

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 30, 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

**OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT**

Representative Story  
Representative Dibert  
Representative Galvin

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: DISCUSSION ON THE CHALLENGES FACING ALASKA'S  
PUBLIC EDUCATION

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

AMY BROWER, Superintendent  
Dillingham City School District  
Dillingham, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified by invitation on the challenges  
facing Alaska's public education system.

SANDY THOMPSON WALLACE, President  
Alaska Public Employees Association  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified by invitation on the challenges facing Alaska's public education system.

SANDI RYAN, President  
Fairbanks Teachers Association  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

AMANDA JOHNSON, Member  
Mat-Su Classified Employees Association  
Palmer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

BARBARA TYNDALL, representing self  
North Pole, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding with concerns.

GENE STONE, Superintendent  
Lower Yukon School District  
Mountain Village, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

MIKE BRONSON, Volunteer  
Education Branch  
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

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

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

ELIZABETH SIDEN, Board Member  
Juneau School Board  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

JESS COBLEY, Teacher  
Juneau School District

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

PAT RACE, representing self

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

NATHAN ERFURTH, President

Kenai Peninsula Education Association

Kenai, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

MIKE GRUNST, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

WILL MULDOON, Finance Chair

Juneau School Board

Juneau School District

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

RACHEL LORD, representative self

Homer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

ALEX KOPLIN, representing self

Homer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

ANTONIA LEONARE, representing self

Wasilla, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified against an increase to school funding.

ALEX JAFRE, representing self

Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified against an increase to school funding.

ROZLYN GRADY-WYCHE, President  
Alaska Coalition of Black, Indigenous, People of Color Educators  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

MICA VANBUSKIRK, representing self  
Seward, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

SUMMER KOESTER, representing self  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

LISA EUGAN LAGERQUIST, representative self  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

CHEYENNA CUELLAR, Teacher  
Dzantiki Heeni Middle School  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

EMILY FERRY, representing self  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of an increase to school funding.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:30:04 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 Bjorkman, Stevens, Gray-Jackson, Kiehl and Chair Tobin.

#### **PRESENTATION** **DISCUSSION ON THE CHALLENGES FACING** **ALASKA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION**

[3:31:02 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of a discussion on the challenges facing public education in Alaska.

[3:31:34 PM](#)

AMY BROWER, Superintendent, Dillingham City School District, Dillingham, Alaska, stated she supports a significant increase to the base student allocation (BSA), transportation, and FY 24 budget. She said she also supports instating a perpetual rate of inflation increase. Flat funding of Alaska's schools for six years means schools' budgets have not kept up with inflation. Inflation is at a 40-year high, schools have lost purchasing power, and therefore programs and services have been cut. Inflation must be accounted for in BSA and transportation funding to improve education for Alaska's students. She stated she had been a superintendent for two districts in Alaska and had cut teaching positions, eliminated support services, and restructured critical programming. Rural educators teach multiple grades and mixed-subject classrooms with little support and limited or outdated materials. Superintendents struggle to find money to purchase new curriculums as healthcare, transportation, utilities, shipping, and supply costs increase. Funding fixed-cost items is becoming a challenge. At Dillingham City School District (DCSD), health insurance costs have increased between 13 - 18 percent yearly. For FY 24, it expects a 16 percent increase. Fuel costs have doubled.

MS. BROWER said DCSD will face a financial cliff when federal COVID funds expire in FY 24. The district will have a \$278,000 deficit, eliminating four teaching positions and cutting several programs. DCSD currently subsidizes transportation funding with \$60,000 annually from its foundation fund. Teachers are leaving rural Alaska in droves. Housing conditions and livable wages are the reasons given for leaving. She stated she moved to Dillingham in July and lived in a room at the school for five weeks before finding a place to live. There was no hot water at the school. Nine teachers arrived in mid-August and lived at the school with their families. It took as long as mid-October to find housing. Housing for teachers across the state is imperative. A livable wage and teacher retirement plan is also needed to keep quality teachers in Alaska. Classified staff are also leaving schools for higher-paying jobs.

MS. BOWERS said that the Reads Act in FY 24 is projected to add \$30-40 to the BSA. Teachers support the Reads Act, but funding provided to the BSA for its support is inadequate. DCSD must make up more than \$150,000 in FY 24 due to enrollment losses alone.

[3:41:04 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if the DCSD is involved with any grow-your-own programs.

[3:41:27 PM](#)

MS. BOWER replied that DCSD secured a United States Department of Education full-service community schools grant in December. A large portion of the grant is to develop an early education program. The funding will support a program with the Bristol Bay Regional Career and Technical Education Consortium to develop a program to provide staff for the early education program.

[3:43:22 PM](#)

SANDY THOMPSON WALLACE, President, Alaska Public Employees Association, Anchorage, Alaska, said the organization represents employees in 24 local unions across Alaska. She has worked for the Anchorage school district for 26 years and discussed the various positions she has held as support staff. She said she had been the president of the Totem Association of Educational Support Personnel since 2019. The organization was founded in 1967 and has over 11,000 members making it the largest support staff union in Alaska. Support staff have a vital interest in the health and long-term success of Alaska's education system.

MS. THOMPSON-WALLACE said policymakers must recognize that the education team in schools consists of more than certification personnel. She opined that classified staff are often forgotten in the funding discourse. She described the various duties of classified staff and why the positions deserve respect. She noted that students with disabilities often spend more time with paraprofessionals than teachers. The number of students entering DCSD is declining; however, more students need assistance. Support staff care about students. Before the staffing shortage, many worked at the same school for 20 or more years. The need for defined benefits and livable wages has made hiring more difficult. Like teachers, support staff provide supplies for students but earn half as much. For example, in 2020, during the COVID pandemic, members of the Juneau Education Support Staff (JESS) paid off the lunch balances of 564 students, totaling \$7,446. The COVID pandemic and flat funding of education have left support staff doing more. Staff cover for teachers and give up breaks and lunches to care for students. In Anchorage, when staff fills in for the teachers or nurses, they are paid an additional \$10 per hour because there are not enough substitutes to cover the unfilled teaching positions and everyday staff absences. Budgets and staff get cut, but students still need to be educated and cared for.

MS. THOMPSON-WALLACE said Alaska needs to do better. People are overworked. They are tired, and their morale is low. She declared that schools in Alaska could not function without support staff. The most significant crises schools face are an effective cut to the BSA and the legislature's failure to offer members a defined benefit retirement option. She said there are 700 vacant support positions across Alaska. Members are paid hourly with an average annual income of \$33,000. They are allowed to work only 40 hours per week. Support staff in one school district agreed to a 35-hour work week to avoid support staff layoffs. Support staff often work multiple jobs to make ends meet.

[3:58:14 PM](#)

MS. THOMPSON-WALLACE stated that despite modest financial bargaining proposals, school districts consistently reply that their hands are tied by a flat funded low BSA that has not kept pace with inflation and a retirement system that is not within their control. She requested that school districts be encouraged to set funding aside to provide a living wage for support staff if the BSA is increased. She compared the wages of support staff to similar jobs, for example a food service worker is paid \$15.62 per hour, while McDonald's pays \$18.50 per hour. She asked that the legislature fund school districts so that support staff can be given a livable wage, pension, and pathways for career advancement. On behalf of the support staff she represents, she requested a BSA increase of \$1,100.

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At ease.

[4:00:26 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and acknowledged Representative Story was in attendance.

[4:01:24 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on the question of whether to increase school funding.

[4:01:44 PM](#)

SANDI RYAN, President, Fairbanks Education Association, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding, stating she had been a high school math and computer science teacher for 36 years. She said she had witnessed the elimination of programs through the state's underfunding of education. The programs cut are the programs that draw students to school. Students must pay privately to participate in music,

art, or sports. Students should not have to pay to play to have an equal opportunity to learn.

[4:05:25 PM](#)

AMANDA JOHNSON, Paraprofessional, Member of Mat-Su Classified Employees Association, Palmer, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding and provided information on class sizes in her area. A kindergarten class has 27 students. Her son's third-grade class has 37-38 students that sit on the floor because there is not enough room for desks. High school classes have 38-40 students in math, science, language arts, and art. A behavior support class has 15 students in grades K-5 with one teacher and two paraprofessionals. The average school caseload for a school counselor is 400. The American School Counselor's Association recommends at most 250 students. A substantial increase in the base student allocation will help educators. The legislature is responsible for having a short-term and long-term plan for assisting education in Alaska.

[4:08:18 PM](#)

BARBARA TYNDALL, representing self, North Pole, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding and stated she recognizes that staffing, transportation, and inflation have been huge issues for schools. Education takes up a large portion of the state budget. She noted that school populations are shrinking. She opined that the quality of the products and services Alaska's students receive is poor and is not necessarily beneficial to students. She asserted that families, not schools, should address mental health issues. Alaska is behind academically because teachers spend time on non-academic subjects. Teachers have time cut from the school day by other programs. The budget should be for "boots on the ground" teaching staff, and schools should pull back on items that families can address. She asked that the legislature scrutinize projects and programs. Educators should teach students to think and analyze, and parents should raise their children. Doing this would lower the state's welfare budget.

[4:10:56 PM](#)

GENE STONE, Superintendent, Lower Yukon School District, Mountain Village, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding and thanked the legislature for publicly sharing that it would work to address current funding deficiencies in education. He stated that his school district had experienced increased costs, such as shipping, housing, transportation, and maintenance. The supplement for food costs is \$1 million per year. Activities costs have increased by \$500,000. The school

district is recruiting overseas teachers. The state is funding only a few capital improvement projects, so the school district pays for repairs as it can. The school district recently had to pay \$4.5 million for a tank farm in Hooper Bay. He opined that the legislature should consider the proposed BSA increase of \$860, a bare minimum amount, as it will barely cover costs. The state will not draw teachers to Alaska without adequate housing. The district has been innovative in solving issues and working to develop career and technical education opportunities with Anchorage. School District personnel need raises due to inflation. He asked that the legislature make adequate education funding a priority.

[4:13:49 PM](#)

MIKE BRONSON, Volunteer, Anchorage Branch, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding, stating he is concerned because Alaska's students are at the bottom of the barrel in reading and math. The legislature needs to establish reasonable class sizes and adequate instruction. Based on state funding laws, the Anchorage School District projects an increase to the teacher-pupil ratio of 53 percent. Between 2019 - 2029 average student class sizes will have increased from 24 to 37. He provided the names of schools that saw an increase in class size while experiencing lower reading and math performance.

[4:16:20 PM](#)

TREVOR STORRS, President, Alaska Children's Trust, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding, pointing out that children make up 25 percent of Alaska's population and 100 percent of its future. Alaska ranks 49 out of 50 states. Society needs to ensure Alaska's children have the knowledge, skills, support, and resources to be strong contributors to the collective success of the state. He said that Alaska would continue to see increased job vacancies, state out-migration, and overall cost increases without adequately funded education. Alaska schools have been flat funded for seven years. Flat funding coupled with inflation equates to program losses due to an eight percent decline in purchasing power. Kids Count has continually ranked Alaska in the bottom half of all states for student well-being. He said he encourages the legislature to make lasting and meaningful changes to the BSA.

[4:18:56 PM](#)

ELIZABETH SIDEN, Board Member, Juneau School Board, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding

and said that she and Ms. Cobley met in 2017 working to bring science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs into Juneau's classrooms, along with place-based hands-on learning. She said she wants good student programs but finds the district and the Juneau teacher's union are at an impasse due to flat funding. Juneau has a projected \$5 million deficit for FY 24. If class size is the adjuster, there would be 36 students per class instead of 25. She urged the committee to consider a minimum increase to the BSA of \$860.

[4:20:45 PM](#)

JESS COBLEY, Teacher, Juneau School District, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to the BSA. She stated that her class size was 36 students upon returning to school following the COVID pandemic. At one point, she had 45 students who were to wear masks and remain 3 feet apart. She recalled that it was laughable. This year the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) is set at 25 to 1. However, her science class is 34 to 1. She opined that it is a huge disservice to students to place them in rooms with large class sizes. A task that should take 10 minutes will take an hour. Large class sizes make it difficult for a teacher to meet the needs of the students. She stated she is surprised schools have not been sued for failing to meet the needs of special education students. She invited legislators to visit her classroom if they do not believe there is a need to increase the BSA.

[4:24:14 PM](#)

PAT RACE, representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding and stated he is involved in bringing artists into schools. He said his sister is a teacher who is paid well but does not work in Alaska. She would like to return to Alaska, but it is not affordable. She and her husband are National Board Certified. Alaska needs them. However, Alaska does not offer a retirement plan for teachers. He opined that Alaska needs to become competitive by inflation-proofing the BSA and offering a retirement and benefits package equal to Washington State. The state should treat the next generation with respect. They cannot vote. It is up to this generation to look after them and provide them with opportunities for success.

[4:27:18 PM](#)

NATHAN ERFURTH, President, Kenai Peninsula Education Association, Kenai, Alaska, testified in support of school funding and opined that the achievements and efforts of KPBSD veil a district that has begun to crumble due to a lack of

funding. Over the past several years, the state has placed more demands on the school district. Fixed costs have increased, but the BSA has not. The number of teachers nationwide is plummeting, exacerbating the district's challenges because it cannot offer competitive wages and benefits. Positions are unfilled, services go unrendered, and programs are evaporating. Educators are not line items; they create opportunities for students. Students notice the contraction and see their worth is less every year. He stated the following are the problems KPBSD faces:

- Displaced library due to water-damaged ceiling.
- Deferred maintenance of \$420 million.
- Distance education used beyond its intended scope.
- Teachers absorbing classes that colleagues have left.
- Loss of quality staff due to mental health concerns.
- Custodial duties performed by teachers outside of school hours.
- Classified staff performing tasks outside their pay grade.

MR. ERFURTH said the future of Alaska depends on public schools helping all students grow into successful young adults. Students miss out on opportunities and experiences due to a lack of funding. Educators are leaving the profession and taking jobs that are not demoralizing, politicized, criticized, and micromanaged. The education of Alaska's students is a constitutional and ethical responsibility. He asked the following rhetorical questions to people who believe student test scores should improve before funding is increased: "The last time your car came to a hill, did you hit the gas to get over it? Or did you refuse the car gas until it went fast up the hill on its own?" He concluded that the legislature needs to provide funding so that education in Alaska can surpass its challenges and move student learning forward.

MIKE GRUNST, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding and stated that as a parent with children in the Chinese language immersion program, he had noticed the flat funding of schools for several years. He said that the governor's extreme budget cuts to the university system started a chain of events leading to 18 - 34-year-olds leaving the state. Enrollment in Anchorage schools began falling 2-3 years ago. Anchorage is down 5,000 students and needs to close schools. He opined that it is okay to increase efficiency but not at the expense of programs that help the state's future. In the late 1970s - 80s, Texas experienced similar economic

turmoil as Alaska. However, Texas focused on funding education and its university system, which is now world-renowned. He questioned why anyone would want to move to Alaska where education is not properly funded. There is no draw for young professionals, and high school students do not want to remain where they are not valued. He asserted that Alaska needs to overhaul its PreK - College education system comprehensively. He stated he is okay with using PFD funds or taxes to fund education.

[4:34:35 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN acknowledged that Representative Galvin and Representative Dibert were in attendance.

[4:35:02 PM](#)

WILL MULDOON, Finance Chair, Juneau School Board, Juneau School District, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding and stated that Juneau schools expect to receive \$1.836 million in one-time funding. The school district will use \$1.806 of that amount to fill deficits. The City and Borough of Juneau funds to the local cap, as determined by the BSA calculation. Juneau would need \$640 added to the BSA to maintain a status quo budget. Class sizes for Juneau are between 35 - 40 students. The school district must pass its budget by March 18. Not knowing the funding before the budget deadline places schools in a difficult position. He stated he is trying to remain optimistic that the legislature will fund education.

[4:36:54 PM](#)

RACHEL LORD, representative self, Homer, Alaska, testified in support of increased school funding and stated she is a parent of two children and a member of the Parent Teacher Association. She said she supports increasing and inflation-proofing the BSA. Flat funding is, in effect, a budget cut to schools due to inflation. She opined that the argument regarding return on investment is unfair considering the lack of investment Alaska has given K - 12 education for many years. Supporting students through education and programs attracts people and businesses to Alaska.

[4:39:01 PM](#)

ALEX KOPLIN, representing self, Homer, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding and stated that five of his children advanced through Homer's school system. He asserted that Alaska should immediately increase the BSA by \$1,400 - 1,800. Since he does not pay taxes in Alaska, he cannot be upset about the increase. It is great to have a legislature that wants

to solve issues. He stated he hopes there is a paradigm shift in the legislature where only the state's three top priorities, budget, PFD, and education, receive committee hearings. He stated he did not understand why Governor Dunleavy cut the education budget when he was a superintendent. Alaska has some unbelievable schools, and the ranking of 49th out of 50 does not reflect all schools in Alaska. Teachers in Alaska are fantastic and do not deserve the treatment they are receiving. They should have a meaningful retirement. Alaska should give education a priority, so infrastructure does not die.

[4:41:51 PM](#)

ANTONIA LEONARD, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in opposition to an increase to school funding and stated she did not enjoy school as a student. She began homeschooling her youngest child at the onset of COVID. Homeschool children receive \$2,100 yearly to purchase curriculum and pay for extracurricular activities. Alaska spends \$13,000 per student enrolled in public school. She suggested that parents be given \$13,000 to choose their child's education.

[4:45:45 PM](#)

ALEX JAFRE, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in opposition to an increase to school funding and said he is appalled that school districts are asking for more money when poor judgment has been exhibited. Private schools educate children for less than \$13,000 a year.

[4:47:16 PM](#)

ROZLYN GRADY-WYCHE, President, Alaska Coalition of Black, Indigenous, People of Color Educators, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding and said the organization she represents supports an increase to the BSA. She opined those barriers to becoming an educator, such as exams for teachers and students, need to be addressed. Class sizes are too big, and parents need to be involved. Teachers and administrators need to have accountability. She also supports school choice.

[4:50:12 PM](#)

MICA VANBUSKIRK, representing self, Seward, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to schools funding and said that he had watched school costs increase. The school district tells the community of Seward every spring that it will lose teachers due to an underfunded budget. The loss of even one teacher is huge to small communities. The school's budget is due in April, but the legislature does not finalize a budget until May. Students

often do not know if they will have a teacher until the beginning of the next school year. Her community has cut many teachers and programs. She asked that schools receive an increase in the BSA to retain and recruit teachers early. The legislature should forward fund education.

[4:54:01 PM](#)

SUMMER KOESTER, representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding. She stated that she had to advocate for her job every year as a Spanish teacher. Her position was eventually cut. She now advocates for her son, who will enter a middle school with class sizes of 40 students. She advocates for her daughter with autism, who will not receive needed support, and for former colleagues whom students have assaulted. One out of five teachers leave the profession each year. It costs the state less than \$6,000 a year to educate a student and \$38,000 to incarcerate an adult. Higher graduation rates correlate to reduced prison populations. Teachers spend more money in their communities than employees in the oil and gas sector. Executive Director of the Juneau Economic Development Council stated, "Alaska ranks 49th in education, 49th in high school graduation, and number one in fiscal stability." She concluded that Alaska has resources. She urged legislators to fund education.

[4:56:26 PM](#)

LISA EUGAN LAGERQUIST, representing self, Juneau, Alaska, said she testifies in support of school funding because her dream teaching position became available recently, but she cannot afford to give up her current pay and retirement benefit. Teaching requires much time. Flat funding is less funding for schools. Teachers do more and are being paid less. Alaska needs to make education a priority.

[4:58:17 PM](#)

CHEYENNA CUELLAR, Teacher, Dzantiki Heeni Middle School, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding and said the BSA should be increased by \$1,300 so that districts can hire and retain support staff. Legislators rely on support staff to make it possible for them to do their jobs. Teachers require the same. Schools can only provide an excellent education with excellent support staff. There are five paraeducator positions open at Dzantiki Heeni. Districts are not able to offer a competitive wage to hire support staff. The office staff at Dzantiki Heeni Middle School has decreased from seven to four, and the custodial staff from 4.5 to 2.5 over the last ten years. Support staff reduce student behavior problems

in hallways and bathrooms. A fully funded education system would have truancy officers and social workers to help students stay in school. Cuts to support staff affect students' education.

[5:00:59 PM](#)

EMILY FERRY, representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of an increase to school funding. She stated that she works with the Association of School Boards and has a day job looking at state data. In areas that Alaska invests, it does well. She stated that she chose the Montessori Borealis school for her children because it promotes workforce development. The Juneau school district must cut 40 - 50 teaching positions without increased funding; this could mean the entire Montessori program. She is willing to pay for education.

[5:03:51 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN closed public testimony.

[5:04:06 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 5:04 p.m.