

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 7, 2023

8:10 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Justin Ruffridge, Co-Chair
Representative Mike Prax
Representative CJ McCormick
Representative Rebecca Himschoot

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Jamie Allard, Co-Chair
Representative Tom McKay
Representative Andi Story

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): RURAL EDUCATION IN ALASKA

- HEARD

HOUSE BILL NO. 148

"An Act relating to the Alaska performance scholarship program."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 148

SHORT TITLE: AK PERFORMANCE SCHOLARSHIP; ELIGIBILITY

SPONSOR(S): EDUCATION

03/29/23	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/29/23	(H)	EDC, FIN
04/03/23	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/03/23	(H)	Heard & Held
04/03/23	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/05/23	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/05/23	(H)	Heard & Held
04/05/23	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/07/23	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

KIMBERLY HANKINS, Superintendent
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the PowerPoint on the Lower Kuskokwim School District.

CLARENCE DANIELS, President
Lower Kuskokwim School Board
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced himself to the committee.

COREY HUGHES, Dean of Students
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Nunapitchuk, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the PowerPoint on the Lower Kuskokwim School District.

MEGHAN CROW, Lead Social Worker
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Kipnuk, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the PowerPoint on the Lower Kuskokwim School District.

TERRI WALKER, Superintendent
Northwest Arctic Borough School District
Kotzebue, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint on the Northwest Arctic Borough School District.

BILL HILL, Superintendent
Bristol Bay Borough School District
Naknek, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint on the Bristol Bay Borough School District.

BUD SEXTON, Staff
Representative Justin Ruffridge
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of the sponsor, the House Education Standing Committee, of which Representative Ruffridge served as chair, provided a brief overview of HB 148 and the Alaska Performance Scholarship.

EMILY FERRY, Collective Impact Coordinator
Association of Alaska School Boards

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 148.

LISA PARADY, Executive Director
Alaska Council of School Administrators
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 148.

VIRGINIA MORGAN, representing self
Cooper Landing, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 148.

SHANNON MAJOR, representing self
Valdez, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 148.

MEGAN MURPHY, representing self
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 148.

PAIGE PETR, School Counselor
King Tech High School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 148.

SEAN SCHUBERT
Workforce Development
King Tech High School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 148.

TOM BRICE, Vice President
Board of Directors
Alumni Association
University of Alaska Fairbanks
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 148.

HERMAN MORGAN, representing self
Aniak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 148.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:10:21 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR JUSTIN RUFFRIDGE called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:10 a.m. Representatives Prax, McCormick, Himschoot, and Ruffridge were present at the call to order.

PRESENTATION(S): Rural Education in Alaska

[8:12:29 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE announced that the first order of business would be a presentation on rural education in Alaska.

[8:13:05 AM](#)

KIMBERLY HANKINS, Superintendent, Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD), co-presented a PowerPoint on the Lower Kuskokwim School District [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She shared that this is her third year as superintendent and has worked for LKSD for 20 years. She moved to slide 2 and invited members of her team to introduce themselves to the committee.

[8:14:29 AM](#)

CLARENCE DANIELS, President, Lower Kuskokwim School Board, Lower Kuskokwim School District, introduced himself to the committee. He shared that he has represented the board since 1988, when he was a student representative. He stated that he has been an elected member for 10 years. He continued that the board supports the mission of the school district and the work that is done in bilingual education.

[8:15:31 AM](#)

COREY HUGHES, Dean of Students, Lower Kuskokwim School District, co-presented a PowerPoint on the Lower Kuskokwim School District. He shared that he has worked for LKSD for six years and has been the Dean of Students for two years.

[8:16:02 AM](#)

MEGHAN CROW, Lead Social Worker, Lower Kuskokwim School District, co-presented the PowerPoint on the Lower Kuskokwim School District. She shared that she has been a social worker at LKSD for 25 years. She also shared that her family is from Bethel.

8:16:36 AM

MS. HANKINS moved to slide 3 which showed a map of the district and stated that LKSD is the largest regional educational attendance area in the state, with LKSD serving around 4,000 students in 29 schools. It has 24 communities which cover over 22,000 square miles. She stated that around 95 percent of LKSD students are Alaska Native, with a majority of the families practicing a subsistence lifestyle. She moved to the next slide which showed the same map but with traditional place names. She pointed out LKSD's mission on slide 5, and its key measures. She stated that the district has been engaged in this work for decades, with some of the key measures listed as: improving student proficiency in reading, language usage, math, decreasing absenteeism, increasing the graduation rate, and increasing the Native language proficiency rates.

MS. HANKINS moved to slide 6 and pointed out some of the highlights of the presentation, which include: the immersion and dual language programs, curriculum and course offerings, career ladders, student supports, and partnerships with local entities and statewide organizations. Addressing the language programs, she pointed out that LKSD has one Yup'ik immersion charter school and 19 dual language enrichment model (DLEM) schools. She stated that LKSD is the leader in Alaska in this work and has been for decades. She described that the immersion and DLEM models are different, but both focus on Yugtun and Cugtun languages. She moved to the next slide and pointed out the differences between these two language school models. She added that the language usage is supported by curriculum which has been developed over the past few decades. She pointed out that slide 9 through slide 11 show examples of the bilingual text books created to support the curriculum.

8:21:18 AM

MR. HUGHES highlighted the examples on slide 10 of a localized textbook compared with a widely used textbook. He made the distinction that some of the ideas in widespread textbooks do not relate to life in LKSD. He explained that localizing textbooks means using some [conventional] widespread concepts and converting them into something students living in a village would experience. He took this idea and applied it to standardized tests, explaining that the tests may contain unknown references for students living in rural Alaska. Therefore, this becomes a disadvantage. He continued with some examples of this.

[8:23:08 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS moved to slide 11, which showed more examples of localized curriculum. She moved to slide 12 and stated that teachers in LKSD are trained in the core reading program, and the district has invested in creating this in Yup'ik. She continued discussing how the reading program has developed paralleling English text using Yup'ik.

MS. HANKINS moved to slide 14, titled "Curriculum and Course Offerings" and explained the secondary level Yup'ik course which extends beyond grades K-6. She stated that this material has been developed through partnerships, and she listed some of these.

[8:25:22 AM](#)

MR. HUGHES stated that LKSD has recognized the need for a "grow-our-own teacher" program, supported by the Career Ladder program, as seen on slide 15. He stated that these local teachers have the lowest number of turnovers of any group, and this is supportive of language acquisition. He pointed out that LKSD has invested in the Career Ladder program for over 30 years. He moved to slide 16 and pointed out the seven LKSD Career Ladder programs, of which he briefly summarized. He stated that currently there are 50 individuals enrolled in these programs.

[8:29:11 AM](#)

MS. CROW moved to slide 17, which listed four types of student support in LKSD. The list includes school social workers, school community advocates, school counselors, and peer leader programs. She stated that these examples are just some of the many types of student support offered. She explained the role of these four types of support at LKSD.

[8:32:19 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS stated that LKSD is fortunate to have partnerships with local entities and statewide organizations, as listed on slide 18. She highlighted the partnerships with the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation, the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program, and the local Native Tribes. She moved to slide 19 and addressed the challenges LKSD faces. She stated that the remainder of the presentation will address the

following challenges: educator recruitment and retention, erosion and community relocations, major maintenance needs, lack of support services in the region, broadband connectivity, and flat funding and rising costs.

[8:34:49 AM](#)

MR. HUGHES moved to slide 20 and addressed the challenge of educator recruitment and retention. He stated that on average, LKSD experiences a 15 to 20 percent teacher turnover rate each year, with each turnover costing the district around \$20,000. He discussed the factors which contribute to the high teacher turnover rate, and this includes geographic location, quality of teacher housing, high cost of living, and lack of amenities.

[8:40:05 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS moved to slide 21 and addressed the erosion and community relocations. She stated that there are two communities heavily effected by erosion: Newtok and Napakiak. She added that these communities are moving to managed retreats. The threats from climate impacts include permafrost degradation, rising sea levels, erosion, and flooding. She discussed how the school in Newtok has been impacted. She moved to slide 23 and addressed the major maintenance needs in LKSD, as the schools are aging. She pointed out that the top five needed projects have a value of over \$7 million.

[8:45:35 AM](#)

MS. CROW moved to slide 24 and addressed the challenges which result from the lack of support services in the region. She referenced the geographical size of the regions as a major issue. She stated that the extensive travel between the villages affects the immediate access to healthcare and law enforcement during an emergency, which causes trauma and grief in the small communities. She stated that trauma services include supporting a large community response. She added that behavioral health services have had a difficult time with employee retention.

[8:48:03 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS moved to slide 25 and said the challenge of connectivity is a big issue in rural Alaska. She stated that this came to light during the COVID-19 pandemic, as less than 15

percent of LKSD students have access to home Internet. This highlighted the digital divide between urban and rural students.

MS. HANKINS continued to slide 26 and stated that LKSD has seen dramatic cost increases over the past few years. She highlighted that the cost of utilities has increased 38 percent, the cost of fuel has increased 46 percent, and the cost of travel has increased 40 percent. She said that, with flat funding, LKSD is "struggling on how to make things work." She said that LKSD is "doing less with less." She pointed out the graph on the next slide, which showed the decrease in the adjusted base student allocation over the past 10 years.

[8:52:57 AM](#)

MR. HUGHES addressed LKSD's strengths, as listed on the last slide. These include LKSD's excellent staff, who often go beyond their duties as educators to support the community.

[8:53:34 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS highlighted LKSD's dedicated Board of Education, with members who have served for decades.

[8:54:02 AM](#)

MS. CROW continued discussing the strengths of LKSD. She pointed out the strong family and community partnerships, which includes parents who have opened their village to this support.

[8:54:46 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS pointed out the strength of the local language and culture in LKSD, as the district is a leader in bilingual education in the state. She stated that this is the result of decades of hard work.

[8:55:09 AM](#)

MR. HUGHES highlighted the dedicated students in the region, who empower themselves through education while helping others.

[8:55:42 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS concluded the presentation by pointing out that the staff at LKSD strives to provide an excellent education every day. She encouraged the members of the committee to visit rural

Alaska. In response to a committee question, she stated that "MTSS" means multi-tiered system of support. She added that LKSD needs to strengthen its Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions for students in the Yugtun programs. She stated that MTSS has been in place for many years, and it provides extra support for students struggling in certain areas. In response to a follow-up question concerning the financial support for the language programs, she stated that the district has been engaged in this for over 30 years and the funding is a combination of state support and grants.

[8:59:06 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK thanked the presenters for their service in the district. He questioned the challenges for getting local students to become teachers in the district.

MS. HANKINS responded that when graduates return after college it is because they are connected to the community. She deferred to Mr. Hughes who added to the comments about connectedness to community. Concerning teacher turnover rate in smaller schools, she responded that when positions go unfilled every student does not have a qualified teacher. She contributed LKSD's lack of teachers to its inability to provide competitive salaries and flat funding.

[9:06:01 AM](#)

TERRI WALKER, Superintendent, Northwest Arctic Borough School District (NWABSD), gave a PowerPoint presentation on NWABSD [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She stated that she has been involved in education for 32 years, as a teacher, coach, principal, and now four years as a superintendent. She stated that many of the situations discussed during LKSD's presentation are the same for NWABSD. She moved to slide 2 and listed the rural challenges that NWABSD faces, which include cost of operations, staff shortages, broadband capacity, and affordability. She stated that without any further funding NWABSD has an \$8.2 million deficit. She moved to the next slide, which showed the demographics of the region. She pointed out the district is at 100 percent for free and reduced meals. She added that NWABSD pays \$1.2 million out of its general funds above what the U.S. Department of Agriculture refunds. She stated that this is because of the high cost of shipping. She noted that the graduation rate has dropped, and she contributed this to the cut programs because of funding.

[9:10:46 AM](#)

MS. WALKER continued to slide 4, which addressed the high cost of living in the region. She noted that the region also has issues with unaffordable housing and the lack of public safety. She pointed out the map of the region on slide 5, which covers 39,000 square miles. She stated that there are no roads connecting the villages, and the travel between the villages is very expensive, especially in emergency situations. She discussed the high cost of shipping for any school supplies. She moved to slide 6 which listed some examples of the high cost of living, pointing out that in some places a gallon of milk is \$30. She next pointed out the high cost of housing.

MS. WALKER moved to slide 7 and slide 8 and addressed NWABSD's operations and maintenance. She stated that the district consists of 10 villages, and it has difficulty hiring certified maintenance workers who can serve the entire district, as the wages are low. She added that many of the systems need very expensive upgrades, and parts are hard to find because of the age of the systems. She stated that the cost of fuel and electricity is a quarter of the district's operating budget.

[9:18:27 AM](#)

MS. WALKER stated that because of the governor's veto on capitol maintenance, none of the district's projects have been funded. These top-needs projects are listed on slide 8. She noted that now the river in Deering is flowing next to the school building, and the ocean is on the other side. Because of erosion the school building is being unlevelled, and the wind blows through the wall. She further described the students' learning environment as "cold." She moved to slide 9 and discussed the difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, as NWABSD has a 40 percent teacher turnover rate. Like LKSD, she said, with low wages, no housing, and the high cost of living, there are no incentives for teachers to move to the district. On slide 10 she discussed broadband capacity and affordability. Currently a federal E-rate grant helps supply the Internet; however, this is ending in December and the district will not be able to afford quality Internet.

[9:26:22 AM](#)

MS. WALKER discussed other challenges affecting students. She mentioned that because of lack of housing, many villages do not have a public safety officer, and this causes a crisis during

any emergency. Because of the lack of a behavioral health support system, she stated that the members of the communities have substance abuse, anxiety, and depression. She described the need for a behavioral health crisis center. In reference to workforce development, she said that it is a struggle for individuals to leave their families to receive training. She related that there are many challenges; however, she expressed gratitude for being able to serve her region, as it is a choice for her. She stated that there are many good things happening in the district as well.

[9:33:08 AM](#)

MS. WALKER, in response to a committee question, reiterated that teacher turnover in NWABSD has been up to 40 percent for the last couple of years. She stated that this is for all subjects. She added that the recruiters are reporting that the positions hardest to fill are the career and technical education (CTE) positions.

[9:35:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT expressed the opinion that the biggest cost of teacher turnover is the loss of student learning.

[9:35:39 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK expressed appreciation for slide 4 which showed the cost-of-living examples, as this is very important to illustrate. He related a story of teachers in NWABSD paying for student's snacks out of their own pockets, as this exemplifies the commitment the teachers have in the district.

[9:38:02 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:38 a.m. to 9:40 a.m.

[9:40:07 AM](#)

BILL HILL, Superintendent, Bristol Bay Borough School District (BBBSD), gave a PowerPoint presentation on BBBSD [hard copy included in the committee packet]. He shared his personal background and described Bristol Bay as a mixing pot of different cultures. He stated that he taught for the first five years of his career in BBBSD. He then taught at other locations in the state, and now he has been the superintendent for BBBSD

for 10 years. He stated that BBBSD is a small district with two schools, 110 students, 12 certified teachers, and 12 support staff. He moved from slide 4 to slide 6, discussing BBBSD's challenges. He stated that in the past the district has had very little teacher turnover, but this has changed with a 20 percent turnover on an annual basis over the last 7 years. He stated that the CTE program has had a vacancy for the past two years. He listed the difficulties in recruiting teachers, which include: the national shortage of qualified teachers; wages that are not competitive; after five years of service, teachers have an incentive to leave for states offering a defined benefit system; lack of adequate housing; and the high cost of living associated with energy costs, travel, and freight. He moved to slide 6 which showed his salary as a starting teacher in 1998 compared with the current salary of a starting teacher. Per current inflation, he estimated that a 16.35 percent raise would be needed to bring the current salary in line.

[9:48:39 AM](#)

MR. HILL proceeded to slide 7 and listed the staffing initiatives the district is taking. He discussed the following: the certified tutor program; higher pay for teachers; an experimental master's program; cultural training for teachers; and a pathway for a para-certified educator program. He moved to slide 8 and slide 9 and addressed other challenges, including the cost of transportation, utilities, and the Internet. He moved to slide 10 and slide 11 and addressed energy initiatives in the district. He pointed out the upgrades to lighting, upgrades on heat pumps, and upgrades to windows and doors. He stated that the district saw results in increased comfort for students in cold months, brightly light education spaces, and a reduction in electrical costs of over 30 percent.

[9:54:01 AM](#)

MR. HILL moved to slide 12 and addressed the broadband challenges. He stated that the district spends over \$1.3 million a year on broadband, with 90 percent paid for with the federal E-rate funding. He added that the limited broadband usage reduces opportunities for students. He moved to slide 13 and addressed the opportunities for broadband, which include: providing online courses, completing state assessments, and training for staff.

[9:55:17 AM](#)

MR. HILL moved to slide 14 and addressed how to reduce the amount of reporting staff must do. He moved to slide 15 and addressed the initiatives at BBBSD. He mentioned energy efficiency efforts and the reduction of staff. He addressed the partnerships BBBSD has with other school districts. He moved to slide 16 and expressed the opinion that the future of Alaska's education system is unstable because of high teacher turnover.

[10:00:45 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT questioned whether there are any downsides to outsourcing positions.

MR. HILL replied there are significant downsides to outsourcing, including response time, as contractors may have multiple districts they are working with. When contracted, he advised that special education professionals often will not have a connection to the community, making this work difficult. He added that another downside is the cost of some of the contracts.

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT explained that the proposed HB 105 would require districts to meet the needs of gender related issues, including a parental notification if a student requests to be called by a different pronoun. This bill would change the opt-out provision for sex education to an opt-in provision. She questioned Mr. Hill's opinion of this.

MR. HILL replied that he can address some of this, and other questions would need to be addressed by the BBBSD's board. He explained that there needs to be consideration on whether students are harmed. He expressed the fear that with an opt-in provision for sex education, students will not have enough information to make wise decisions once they reach adulthood.

[10:05:42 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK commented on the importance of broadband in rural schools, and he said that it is good to hear success stories.

[10:06:50 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE provided closing comments.

[10:08:00 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 10:08 a.m. to 10:09 a.m.

HB 148-AK PERFORMANCE SCHOLARSHIP; ELIGIBILITY

10:09:40 AM

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 148, "An Act relating to the Alaska performance scholarship program."

10:10:06 AM

BUD SEXTON, Staff, Representative Justin Ruffridge, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of the sponsor, the House Education Standing Committee, of which Representative Ruffridge served as chair, provided a brief overview of HB 148 and the Alaska Performance Scholarship (APS). He discussed the changes HB 148 would make to APS, including increasing the award amounts, eliminating the testing requirements, adding a step-up provision, and the recognition of CTE.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE invited public testimony [which remained open from the meeting on 04/05/23].

10:12:28 AM

EMILY FERRY, Collective Impact Coordinator, Association of Alaska School Boards (ASB), testified in support of HB 148. She stated that ASB supports the inclusion of CTE in APS. She stated that research supports removing the testing requirements. She discussed how increasing eligibility to APS would help contribute to the workforce in the state. She stated that implementing staff to help students and parents with APS is also crucial.

10:15:53 AM

LISA PARADY, Executive Director, Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA), testified in support of HB 148. She concurred with Ms. Ferry's testimony. She referred to ACSA's position statement and its support of CTE, as this would contribute to the state's economic stability. She pointed out that research shows CTE courses improve graduation rates, lead to higher career earnings, and decreases the student dropout percentages. Concerning rural students, she expressed the opinion that the proposed legislation would increase APS accessibility without diminishing the rigor.

[10:18:53 AM](#)

VIRGINIA MORGAN, representing self, testified in support of all the provisions in HB 148, but she stated that she specifically supports the removal of the testing requirements. She argued that the tests are unfair to rural students, and these tests are not an accurate predictor of success. She shared that her daughter did not do well on the tests; otherwise, she had high achievements.

[10:22:06 AM](#)

SHANNON MAJOR, representing self, stated that as a school counselor she makes sure students are on the right path to meet the APS requirements. She argued that the changes proposed in the legislation would make APS stronger. She pointed out the most challenging part of qualifying for APS is the standardized test requirement. She explained that the scores for these tests are calculated by an agency outside of the district, resulting in inaccuracies.

[10:24:36 AM](#)

MEGAN MURPHY, representing self, testified in support of HB 148. She shared that she worked in the education system for 17 years, with many of these years in rural Alaska. She expressed support for the provisions in the proposed legislation, especially the removal of the requirement for standardized tests to qualify for APS. She stated that the testing locations are not accessible for rural students. She reinforced that a student's grade point average would be a better metric for APS qualification. She argued that this would help students stay in the state and add to the workforce.

[10:27:12 AM](#)

PAIGE PETR, School Counselor, King Tech High School, testified in support of HB 148. She voiced support for the removal of the standardized test requirements. She shared that she has been involved with education for 20 years. She gave a brief description of King Tech High School and shared the story of four students who were prohibited from applying for APS because of the testing requirements.

[10:30:31 AM](#)

SEAN SCHUBERT, Workforce Development Coordinator, King Tech High School, testified in support of HB 148. He concurred with other public testimony heard during the hearing.

[10:31:58 AM](#)

TOM BRICE, Vice President, Board of Directors, Alumni Association, University of Alaska Fairbanks, on behalf of the board, testified in support of HB 148. He argued that students who received their education in Alaska, stay and work in the state. He argued that the update to APS would make the program have a greater impact.

[10:33:53 AM](#)

HERMAN MORGAN, representing self, testified in opposition to HB 148. He argued that students are not being educated and "throwing more money at it makes it too top heavy." He continued that parents need more consent in what students are learning.

[10:36:31 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE, after ascertaining that there was no one else who wished to testify, closed public testimony.

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE announced that HB 148 was held over.

[10:37:12 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:37 a.m.