

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 23, 2023

3:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Jesse Kiehl
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT
(DEED)

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

HEIDI TESHNER, Acting Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview of the Alaska State
Department of Education and Early Development.

LACEY SANDERS, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented an overview of the Alaska State
Department of Education and Early Development

JOEL ISAAK, Director of Tribal Affairs
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on culturally responsive education.

ACTION NARRATIVE

3:30:18 PM

CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens Kiehl, Bjorkman, Gray-Jackson, and Chair Tobin.

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CHAIR TOBIN, District I, asked the committee members to introduce themselves. She said that District I sits on the ancestral lands of the Dena'ina people. She represents the neighborhoods of downtown Anchorage, Fairview, South Addition, Government Hill, JBER, and parts of Northeast Muldoon, North Star, and Eastridge. She stated she is honored to serve as Chair of the Education Committee and looks forward to working with stakeholders on school funding, teacher retention and recruitment, student mental health, implementing the Alaska Reads Act, and other matters. She said she was born and raised in Nome and is a product of Alaska's PreK thru university education system. She is working on a terminal degree in Indigenous Studies at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

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SENATOR STEVENS, District C, said he was first elected in 2000 and served on a Special Education Committee where he realized education was getting short shrifted. Therefore, he wrote a bill to establish education as a standing committee. He is a retired University of Alaska History and Humanities professor. It is his 23rd year serving in the Alaska State Legislature.

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SENATOR KIEHL, District B, said he represents Juneau, Gustavus, Klukwan, Haines, and Skagway. The district contains three municipal school districts and one regional educational attendance area. District B is very diverse and is the headquarters for the University of Alaska, Southeast. He and his daughters attended school in Alaska. Previously he was staff for the State Board of Education and Early Development. He considers education vitally important and looks forward to doing the work of the committee.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON, District G, said she represents Anchorage areas, including Mid-town, Spenard, and the Campbell area. She

has been involved in public service for 38 years. She has served on the Anchorage assembly and advocated for children and education because they are an investment and the future. She is honored to be on the committee and looks forward to doing what is right for children.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN, District D, stated he is from Nikiski, where he taught Government History for fourteen years. He said teaching is his trade and passion. His district covers most of the northern Kenai Peninsula. It includes the cities of Nikiski, Kenai, Soldotna, Sterling, Funny River, Hope, Cooper Landing, Moose Pass, and Bear Creek. These areas are part of the Kenai Peninsula School District. He expressed hope that his involvement on the committee will reduce the cringe factor that many Alaska legislators have when they hear politicians discuss education policy. He wants education policies that work for Alaska's students by enabling educators to deliver an excellent education to every student.

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CHAIR TOBIN commented that the members of the Education Committee comprise a breathtaking array of experience.

OVERVIEW

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT (DEED)

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CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of an overview by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED).

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HEIDI TESHNER, Acting Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, stated that in addition to Deputy Director Lacey Sanders assisting her in the presentation, other staff were available to answer questions, including Joel Isaac via teleconference.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER turned to slide 2 and stated that DEED's mission is an excellent education for every student every day. Its vision comes directly from Alaska Statute 14.03.015, "All students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them." DEED's purpose is to provide information, resources, and leadership to support

an excellent education for every student every day. The presentation will provide a high-level overview of Alaska's Education Challenge, DEED's organizational structure, the public-school funding formula, school district budget resources, and the COVID funding dashboard.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER advanced to slide 5 and said that five years ago, stakeholders came together and created a shared vision for improving Alaska's public education system, which created Alaska's Education Challenge. Five shared priorities govern the daily work of the department:

[Original punctuation provided.]

1. Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade.
2. Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs.
3. Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources.
4. Prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals.
5. Improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER stated that the Alaska Reads Act passed last May, and the department has been working to develop regulations and supports to help districts with its implementation. The act will go into effect on July 1, 2023. The Alaska State Board of Education is scheduled to see the first round of Reads Act regulations on January 25, 2023; additional stakeholder and formal public input will then be heard. She stated that an Alaska Reads Act website discusses each of its programs. There are also weekly webinars to break down the implementation of the Alaska Reads Act into variable chunks to help educators.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER moved to slide 6 and said that Director Susan McKenzie developed the Alaska Strategic Reading Plan last April. The plan contains six buckets: professional development, evidence-based materials, early learning frameworks for success, the science of reading, resources, data and communications, and teacher preparation. The Reads Act is embedded in the plan. The Alaska Reading Playbook is a resource

developed a year ago as an online tool to provide educators with clear step-by-step examples of evidence-based instructional practices. It was written by Alaskans for Alaskans.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER turned to slide 7 to highlight the second priority of Alaska's Education Challenge, which is to increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs. Alaska career and technical education (CTE) camps have been held in partnership with Alaskan industries to immerse students in industry-based career and technical skills exploration. The camps help broaden a student's perspective and interest in various careers. DEED has hired a statewide coding and computer science career coordinator to work on a computer science state plan for Alaska. The plan is slated to be in place by June. In September, DEED secured a license with Microsoft for Minecraft, Education Edition. Professional development is available to help teachers teach students how to code. Finally, DEED is looking to increase its cultural lens to all its initiatives.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER said that the third priority is to close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources. She said DEED is in its third year of school recognition and support work, where it works to revamp the school improvement processes for schools that need improvement. She said the Alaska Empowerment Playbook is an interactive guide for superintendents, principals, staff, and communities on how to engage in the continuous cycle of school improvement. The guide assists administrators in recognizing the unique assets and challenges of communities within their schools. The Alaska System of Academic Readiness (AK STAR) is an assessment designed to streamline the testing experience for grades 3-9 in English Language Arts and Mathematics subjects. It is a balanced approach that connects fall and winter MAP growth in term assessments and the Alaska Spring summative assessment. It provides a comprehensive assessment system that improves efficiency, cohesion, and the ability to drive student outcomes by prioritizing teaching and learning. The assessment literacy toolkit is provided to districts to promote the importance of assessments and help make data-informed decisions around student outcomes. DEED has stackable, instructionally embedded portable science (SIPS) to support equitable education. Alaska is working with a few states on the project. Although the project has just begun, the goal is to create a bank of instructionally embedded science assessment tasks, build state and local educators'

capacity and engage educators, students, and parents. The project will increase Alaska's resources in the area of science and will be free to districts.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER stated that Teacher Recruitment and Retention (TRR) pertains to priority four of the Alaska Education Challenge. TRR is multi-phased. In 2020, the first phase established a governor's task force, followed by the publication of a TRR survey and action plan. Currently, DEED is in the implementation phase. Four subcommittees are working on recommendations for implementation. The subcommittees are:

- Organizational health.
- A recruitment task force.
- A retirement working group.
- An alternative certification team.

Final recommendations are expected within a couple of months. Professional development opportunities are also being provided to districts, including Science of Reading symposiums and professional development for the Reads Act and math. DEED is also progressing to an online educator application and certification hub called TEACH-AK.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER said the final priority of improving the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes is being addressed through the passage of tribal compacting. DEED, Native tribes, and the State Board of Education are negotiating to determine what tribal compacting will look like for Alaska. In March, the selection of participating tribes will be finalized. In April, negotiations will begin, and by next January, a report will be provided to the Alaska Legislature. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is another program DEED and some districts are engaged with to provide frameworks for the promotion of a positive climate and culture within schools. The final program mentioned was eLearning. DEED offers 79 courses through the eLearning platform. Courses offered include child nutrition, special education, health and safety, suicide prevention, and many others. Some of the courses help teachers maintain their certification. There are 34,500 users.

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SENATOR STEVENS paid tribute to former commissioner Dr. Michael Johnson for being a visionary leader. He stated his belief that Dr. Johnson was responsible for Alaska's Education Challenge.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER commented that she talked with an educator from Valdez who gave an excellent review of the Science of Reading Symposium.

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LACEY SANDERS, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, stated she would walk through the DEED framework and organization structure. She advanced to slide 12, which shows that the Commissioner of DEED reports to the State Board of Education and Early Development. The governor-appointed board consists of nine members, including a military and student advisor. The commissioner provides leadership and policy direction to the department. There are five core PreK-12 divisions:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Division of Innovation & Education Excellence
Director, Susan McKenzie

Division of Finance & Support Services
Vacant

Division of Administrative Services
Director, Sabrina Javier

Mt. Edgecumbe High School
Director Suzzuk Huntington

Division of Libraries, Archives & Museums Director
Dr. Amy Chan

MS. Sanders stated that the Alaska State Council on the Arts, the Professional Teaching Practices Commission, and the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education are administratively under DEED.

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MS. SANDERS stated that DEED has 290 positions and nine divisions. The nine divisions are Executive Administration, Administrative Services, Finance and Support Services, Innovation and Education Excellence, Libraries, Archives and Museums, Mt. Edgecumbe High School, Professional Teaching

Practices Commission, Alaska State Council on the Arts, and the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education. She briefly spoke about the duties of each division as outlined on slides 13-14.

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CHAIR TOBIN asked how many of the 290 positions are currently vacant and what is the percent change from 10 years ago.

MS. SANDERS replied that she would provide the information to the committee.

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MS. SANDERS moved to slide 15 and said the pie chart provides a snapshot of how the 267 full-time positions within DEED are distributed. She stated that when support corporations and specific division positions are divvied out, 110 positions are left to support 54 school districts.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER advanced to slide 17 and stated that the legislature provided a formula for funding school operational costs. The school funding formula is a statutorily defined calculation to determine the amount of state aid paid annually to each school district. The formula is intended to achieve an equitable distribution of aid for education throughout the state. The current formula was adopted in 1998 under Senate Bill 36 and was implemented in 1999. It has undergone several amendments since its inception. It incorporates factors intended to recognize and adjust individual district funding for the financial consequences of variables in school size, geographic cost differentials, special needs vocational education, and intensive needs student populations. The formula also considers correspondence programs, federal aid, and the ability of communities to provide local contributions. A school district is only eligible for foundation funding calculated under the formula in Alaska Statute 14.17.410.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER said the first step in determining state aid for a district is determining the average daily membership (ADM) for each school. She noted that a link was provided to the school finance website on slide 17, where detailed information such as formula reports, funding history, and federal Impact Aide disparity tests can be found. In addition, a second link to an overview of the public school funding program was provided.

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SENATOR STEVENS stated the formula is very complex, and he recalled when it was amended. He asked if the department and board were content with the formula.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER replied that the department is comfortable with the formula. However, it recognizes that the Base Student Allocation (BSA) has not kept up with inflation. Also, the district cost factors were created more than ten years ago and probably need to be updated. There have been discussions on whether to update cost factors. Previously when the cost factors were updated, it was a multi-year process with implementation occurring over five years.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER moved to slide 18 to discuss the annual account period. She said state aid to school districts is calculated annually based on student enrollments. Alaska Statute determines the count period, which is the starting point of the Public-School Funding Formula. The formula uses the current average daily membership (ADM), which is the term that defines student count data. It is the number of enrolled students during the 20-day school count period, which ends on the fourth Friday of October every year. The school year count period for 2022 - 2023 was October 3 - 28. Reports are due within two weeks after the end of the count period.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER turned to slide 19 and said the Hold Harmless provision, enacted in 2008, is intended for school districts experiencing a reduction in their brick-and-mortar average daily membership after it has been adjusted for school size in the foundation formula. Eligibility is determined after the district's adjusted for school size ADM is calculated and totaled up for all schools. She noted that the five percent reduction is not just for one school but all schools included in the calculation. The total of a district's adjusted for school size ADM is compared to the prior fiscal year total adjusted for school size ADM to determine if there is a decrease of five percent or more. If there is a decrease of five percent or greater, then the prior fiscal year is locked in as a base year for three years. The provision is intended to help districts adjust to a smaller budget based on a step reduction of 75 percent in the first year, 50 percent in the 2nd year, and 25 percent in the final year.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER said slides 20 and 21 provide a walkthrough of the steps of the formula. Slide 20 shows what it takes to determine District Adjusted ADM and slide 21 shows who pays. The average daily membership (ADM) is adjusted for school size and considers the Hold Harmless provision. Factors within the school size tables then increase that amount. The size of a school determines the adjustment amount, which is set in statute. Once the school size amount is determined, it is multiplied by district cost differentials, special needs factors, vocation education factor, special education intensive factor, and correspondence ADM to determine the District Adjusted ADM. The District Adjusted ADM is then multiplied by the base student allocation (BSA) to determine a district's base operating need. She noted that on July 1, 2023, the BSA will increase from \$5,930 to \$5,960 for FY 24. The required city and borough contribution and Impact Aid reduce the state aid provided to a school district's base need. A quality schools grant increases state aid by multiplying a district's adjusted ADM by \$16.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER moved to slide 22 and stated that since 1999 the BSA had increased 12 times, and it will increase again in 2024. The chart on slide 22 also shows the amounts of 11 additional outside funding formula appropriations to districts. She stated that the distribution is usually based on District Adjusted ADM. In 2023, outside the funding formula appropriations are 57 million.

SENATOR KIEHL requested that the y-axis be started at zero because starting it at \$3,000 makes the BSA look like it has more than doubled.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER stated the request could be fulfilled.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN suggested clarifying the pencil graph on slide 22 by including inflation-adjusted numbers on a per capita basis. The adjusted numbers would provide a better idea of what the numbers mean in real dollar purchasing power when school districts pay for educators and materials.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER said the department could provide the inflation-adjusted numbers.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER moved to slide 23 and stated that the graph depicts the history of Alaska's total state aid versus the total average daily membership (ADM). Since 2017 the ADM has been trending downward, with a slight increase in FY 22. The FY 24 projected ADM is a little more than FY 22 actuals. The projected total ADM for the next school year is \$128,579.50. She stated that DEED is willing to run scenarios based on the information the legislators and BSA provide to the department.

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CHAIR TOBIN commented that there had been a pandemic from 2020 to the present, and many students have had different educational experiences. She asked if there is a way to include the number of students receiving correspondence programs or not enrolled in the public education system.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER stated that DEED could separate the number based on brick-and-mortar and correspondence education. However, the department does not have access to non-public school information.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER said slide 25 provides what the department has regarding school district budgets and actual reporting. Every July, districts must submit their operation budget to DEED, and DEED reviews them. Statute no longer requires school districts spend to 70 percent of their operation fund budget on instruction. While this is no longer in statute, the department still reviews school district budgets to ensure a balance. Reports are on DEED's website showing actual budget spending. DEED also has audited financial statement reports. School districts are required to submit annual audits to the department by November 15th of each year. Budgets are reported by district and function. The functions are divided into instructional and non-instructional, so it can be ascertained what is being spent on support services, district administrative support, or operations and maintenance. This is done per the Uniform Chart of Accounts. It is posted on DEED's website, along with the annual revenue reports required by statute. She reiterated that these and other reports are available on DEED's website.

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CHAIR TOBIN stated that the Reads Act has additional reporting that will come from the department to drill down on what occurs within schools. DEED's website has a wealth of information on

school funding that is easily accessible to citizens curious to know more.

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MS. SANDERS advanced to slide 27 and stated that all states receive funding to support K-12 education thru three acts. The first was the COVID Virus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES), signed into law on March 27, 2020. The second was the Corona Virus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriation Act (CRRSA), signed on December 27, 2020, and the third was the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), signed on March 11, 2021.

MS. SANDERS said Alaska received over \$616 million for Education. The funding was allocated based on federal guidance to: school districts, DEED, the Office of the Governor, and non-public schools. Per federal guidance, 90 percent, or more, was allocated for school districts. DEED created a COVID Relief Funding Resources page on its website to address, track, and manage the federal COVID funds that were received. Guidance information, school district plans, and other materials were organized to provide resources for people working in the school district, families, and the public. DEED also created the Federal COVID Funding Dashboard drill-down website. Through the dashboard, individuals can find how much money was received, allocated, and spent for each of Alaska's 54 school districts. The dashboard also coordinates the three acts through color coordination.

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CHAIR TOBIN inquired about staff morale considering news reports of high attrition rates, busing problems, and funding issues.

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ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER stated she had received good feedback from staff. However, employees are feeling overworked as there are vacancies in the department that need to be filled. Overall morale is positive.

CHAIR TOBIN stated she is looking forward to the commissioner being hired.

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MS. SANDERS stated DEED moved locations from the Michael J. Burns building to the 9th floor of the State Office Building. The move occurred because of a telework-friendly environment. Staff are happy to be in the new location, and morale is good.

CHAIR TOBIN asked what is being done to be more culturally responsive in education.

ACTING COMMISSIONER TESHNER responded that Director McKenzie and Mr. Isaak have been looking into immersion programs similar to what has been done by the Lower Kuskokwim School District in Bethel. They have received materials from LKSD and will visit the school district to learn more. The department has been looking into what it will take to build a screener and is considering using COVID reserve funds to start the process.

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JOEL ISAAK, Director of Tribal Affairs, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, stated that presentations were given at the Science of Reading Symposium last April on what it looks like to teach reading through a culturally based lens and in target languages. The State Board of Education passed regulations that included Alaska Native languages as world languages. The department has also focused on Alaska Native-specific education components and finding a balance to include other cultures. An Alaskan Native newsletter has been established, and subscriptions have grown from 250 to 700 in less than one year.

MR. ISAAK stated that he and Director McKenzie have been working to determine what it looks like to support Alaska Native languages as part of the Science of Reading Symposium. So, there will be a pre-symposium Alaska Native Language Summit to support what it looks like to read in an Alaska Native language.

SENATOR STEVENS asked for an update on what is happening with tribal schools and rural funding.

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MR. ISAAK said there is a question around federal funding for K-12 operation and school construction, known as the Steven's rider, which is still in place. There were conversations at a congressional field hearing last May. There are also conversations with the Department of Education regarding specific Alaskan Native Language grants or Alaska Native Education grants and how funding mechanisms could be better suited for tribes in Alaska.

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CHAIR TOBIN thanked the presenters and committee members.

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There being no further business to come before the committee,
Chair Tobin adjourned the Education Standing Committee meeting
at 4:31 p.m.