

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 6, 2023

1:04 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**

Senator Lyman Hoffman  
Senator Forrest Dunbar  
Senator Donald Olson  
Senator Matt Claman  
Senator Bill Wielechowski

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

DISCUSSION: SCHOOL FUNDING IN ALASKA ASSOCIATION OF ALASKA  
SCHOOL BOARDS LEGISLATIVE FLY-IN

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

DAVE JOHNSON Board Member  
Kodiak Island Borough School District  
Kodiak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

SHANNON JOHNSON, Parent  
Lake and Peninsula School District  
King Salmon, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

REBECCA HAMON, Board Member  
Bristol Bay Borough School District  
Naknek, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

FERDINAND SHARP, Board Member  
Southwest Region School District  
Dillingham Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

JOHN CLOUSE, Board Member  
Dillingham City School District  
Dillingham, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

FRANK HAUSER, Superintendent  
Sitka School District  
Sitka, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

RACHEL UTIC, Student  
Anchorage School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

JESSE TYRRELL, Student  
Anchorage School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

DANIELLE LEWIS, Teacher  
Anchorage School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

SHANE ZOLSIE, Student  
Anchorage School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

MIKA BELL, Student  
Anchorage School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

KELLY LESSENS, Board Member

Anchorage School Board  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

ISABELLA KNESS, Student  
Mount Edgecumbe High School  
Sitka, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52 with concerns.

TIM DAUGHARTY, Board Member,  
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District  
Soldotna, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

DANIELLE WILLIAMS, Board Member  
Unalaska City School District  
Unalaska, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 24.

EDWARD RICHARDS, Student  
Sitka School District  
Sitka, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

DEEDIE SORENSEN, President  
Juneau School District  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

KYLIE MORRIS, Student  
Juneau School District  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

JEWEL CORBUS, Student  
Juneau School District  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

RALPH WATKINS, Superintendent  
Chatham School District  
Angoon, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52 and SB 56.

IVAN IVAN, Board Member  
Yupiit School District  
Akiachak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

JAMIE ALING, Student  
Yupiit School District  
Akiachak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

MOSES OWENS, Chairman  
Yupiit School District  
Akiachak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

JAMIE ERICKSON, Board Member  
Hoonah City School Board  
Hoonah, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

NORA SALTONSTALL, Student  
Kodiak High School  
Kodiak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

FELIX MYERS, Student  
Sitka School District  
Sitka, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

SANDY MARTINSON, President  
Nome School Board  
Nome, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

DOROTHY CALLAHAN, Student Board Member  
Nome School Board  
Nome, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 52.

ETHAN MERCULIEFF, Student  
Mt Edgecumbe High School Agency  
Sitka, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 24 with concerns.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[1:04:43 PM](#)

**CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:04 p.m. Present at the call to order were

Senators Bjorkman, Gray-Jackson, Stevens, Kiehl, and Chair Tobin.

**DISCUSSION:**  
**SCHOOL FUNDING IN ALASKA**  
**ASSOCIATION OF ALASKA SCHOOL BOARDS LEGISLATIVE FLY-IN**

[1:05:45 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced a special meeting to hear from school districts and students across Alaska to discuss school funding. The committee held the meeting in conjunction with the Legislative Fly-In, which comprised the Leadership Academy and the Youth Advocacy Institute sponsored by the Association of Alaska School Boards.

[1:07:04 PM](#)

DAVE JOHNSON Board Member, Kodiak Island Borough School District, Kodiak, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. He provided a brief history of how his family came to Alaska and stated that when he was a high school student in 1997, none of his teachers were new to the profession. In contrast, 40 percent of his children's elementary school teachers have less than two years of teaching experience. Throughout the Kodiak school district, one-third of teachers have less than five years of teaching experience. He opined that low wages and no retirement benefits cause the district to suffer from educational tourism. Teachers come to Alaska and leave after five years because they cannot afford to stay. He said a teaching couple when he was in high school had a combined annual income of \$160,000. The equivalent, if adjusted for inflation today, would be \$355,000. The turnover of teachers also has a financial impact on the school district. The Society for Human Resource Management estimated that the turnover costs were between 50 - 200 percent of a salaried employee's base salary. He stated he ran for a seat on the Board of Education because he wanted his children to have the same opportunities that he had growing up. He expressed his belief that with his expertise, he would be able to correct the problems the school district faced by administering funds correctly. He stated that he had yet to find a way to balance the school district's \$4 million deficit or increase teachers' salaries. Consumer price indexes have risen 14 percent, while teachers have received a 2 percent salary increase. During this same time, the BSA increased by just 0.5 percent. He said the district had leveraged a grow-your-own program, hired nine teachers from the Philippines, and cut the discretionary budget to keep budget growth at zero for the past three years. He stated he is proud of what the school district has accomplished

but looks forward to when teachers do not have to live with their parents to afford to live in the community. Alaska's schools would need a BSA of \$7,153 to keep pace with inflation and provide the same spending as in 2017. He noted that this increase would not address recruitment and retention or the mental health and achievement gaps that schools struggle to close.

[1:11:36 PM](#)

NORA SALTONSTALL, Student, Kodiak High School, Kodiak, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She read the following statement from the Kodiak High School Student Government:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Rural communities are all too familiar with the challenges schools face to educate all students with limited resources. We write to you today to encourage you to do all in your power to support our Alaskan students.

Our schools are faced with staffing shortages, facility challenges, and limited resources. There are literally no incentives for new teachers to stay nor come to our state because of the exorbitant cost of living and inadequate salaries and benefits, and virtually nonexistent retirement. This constant revolving door of educators does not provide consistency in our schools and our students suffer from this instability.

Districts are being forced to make difficult decisions regarding curriculum, providing obligatory student services, building maintenance, utilities, and more. Living in a rural community, professional development, sports and activity travel, and training are inherently more expensive than in urban settings. Our district does really well leveraging technology to help with some of these challenges, but as we know coming out of the pandemic, face to face interactions are more meaningful and effective.

Some may say "throwing more money at the problem" isn't the solution. We could agree. However, the thing is we haven't been "throwing money" and the "problems" of education, as the BSA hasn't changed since 2017! Schools are being forced to close statewide.

Please support our schools. Please support our students. Please support our future.

We thank you for your service to our State. May you keep in mind the future of our schools through your continued service.

[1:14:22 PM](#)

SHANNON JOHNSON, Parent, Lake and Peninsula School District, King Salmon, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated she came with the Bristol Bay, Southwest, and Dillingham school districts, which comprise the Bristol Bay Regional Career and Technical Education Program (BBRCTE). Last year the BBRCTE served over 300 students. Many of the students receive certifications and college credits. BBRCTE empowers students to be workforce ready. Dorm space limits participation in the program. Currently, only 30 percent of applicants can attend. Funding for the program is primarily through a 3-year federal grant. However, BBRCTE is looking for ways to be sustainable. Priorities to grow the BBRCTE program are:

1. Add sustainable funding for the intensive residential learning program through statewide funding.
2. Expand and develop dorm facilities through completion of the half-built BBSD dorm facility.
3. Purchase renovation of a Dillingham dorm facility.

She said the three districts have been accountable and would appreciate the legislature's support of SB 52.

[1:16:45 PM](#)

REBECCA HAMON, Board Member, Bristol Bay Borough School Board, King Salmon, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated she is proud to be part of a coalition formed to meet unmet needs. The community entrusts board members to make decisions for the benefit of children in the community. The value of children is more than a test score or headcount; the whole child should be the community's focus. Fifty-nine percent of adult women in Alaska have experienced sexual violence. One in three women and one in four men have experienced physical violence at home. Eighty-four percent of Native women have experienced violence during their lifetime. In the Bristol Bay Borough, 25 percent of children have been in foster care within the past

year. Children have been placed in the community by the state, but no local resources are provided to deal with the foster population and their needs. Children are placed in the community and age out of the program without ever receiving counseling. She stated that teachers are often the only resource these students have to assist them with their burdens. She said cutbacks place duties on teachers they are not always equipped to handle. A special curriculum or test cannot heal layers of trauma. The state wants students to shine academically but ignores emotional wounds. She stated her belief that mental health should be integral to education. Through outside grants, Bristol Bay Borough School District has a school nurse and two social and emotional learning coaches. Still, grants are temporary, so eventually, the school district must find other funding. She stated some people believe cutting top-heavy administrative positions is a solution, yet Bristol Bay schools have just two administrators. SB 52 is a good start to fixing the issues schools face.

[1:21:12 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated Senator Claman was in attendance.

[1:21:17 PM](#)

FERDINAND SHARP, Board Member, Southwest Region School District, Dillingham Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. He opined that teachers serve the community by educating children, and they deserve more. He shared an anecdotal story of a grandmother being an example to her grandson by valuing his work and the resulting benefit she received.

[1:23:47 PM](#)

JOHN CLOUSE, Board Member, Dillingham City School District, Dillingham, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. He stated that he also appreciates the collaboration of the four districts and the opportunities it has provided the region's students. A \$1,000 increase to the BSA is a great start to re-establishing baseline funding to address significant increases to fixed costs such as utilities, shipping, and insurance. School districts continue to face cuts to positions and programs to address the crisis of increased fixed costs. Insurance premiums have risen 10 - 18 percent in the last three years. Shipping costs are 1.5 times the value of the goods shipped. Schools are predicting student transportation costs will double. The Dillingham school district cut four positions to achieve a \$500,000 cost reduction only to have it consumed by a \$780,000 increase in fuel costs. He stated the \$1,000 increase to the BSA might also allow school districts to address teacher wages and benefits. He said housing

is another issue the districts face. Six teachers turned down contracts when they were unable to secure housing.

[1:27:25 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON agreed that mental health should be addressed in schools. She said she hopes the legislature will pass mental health bills this year.

[1:28:12 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated Senator Wielechowski was in attendance.

[1:28:31 PM](#)

FRANK HAUSER, Superintendent, Sitka School District, Sitka, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. He stated that the Sitka school district faces a \$2.8 million deficit even with stabilized enrollment. This amount is more than 12 percent of the school district's budget.

[1:29:01 PM](#)

EDWARD RICHARDS, Student, Sitka School District, Sitka, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. He said he is a mental health advocate who experienced a challenging time during his first and second years of high school. He noted that although he was able to see a therapist and receive help outside of school, many students are less fortunate. He opined that tragedies would result without mental health assistance in schools. He stated it is imperative to increase the BSA.

[1:30:10 PM](#)

FELIX MYERS, Student, Sitka School District, Sitka, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. He said that the BSA would need to be increased by \$2,200, adjusting for inflation to 2019, by \$1,700 if changed to 2012, and \$1,300 to match 2017. He said legislators should ask how much education is underfunded rather than whether education is fully funded. He provided three reasons why it is essential to address underfunding the BSA:

- Cutting teaching positions leads to a loss of programs for students, which ultimately hurts Alaska. He opined that when schools cut special programs, students lose their passion for school and fail to acquire certifications that benefit Alaska.
- Alaska's ability to compete for and retain teachers is minimized because salaries in Alaska are not competitive, and retirement is the worst in the nation. Furthermore, housing in Alaska is either not available or unaffordable.

- Mental health programs are not funded, and student-teacher connections are not made when teachers only stay for 1 or 2 years. Lack of bonding makes it difficult for students to find needed help and leads to the loss of life.

MR. MYERS opined that schools are in crisis, and if steps are not taken to correct underfunding of the BSA, Alaska will feel the effects for decades.

[1:34:27 PM](#)

SANDY MARTINSON, President, Nome School Board, Nome, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated that the BSA should not be increased by less than \$1,100. Full and predictable funding is needed to cover the costs of providing quality education in rural and urban Alaska. She described similar needs and concerns that other school districts experience. The longest-tenured teacher is six years at the high school and 32 years at the elementary school. Increasing the BSA provides a starting point for future school offerings.

[1:36:33 PM](#)

DOROTHY CALLAHAN, Student Board Member, Nome School Board, Nome, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated Nome is experiencing firsthand the effects of a national teacher shortage. High teacher turnover negatively affects the school district's curriculum and extracurricular activities. She described the impact of losing a music teacher. She opined that long-term teachers are essential in developing safe school environments, and it pains her to think that underfunding might take extracurricular activities away from underclassmen.

[1:38:17 PM](#)

MS. MARTINSON added that alumni and the community are desperately trying to support Nome's school music programs.

[1:39:13 PM](#)

RACHEL UTIC, Student, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated she is enrolled in Anchorage Family Partnership Charter School. She said she watched the school grow and advance in various learning opportunities over the past ten years. She plans to attend UA's nursing program and remain in Alaska. She commented that although her school experience in the Anchorage School District has been great, many brick-and-mortar schools need more funding to meet vast needs due to a pandemic, earthquake, and severe inflation. Teacher retention needs to be better, and there needs

to be more class variety and better execution of existing classes. She opined that school administrators could properly plan cost-effective school budgets and improve the quality of education statewide with funding that compensates for inflation.

[1:40:38 PM](#)

JESSE TYRRELL, Student, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. He named the various programs that helped him discover his passion for politics and recognized that other programs have helped fellow students find their passions. He opined that the legislature threatens these passions and Alaska's competitiveness if it does not raise the BSA. He was in fourth grade the last time the legislature increased the BSA. He urged increasing the BSA and keeping Alaska a state that encourages the future.

[1:41:47 PM](#)

DANIELLE LEWIS, Teacher, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She said she had been a Tier II Anchorage School District teacher for 23 years. She graduated from East High School in Anchorage in 1996. She stated that she is an example of what investing in teachers looks like and that teachers are worth the investment because they will serve for many years. She expressed her desire for younger colleagues to have similar opportunities.

[1:43:04 PM](#)

SHANE ZOLSIE, Student, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52 and spoke about how world language classes have impacted his life. He opined that not offering world language courses in Alaska is a mistake because of the state's cultural diversity. He stated that the US lags behind other countries on a global scale.

[1:45:00 PM](#)

MIKA BELL, Student, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated she was in fourth grade when the BSA was last increased and is now in tenth grade. She said primary and secondary education is about exploration, self-discovery, and preparing to contribute to society. Extracurricular activities assist in preparing students for the future. She listed the many activities she participates in, stating math is her favorite subject. She said she has heard that a core math class may be cut from her school's curriculum and urged legislators not to look at the budget crisis with a reductionist mindset. She questioned the purpose of students working hard and scoring high on standardized tests if they are

not supported. She stated that if society invests in students, students will be a return on the investment.

[1:47:51 PM](#)

KELLY LESSENS, Board Member, Anchorage School Board, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated that the Anchorage School Board is prepared to present a balanced budget as an action item on February 21, 2023. This occurred through the judicious use of a \$16 million one-time rainy day savings account, remaining federal funds, and a substantial fund balance due to hundreds of positions that went unfilled in the Anchorage school system. Typically, 150 - 200 vacancies are across all positions in any given year. However, this year the vacancies have been 400 - 450, which means schools that do not have cafeteria managers receive subpar lunches that children do not like and are sometimes moldy. She said there are 58 unfilled custodial positions across the district. A teacher informed her that there were classrooms that had not been vacuumed since August, and a substitute teacher told her about rats passing in front of a class as they waited for a custodian to arrive to clean up vomit in the classroom. Schools are often considered reliable places for meals and stability for disadvantaged families. Providing foundational elements is essential to learning and producing future leaders. She urged the legislature to contemplate the path forward and what adequate funding really looks like.

[1:52:28 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked how many teaching positions the Anchorage school district would need to cut to balance its budget if it did not have savings.

MS. LESSENS replied that for the upcoming school year, Anchorage is raising its pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) by one across the K-12 system. That saves the district \$7.3 million and equals approximately 60 teaching positions. She stated the school district has tried to avoid raising the PTR for years and allocated \$56.2 million of federal relief funds to maintain it for this year. She stated 99 percent of ASD classrooms are above an evidence-based class size. ASD has 37 elementary classrooms that have greater than 30 students. After the expiration of federal funds and savings, ASD will no longer be able to maintain levels of classroom service.

[1:54:39 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked what ASD's total budget deficit is this year.

[1:54:45 PM](#)

MS. LESSENS replied that the estimated deficit before using savings and relief funds was \$60 million. She said the following are the predicted deficits for the next three years if the BSA is unaltered:

FY 24-25 \$78 - 85 million  
FY 25-26 \$91 - 105 million  
FY 27 \$104 - 125 million

[1:56:29 PM](#)

ISABELLA KNESS, Student, Mt Edgecumbe High School Agency, Sitka, Alaska, testified in support of SB 24 with concerns. She said she is from False Pass in the Aleutians East School District but has attended Mount Edgecumbe Boarding School for three years. She stated high rates of substance abuse, poor education, sexual assault, and domestic violence exist in her hometown and other small communities. These issues and an extreme lack of emotional support from teachers and staff have led to a high rate of depression among students. She opined that mental health needs to be of more concern in schools. She has been diagnosed with bipolar II disorder and ADHD. Alaska ranks second in the nation for suicide. She stated she is aware of four students who attempted suicide. Schools should address mental health as part of a decent education. She said she supports SB 24, but it should be amended. She opined that mental health support could be life-saving to youth and should not be considered a luxury. Alaska cannot afford to lose more lives. She urged the legislature to give students hope for a better tomorrow.

[1:59:04 PM](#)

ETHAN MERCULIEFF, Student, Mt. Edgecumbe High School Agency, Sitka, Alaska, testified in support of SB 24 with concerns for stronger language in defining mental health guidelines and mental health education. He stated his desire for an amended SB 24 stems from his experience with depression. Nationally every 27.7 seconds, someone attempts suicide, which equals 11 people in five minutes that are someone's children, siblings, and friends. SB 24 is a step towards taking action but is far from what is needed to correct the state and federal crisis.

[2:00:46 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON invited the students to her office to discuss their ideas.

[2:01:51 PM](#)

TIM DAUGHARTY, Board Member, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, Soldotna, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52 and shared how he became a teacher in Alaska when schools were well maintained, students received a quality education, and salaries attracted the best teachers. He realized he did not experience discipline problems in exploratory and vocational education classes. He was allowed to teach whatever subjects interested the students. The learning environment and school climate were unmatched. No child left behind changed the focus of education to high-stakes testing, and the education climate in the school diminished. He opined that to understand Alaska education, a person needs to have spent quality time living in the Bush. He shared an anecdotal story of a student that slept in a doghouse and only received food from school. He opined that "no one size will ever fit all" regarding the needs of urban and rural students in Alaska. He stated that he speaks openly and honestly as a school board member without fear of retribution. His children teach outside of Alaska because he cannot, in good faith, encourage young people to pursue an education career in Alaska. He opined that the state had squandered incredible amounts of money in education on valueless items. He supports increasing the BSA and creating a long-term plan to achieve educational stability. He opined that it is time to repair community schools, take care of teachers, fund real-world interest-promoting classes, grow our own teachers, and remember schools become safe when people, place, and funding become consistent.

[2:09:01 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked what things were being done in education 10 - 20 years ago that are not available to students now.

[2:09:33 PM](#)

MR. DAUGHARTY replied that exploratory classes were open to students and the community. There were extracurricular activities such as music, debate, and sports. Schools no longer offer courses that grip students' attention, so students do not want to attend school. He recalled a former student who remembered that he taught her how to read a ruler, which was math taught in a woodshop class.

[2:10:45 PM](#)

DEEDIE SORENSSEN, President, Board of Education, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated she is a retired schoolteacher who has submitted written testimony and would like the committee to hear from two students.

[2:11:23 PM](#)

KYLIE MORRIS, Student, Juneau Borough School District, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She described being happy living with her family despite poor living conditions because the family was together and had food to eat. That changed when her mother lost her job, the family was evicted, and they had had no money for food. She said this situation is like Alaska's school system because the state has stopped funding what matters, and schools need money to meet basic needs. Society tells students that they are the future of Alaska, but she questioned how students are to create a beautiful future without quality education.

[2:13:47 PM](#)

JEWEL CORBUS, Student, Juneau Borough School District, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She described participating in various activities. She stated that the legislature had not increased the BSA since 2017, and the opportunities available to her are different from her older siblings. Schools have had to cut programs and support services. There are fewer teachers handling classes with a greater number of students. As a member of the student government, she said she hears complaints from students about the loss of programs. She urged the legislature to fund schools because students have lost interest in having an education that does not provide what they need and want.

[2:15:33 PM](#)

DANIELLE WILLIAMS, Board Member, Unalaska City School District, Unalaska, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She said that a one-way flight from Dutch Harbor to Anchorage costs between \$675 - \$900, teacher housing is limited, and there are few rentals. School District insurance has increased by \$483,000, and energy has increased by \$283,000. After a \$213,000 supplemental increase outside of the BSA last year, the school district debt for these two items was \$553,000. The district still needs to cover salary increases and shipping and supply costs. The school district estimates it will cost \$800,000 to cover energy and insurance costs in FY 24. She stated that the school district worries that Unalaska will lose teachers, staff, and families without increased funding.

[2:17:30 PM](#)

RALPH WATKINS, Superintendent, Chatham School District, Angoon, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52 and SB 56. He said he came to Alaska with his family ten years ago to be an administrator. One of the factors in deciding to move to Alaska was an

education system comparable to other states. He has worked hard as an administrator to hire quality teachers and fully supports increasing the BSA. However, he said he would like to speak to SB 56 as his daughter and son attend the University of Alaska (UA). He said his son was in a car accident and suffered a traumatic brain injury. SB 56 realigns how the UA performance scholarship is used. The UA performance scholarship is a tool that helps Alaska's students gain access to college and vocational training. The time limit for the student's use of the funds is four years. SB 56 would lengthen that time to six years. Students do not always complete college in four years for various reasons. SB 56 would provide extra time to get a degree. The students that have testified are proof that Alaska's schools are amazing. Legislators, teachers, staff, and administrators are all working to ensure Alaska's students have a quality education.

[2:22:28 PM](#)

IVAN IVAN, Board Member, Regional School Board, Yupiit School District, Akiachak, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. He stated that the Yuupiit School District's methods of travel are riverboats in the summer and snow machines and airplanes in winter. Spring and fall are tough times to travel. Living in rural areas off-the-road system is more expensive. He said the administrators do their best to cover costs with the available funding and that there will be hidden costs in achieving the mandates in the Reads Act. Teachers are already overworked, and their time will be taken away from students. He asked the legislature to take another look at the Reads Act and make it easier to manage financially and administratively. The school district will ask for community support in implementing the Reads Act, but additional funding would be appreciated.

[2:28:45 PM](#)

JAMIE ALING, Student, Yupiit School District, Akiachak, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated she represents the students of Tuluksak, Alaska.

[2:29:18 PM](#)

MOSES OWENS, Chairman, Regional School Board, Yupiit School District, Akiachak, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. He stated the Yupiit School District serves the communities of Akiachak, Akiak, and Tuluksak. The schools are rural with a high cost of living. He said 90,000 gallons of fuel cost \$436,000. Money is needed to light and heat schools for the students. Chartering a plane from Akiak to Bethel for student activities costs \$460 one way. Funding is also necessary to recruit and

retain qualified teachers. Without additional funds, the district cannot provide teachers with wage and cost of living increases. The Yupiit School District must offer competitive salaries and housing or it loses teachers to other school districts. He said it scares him when he sees that Alaska's teachers have the lowest pay in the nation. He expressed appreciation to the legislature for introducing and hearing SB 52 and allowing the school district to follow a subsistence calendar so they could continue hunting and gathering food.

[2:36:25 PM](#)

JAMIE ERICKSON, Board Member, Hoonah City School Board, Hoonah, Alaska, testified in support of SB 52. She stated that she is a single parent of a 12-year-old son. She grew up in Hoonah when schools were fully staffed with great teachers. The shortest tenured teacher was fifteen years. Hoonah was among the top rural schools in Southeast Alaska. The school is now short-staffed and needs custodial staff, substitutes, paraprofessionals, and certified teachers. The school needs more than five certified teachers and anticipates losing four more. When fully staffed, the school has eleven teachers. Passing SB 52 would provide funds to hire teachers, stop teacher burnout, bring back elective courses like auto shop, and assist with teacher housing. Lack of funds inhibits bonding between teachers, students, and staff. She agreed that having resources and counselors available is critical to inform and assist students with the various types of abuse and mental health issues they face.

[2:41:11 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN thanked the students, teachers, and board members for their testimonies.

[2:41:52 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 2:41 p.m.