as schools that are failing. He opined the lack of success was being caused by a culture curriculum and implementation. He pointed out the news of how teachers are being cut but said he had not heard of a six-figure administrator being cut. He said he thought the wastefulness [of funds] is evident, and that he would not attach it to inflation proofing.

[7:58:56 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 7:58 p.m. to 7:59 p.m.

[7:59:34 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE called on several testifiers who dropped off.

[8:01:01 PM](#)

DARREN SNYDER, representing self, thanked the House Education Standing Committee for their service, and testified in support of HB 65 and the success of all Alaska's communities. He explained that when he learned of the state's inability to keep up with commitment to educate K-12 youth over the past ten years, he was "floored." He questioned how to achieve the goals of every citizen of Alaska to be self-reliant and successful by not providing even a 2013 funding level. He opined that unless the BSA is raised, youth and communities throughout the state are not adequately being served. He said the right thing to do is obvious, and he urged the passage of HB 65. He addressed previous criticism of "top heavy" administration being a problem, and he said those who have problems with administrators should get in touch with the school district to deal with things. The public school is just another element in our democracy and people must work with each other to achieve accountability, he said.

[8:04:49 PM](#)

MICHELE ELFERS, representing self, advocated to raise the BSA. She said she thought it was directly related to workforce development, and she confirmed the many vacancies in her organization. She opined that professionals could be raised here in the state and retained, since it starts with good quality education. A good quality education system is needed, she said, and people are leaving due to the lack of it. She gave examples of her own children in the Alaska school system and discussed the need to educate her child through correspondence courses alternatively. She stressed her desire for students to be able to stay in the state.

[8:08:59 PM](#)

VALERIE BROOKS, representing self, testified in support of HB 65. She related she was a recently retired reading teacher and had over 30 years of public education in Alaska. She said she saw firsthand how inflation and a stagnant BSA impacts students and staff. She praised public education, students, and staff, and opined that the system is not failing, but when it is not adequately funded, it cannot address all the requirements to meet the needs of public-school kids. Lack of funding results in a lack of progress, she said, adding that HB 65 and a BSA increase would help make Alaska public schools successful. She urged the passage of the bill.

[8:11:45 PM](#)

RAY IMEL, representing self, relayed that he is a recently retired teacher from a middle school in Juneau. He reflected on the story of how cyclist Lance Armstrong had cheated but could not lie to his child when asked. He said the "cheapskate" funding for education has been cheating the children of Alaska. Despite the fiscal reduction, test scores never increase, he said. He stated that he had worked with a team of excellent educators who doubled down to make things work, and at least two of his colleagues "worked themselves to death," which he described as an awful cautionary tale. He opined that HB 65 was finally a step in the right direction.

[8:14:32 PM](#)

BILL BURR, Superintendent, Wrangell Public Schools, related that he was Superintendent of Wrangell Public Schools, and testified during the hearing on HB 65 specifically, he said, regarding the effect a stagnant BSA would have on the educational

opportunities for the students in Wrangell, and the state at large. As inflation and costs increase, the funding to public education has not. He explained the hardships his district had faced as a result of the [COVID-19] pandemic and their budget, causing a significant strain on remaining staff. Students, he said, are a resource that must never be depleted and while adding funds to public education costs is not easy, it is essential to the wellbeing of the state. He urged the committee to make students a priority by increasing and inflation proofing the BSA to a sustainable amount.

[8:16:59 PM](#)

JENNA FABIAN, Principal, Nikiski North Star Elementary, noted her affiliation with the Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals. She stated that stable and predictable funding is critical in ensuring that districts retain and attract high quality educators. In addition, the impact of inflation had created a significant loss in purchasing power for all the school districts, she said. The bandwidth for instructional effectiveness of certified teaching professionals has been greatly reduced, and less staff are unable to facilitate after school programming. Another of her concerns, she said, is the worry about burnout in educators as well as finding and retaining qualified candidates for vacancies. Reliable funding is key, and she asked the committee to increase and inflation proof the BSA to ensure Alaska schools can serve students with the quality education they deserve.

[8:19:56 PM](#)

KEVIN BANKS, representing self, offered his testimony as an advocate for the passage of HB 65. Schools are not failing, they are starving, he opined, characterizing the lack of funding imposed on the public schools in the state as "anemic." The opportunity to go to alternative schools are great, he said, but he questioned the students who don't have that option. He said that public schools are public for a reason, and a part of making sure that every student has a chance for an education. He said it is time to start "feeding" the schools the nourishment they require.

[8:22:18 PM](#)

GENE STONE, Superintendent, Lower Yukon School District, related that he wished to advocate for school funding. He described some of the increases his district faced, supplementing costs of

needed programs, and many of the capital improvement projects not making the cut. He opined the BSA amount of \$1,250 is a reasonable starting point in the discussion of increasing the BSA. Seven years of flat funding has put districts on obvious deficits, he said, and he urged the passage of HB 65 to adequately fund education.

[8:25:53 PM](#)

CHRIS REITAN, Superintendent, Craig City School District, testified in support of HB 65 and a \$1,250 increase in the BSA. He related that he had been a superintendent in Alaska for 12 years and an educator in the state for 29 years. For 26 of those years, he worked with districts that were strong advocates for school choice options. He said he was a strong proponent of district operated school choice options developed at the local level. He highlighted the challenges the public school systems face on a daily basis and how it impacts every school. He gave examples of the hardships the Craig City School District endured since the increase in the last BSA in 2017. He brought up the lack of consistent investment into children's education and urged the passage of HB 65.

[8:29:31 PM](#)

NATHAN ERFURTH, President, Kenai Peninsula Education Association, provided his background as the president of the Kenai Peninsula Education Association and testified in support of HB 65. He relayed that for the last several years schools had received very real cuts through increasing costs, and inflation alongside a flat BSA. Districts attempted to absorb the cuts by not re-hiring when teachers retire or resign, and students are losing access to programs and professionals that could open doors for life opportunities and careers, he said. He offered his opinion that if the state wants to keep the best and brightest around for the work force, they must be treated well and given what they need while they are young. Public education can meet everyone's needs with the right resources and professionals, he said.

[8:31:34 PM](#)

KEVIN SHOVE, School Board Member, Haines Borough School District, provided his educational and professional background and stated that the Haines school board and administration strongly support HB 65. He said that the current situation regarding education is evident, and he reflected on some

testifiers' concerns about how the funding was being allocated. He said that would be an accountability issue, not a funding issue; however, not increasing funding since 2017 is a huge concern for him. The passage of HB 65 would show serious commitment to Alaska's education and children, he said, and thanked the committee for their time and consideration.

[8:35:37 PM](#)

JOSHUA GILL, Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals, provided his professional background and stated that he had many affiliations, as well as being a parent of 5 children - with 4 enrolled in public school. He said to meet the bare minimum needs, the BSA needed a substantial increase. He noted the many costs schools have faced to keep running, and in addition, the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers especially in recent years. Flat funding, he said, had impacted all of this. He stressed that raising the BSA would help provide students with basic needs and well qualified educators.

[8:38:48 PM](#)

RITA TROMETTER, representing self, testified in opposition to HB 65, and she questioned where the increased allotment of money was going to be used. Without real answers, she advised the house to consider a tight budget for the upcoming year, as it appeared annual allotment increases have little to no tracking as to where it has been spent in the past to improve student scores, or where it will be used in the future to improve testing scores. She offered her belief that monies for education should not increase, instead, education departments should be advised to cut nonacademic curriculum from the line up and go back to basic education [reading, writing, and math] so students can pass grade level testing. She urged the committee to vote against HB 65 at this time.

[8:41:57 PM](#)

LILLY BORON, Principal, Haines Borough School District, provided her background and testified in support of HB 65. She expressed her pride at the quality education Haines strives to deliver to Alaska students. She added that students tend to stay in the state and attend Alaska universities and she gave examples of her own children's success. However, she said the cost of groceries and other commodities have increased by at least 25 percent, and in recent years, there have been difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified educators. Years of

continued flat funding, she said, had reduced the ability to sustain programs and provide necessary student services. She urged the committee to invest in Alaska's students and pass HB 65.

8:44:30 PM

LEM WHEELLES, representing self, provided a brief personal background and stated that he is a product of the Alaska education system and highly invested in it. He opined that schools are in dire need of a significant increase in the BSA, and the amount proposed would go a long way to correct the damage done. He said he witnessed firsthand the loss of teachers due to flat funding, and he expressed that he is tired of seeing great teachers leave his school because of lack of adequate investment. He asked the committee to work with their colleagues and the Senate to get HB 65 passed.

8:47:39 PM

PATTY BROWN, representing self, gave her background and said she was a retired teacher and taught for 22 years in rural Alaska, as well as being on the board of Alaska Science Teachers Association for ten years. She said there had been flat funding since 2017 with miniscule increases before that, and she emphasized the huge needs in rural, urban, and bush communities in Alaska. Holding schools accountable is the right thing to do, not schools having to accomplish more with less, she said. She stressed her support to raise the BSA and encouraged the use of some of the funds to enrich science education for all students.

8:50:51 PM

TIM ELDER, Employee, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, said he was the Kenai Peninsula Borough theatre manager since 2005 and began his career with the district as a theater technician. He added that he raised two children in the district who have graduated. He noted the district had not seen an increase in the BSA since 2016, and he pointed out the proposed elimination of theater technicians as a measure to close the fiscal gap. By removing this technical support position, he opined the community would lose access to a resource that promotes creativity, community involvement, and the arts. He asked the committee to invest in children and the community by increasing the BSA.

[8:53:32 PM](#)

SANDI RYAN, President, Fairbanks Education Association, stated that she was a 29-year teacher of high school mathematics and computer science in Fairbanks, Alaska, and currently the president of the Fairbanks Education Association. She gave personal examples of her own education, and the opportunities she had for field trips. She said budget cuts fall directly onto the students and noted that extracurricular activities are "drying up." She said she supported a significant increase to the BSA for Alaska's students.

[8:55:35 PM](#)

KIM HAYS, representing self, testified in support HB 65 and urged its passage. She said a well-educated populous is integral to the survival of democracy, and education is the one thing that should be invested more in year after year, not less. She gave examples of her children's education, and that parents, teachers, and education advocates have been "sounding the alarm" for years. It has come to the point where there have been school closures and more will be closed if things continue this way, she said. She stated the passage of HB 65 would put education first and show that the children are valued.

[8:58:12 PM](#)

PEGGY COWAN, representing self, said the minimal increase in the BSA had eroded the ability of districts to hire the necessary staff, and the past decade consisted of slashing budgets and limiting extracurricular activities, among other consequences. She urged the committee to listen to the specifics of the current school board members who had testified, and urged the committee to adopt a state budget that would increase funding for schools to a sustainable level. Punishing districts by short funding schools will not increase student achievement, and families need to want to stay in Alaska to strengthen the future of the state.

[9:00:32 PM](#)

ESTON JENNINGS, Director, Teaching and Learning Alaska Gateway School District, testified in support of HB 65. She said an increase of predictable funding is needed to retain quality educators. She noted the lack of the BSA increase since 2016, and the impact of inflation on purchasing power for districts. There is a misconception that district offices are filled with

overpaid administrators which, she said, is simply not true. Most educators wear multiple hats to do the necessary work of a small district. Reliable funding is key to improving students' outcomes by stabilizing schools and reducing educator turnover. She affirmed her support for increasing and inflation proofing the BSA.

[9:02:39 PM](#)

MIKE GRUNST, representing self, shared the educational background of he and his children, and said it is time for the state to step up and take responsibility for the direction citizens want the state to go. He pointed out that Alaska is the lowest taxed state in the nation and pay nothing for the services received from the state. He reiterated some of Alaska's unfavorable ratings in many other areas and opined that the state needs a comprehensive financial plan to address these issues. He suggested the coordination of school districts and university systems so they can mutually support one another. He said that Alaska has 750,000 residents with \$80 billion in the bank, and opined that almost all the problems can be solved with the fortitude to do so.

[9:06:18 PM](#)

SUSAN NEDZA, Chief School Administrator, Bering Strait School District, said that her district is only accessible by air travel, and opportunities and challenges need predictable funding at a level that meets the needs of students to operate to full capacity. Costs have increased in recent years, which in rural Alaska, is compounded by shipping and travel costs. When these costs cannot be met, students must go without. She said the district strives to do the best in providing a quality education in a variety of areas without any additional funding, but when full supports can be provided through stable funding, improvement in test scores would be just one of the measures of success. She said some communities have outgrown their schools and are trying to make room for enough students; however, labor and building costs have doubled. She stressed the importance of a BSA increase so the crisis would not continue.

[9:10:19 PM](#)

TREVOR STORRS, President and CEO, Alaska Children's Trust, said children make up 25 percent of Alaska's population but 100 percent of the future. Due to Alaska's poor standings in education nationwide, everything must be done to ensure Alaska's

children grow up with the knowledge, skills, supports and resources to be strong contributors to collective success. He encouraged the legislature to pass meaningful changes to the BSA this year, as well as a BSA that keeps pace with inflation.

[9:12:39 PM](#)

LAURA ANDERSON, representing self, stated that she is a fourth-grade teacher in Anchor Point and testified in support of HB 65. Schools need stable and predictable funding, since public education has been flat funded since 2017, she said. She noted that inflation has risen 18 percent and the BSA has increased by less than 5 percent. She related that her district saw the impacts of flat funding as well as how it could affect the future. Students, teachers, and parents deserve better, she said, and urged the passing of HB 65 so students can be served with a quality education.

[9:14:50 PM](#)

FRANK HAUSER, Superintendent, Sitka School District, said that the Sitka school district is currently facing a budget deficit of \$2.7 million dollars which represents almost 12 percent of their total general fund budget. He said flat funding does not provide for many things, and multiple years without an increase to the BSA have eroded the ability to keep educators in classrooms. He explained that in Sitka, they have made significant cuts to teachers, administrators, support staff, and programs. He opined that reliable funding would increase student achievement, and that HB 65 would provide stability in the schools in many ways. Money invested in Alaska's schools and students is money well invested in the future of Alaska, he said.

[9:17:46 PM](#)

TED EISCHEID, representing self, testified in support of HB 65. He praised previous testimony and thanked the public educators who were involved in his life. He recognized the crisis in education funding over time and said he hoped the proposed legislation would offer a solution. He reflected on testifiers who said to "let the money flow with the students," and he opined that the job of legislators is to maintain education with adequate funding.

[9:22:49 PM](#)

SUMMER KOESTER, representing self, offered her background as a teacher, a parent, and gave personal examples of when she began her career as a teacher. She said she advocated for her son who will soon enter middle school and will be in classes of 40 plus students. She said she also advocated for her autistic daughter who she takes to a school that does not have too many students per class. Lastly, she said she advocated for her colleagues and asked the committee to "fund what matters."

[9:25:40 PM](#)

ERICA KLUDT-PAINTER, Superintendent, Petersburg School District, testified in support of HB 65 and provided a brief professional background. She said her commitment to public education is clear and unequivocal. She observed that the education budget in Alaska had been unstable for years with a minimal \$30 increase in the BSA in the last six years, leaving negative outcomes. Stable and predictable funding is necessary, she said, to ensure districts can attract and retain high quality educators and improve student outcomes. She said her school district [Petersburg, Alaska] is facing a \$1 million budget deficit, and the next steps would be increased class sizes and reduced programs, among many. She urged the committee to increase and inflation proof the BSA to ensure Alaska's schools can meet important goals.

[9:28:07 PM](#)

CRISTEN SAN ROMAN, representing self, said she was testifying in strong support of HB 65, and opined that it is legislators' jobs to make sure that state money is invested wisely. She offered her perspective that schools have resources that benefit the community, and a functional and thriving community is built on a strong education system, and adequate funding being essential in making that happen. She noted that in Homer, Alaska, there are not many spaces for indoor recreation and that theater programs, which may be cut, are important especially in winter months. She spoke of some of her favorite programs during and after high school, and said she is concerned that students may not be able to experience all that she did. She stressed that 2017 money is very different than 2023 money, and said it is beyond time for a BSA increase.

[9:31:14 PM](#)

SARAH NUGENT, representing self, shared that she was an educator in Kodiak, Alaska, and testified in support of HB 65. She

offered her educational background and that of her children's. She implored the committee to do everything in their power to make sure HB 65 passes into law, as the BSA has not increased since 2017. Inflation has increased, and it is a disservice to schools not to increase the funding, she said. If her district does not receive more funding soon, drastic measures will be forced upon them and students will suffer the consequences of such cuts, she opined. The public schools are in crisis mode and the Alaska legislature must increase the BSA this year and do right by the children, she said.

[9:33:39 PM](#)

TERRIE GOTSTEIN, representing self, testified in support of HB 65. She pointed out the last seven years of cuts to school budgets while other costs have increased, which she found unbelievable. The bill would at least approach a break-even point on the BSA, she said, and she quoted a previous testifier who said, "our schools are not failing, they're starving". She opined that the legislation had spent itself into a hole and she encouraged the committee to at least pass the \$1,250 increase to the BSA and inflation proof it so as not to dig further into another hole. Adequate funding, she said, is a constitutional responsibility especially to public education in Alaska.

[9:37:48 PM](#)

ROY GETCHEL, Superintendent, Haines Borough School District, urged the committee's support for HB 65 and an increase to the BSA, as it had not been increased since 2016. He provided a background of activities his students in his district participated in that he wished to protect. He added that hiring quality staff is the single most important thing he does as a school leader, and emphasized the importance of responding to the pressures of the economic situation immediately so that high quality staff can be maintained for the benefit of the children.

[9:41:23 PM](#)

REED DAVIDSON, representing self, said that as a student, she strongly supported HB 65. She said her district in Anchorage had an estimated budget deficit of \$68 million for fiscal year 2024 (FY 24), and academic curriculum would have to suffer, among other things. She said she had frequent conversations with administrators in the school district that all become centered on lack of funding. She urged the committee to allocate funds towards education, as there is no better

investment into the future of Alaska than an investment into its school system.

[9:43:38 PM](#)

JAY GIBSON, representing self, testified in support of HB 65, and offered his background which led to him being an educator. He said that when he graduated, he had the flexibility to choose where he wanted to teach, but it was competitive teacher salaries that brought him to Alaska. Now, uncompetitive salaries are pricing teachers out of living in the state and making it impossible to sell these positions. He stated that it is the simple truth that you get what you pay for in education just like in other areas. He encouraged the committee to invest funds into education and thanked them for their support.

[9:46:45 PM](#)

LUANN MCVEY, representing self, said that she is a retired Alaska teacher and a grandmother, and strongly supported HB 65. A significant increase is needed for the BSA for teachers to meet the needs of students in public schools, she opined. Public schools, she said, are inclusive and teachers must teach to each student's needs. When class sizes boom even the best teachers struggle, and in addition to planning student's lessons, they must locate materials at appropriate reading levels as well as maintain interaction with students. Funding and providing for public education is a constitutionally mandated job of the state, and without an appropriate BSA increase, students will lose out on learning, she said. She suggested paying for increases [in education funding] through statewide income tax, reduce the permanent fund dividend, and increase taxes on oil companies. She urged the committee to pass HB 65.

[9:49:36 PM](#)

HEATHER CONN, Principal, Petersburg School District, stated that she is a principal at Stedman Elementary School in Petersburg, Alaska, and a board member of the Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals. She said she supported HB 65 and asked for consistency and reliability in education funding. Funding is necessary to ensure the future of Alaska's students, she said. She stated that she believed in education, what is done in her district's schools, and she hoped the committee also believed in the public education system and would support HB 65.

[9:51:34 PM](#)

JASON TAURIAINEN, representing self, related that he had been a public-school student and had spent some time in private schools as well. He said public school is a constitutional obligation for the state government, and he saw opportunities within the school system slowly start to erode due to flat funding. He stated that his family leans in, not away from public education and that his children had been successful through their own public education. He said if it came down to how funding can be accomplished, he would choose sales tax, or consumption tax. He stressed that something needs to be done to accomplish investment in the state's education.

[9:54:39 PM](#)

ROBYN CAPP, representing self, testified in support of HB 65, and related that she was a special education educator and parent of a special needs child. She said she is deeply committed to the success of every student regardless of their ability level, and that supported schools today are growing tomorrow's inventors and leaders. She expressed that she had seen the impact of insufficient funding in Fairbanks, and it is magnified when students with disabilities are looked at. She offered her belief that reliable funding is key to improving student outcomes, and she asked the committee to support HB 65.

[9:57:13 PM](#)

DAN POLTA, Superintendent, Denali Borough School District, spoke in support of HB 65 and urged the committee to advance the bill. Students deserve and need support, and many years of stagnant funding had negative impacts towards fully supporting students, he said. Schools can no longer offer attractive salaries and wages to teachers so they can nurture students' love of learning. Children need support, deserve an excellent education, and he opined HB 65 would be a powerful step.

[9:58:35 PM](#)

CYNDY MIKA, Superintendent, Kodiak Island Borough School District, said that as an educator, superintendent, and parent, she spoke in favor of HB 65 and the full increase to the BSA. For years, the BSA has been flat-funded and inflation continues to rise. In actuality, she said, funding is less than previous years resulting in a severe disadvantage to public education. Inflation proofing education funding and increasing the BSA is

necessary to ensure districts can provide high quality education and educators, she opined. She reiterated her support for the full increase to the BSA in HB 65.

[10:01:09 PM](#)

REBECCA INGALLS, Teacher's Union of Bristol Bay School District, provided her educational background and affirmed her support and encouragement for the passage of HB 65. There is a constitutional obligation to provide an adequate education to every student in the state, and she stated that the world children live in today is not the same world as their parents grew up in. Inconsistent funding for education has caused schools to do more with less for a number of years, along with cutting educators and programs. Staffers, she said, also have to do their jobs, and then some, which makes it more difficult to direct individual attention towards each child. She spoke briefly about testing and said that kids are so much more than a test score. She believed that comparing states through a national test when each state does things differently is not an adequate comparison. She urged the committee to visit local schools to see the issues they face.

[10:04:40 PM](#)

CHRISTY JORDAN, representing self, testified in support of HB 65 and related that she was an elementary school counselor and mother of a special needs child. She offered a story of a family she knew who considered leaving Alaska, a theme she said that she had seen much more in recent times because of lack of opportunities. She added that music and art in the schools have been lost and there is talk of closing the only local pool. She stressed the importance of the pool as a life-saving necessity where children learn how to swim. She said it was heartbreaking when she hears of children not seeing a future in Alaska. She brought up computerized testing that can last over four days, and the inaccuracies that can result. She asked the committee to provide more opportunities for children, so they want to stay in the state.

[10:07:44 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE closed public testimony on HB 65.

[HB 65 was held over.]

[10:08:11 PM](#)

**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:08 p.m.