

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 7, 2024

3:33 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: SCHOOL CHOICE FOR ALASKA'S STUDENTS

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: ALEUTIAN REGION SCHOOL DISTRICT EDUCATION MODELS

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: YUKON-KOYUKUK SCHOOL DISTRICT EDUCATION MODELS

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: FIREWEED ACADEMY

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: IDEA HOMESCHOOL PROGRAM

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: THE NATIONS CHARTER REPORT CARD

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

NORM WOOTEN, Advocacy Director
Association of Alaska School Boards
Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on School Choice for Alaska's Students.

MICHAEL HANLEY, Superintendent
Aleutian Region Schools.
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on Aleutian Region School District Education Models.

SCOTT MACMANUS, Director
Grants and Special Projects
Yukon-Koyukuk School District
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on Yukon-Koyukuk School District Models.

TODD HINDMAN, Presenter
Fireweed Academy
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on Fireweed Academy.

DEAN O'DELL, Director
IDEA Homeschool Program
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on the IDEA Homeschool Program.

PAUL PETERSON, Professor
Public Policy
Harvard University Professor
Cambridge Massachusetts

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation The Nations Charter Report Card.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:33:30 PM](#)

CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:33 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Kiehl, Gray-Jackson, Bjorkman, and Chair Tobin.

CHAIR TOBIN stated that the meeting's agenda would focus on the different education models used by Alaska's public schools.

PRESENTATION:
SCHOOL CHOICE FOR ALASKA'S STUDENTS

[3:35:16 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of a presentation School Choice for Alaska's Students.

[3:36:10 PM](#)

At ease

[3:38:51 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and asked Mr. Wooten to begin his presentation.

[3:39:15 PM](#)

NORM WOOTEN, Advocacy Director, Association of Alaska School Boards, Kodiak, Alaska, introduced himself and began his presentation on School Choice for Alaska's Students.

[3:39:37 PM](#)

MR. WOOTEN moved to slide 2 stated the Association of Alaska School Boards has always understood that the first and best teachers are parents. Parental choice is important across the state. He said he would discuss the following types of educational choices:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**Alaska Families Enjoy a
Wide Variety of School Choice**

- Traditional "Brick & Mortar" Neighborhood Schools
- Correspondence Programs
- Charter Schools
- Residential Schools
- Home Schools

[3:40:29 PM](#)

MR. WOOTEN moved to slide 3 and mentioned two types of schools in Alaska and that schools in Alaska have vast differences:

[Original punctuation provided.]

The Uniqueness

of Alaskan Schools

The system is made up of 54 school districts divided into two types:

- 34 city & borough school districts
- 19 Rural Education Attendance Areas (REAA's)

Alaska's schools have vast differences

- Anchorage School District 50,000 students & 300 teachers
- Aleutian Region School District 12 students and 2 teachers
- Pelican School District 12 students and 2 teachers

MR. WOOTEN stated that the main difference between the two types of schools is municipalities have a tax base and must make a required local contribution (RLC). On the other hand, Rural Education Attendance Areas (REAA's) do not have a tax base and education costs are the state's responsibility.

[3:41:45 PM](#)

MR. WOOTEN moved to slide 4 which shows a map of Alaska and described traditional brick and mortar schools across Alaska:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Traditional "Brick & Mortar" Schools

- 502 separate schools in 54 school districts
- 131,600 students
- North Slope School District to Annette Island School District
- Aleutian Region School District to Alaska Gateway School District

MR. WOOTEN added that most of Alaska's school districts are larger than many states. Kodiak Island Borough School District is about the size of West Virginia, and the North Slope School District is about the size of Montana.

[3:43:15 PM](#)

MR. WOOTEN moved to slide 5 and mentioned the following points about correspondence programs in Alaska:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Correspondence Programs

- 1st correspondence program was a territorial program begun in 1939.
- 35 programs in 16 districts exist today.
- Alaska Statute (2002) allows a state centralized program as well as those operated by local school districts.
- Learning plans, allotments to families are allowable (non-sectarian).
- General oversight provided by DEED.
- Partisan/sectarian/ denominational prohibited.
- Funded through the BSA at 90 percent of BSA.
- Very popular with Home School families.

[3:44:41 PM](#)

MR. WOOTEN moved to slides 6 - 7 and discussed charter schools in Alaska:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Charter Schools

- Alaska's charter school bill enacted 1995.
- 2001 amendment increased allowable numbers from 30 to 60 - extended length of charter from 5 yrs to 10 yrs - dropped geographical restrictions.
- 2010 amendment removed restriction on number of allowable charters.
- 2014 amendment clarified rental of district space to charters - limited indirect rate to 4 percent.
- Charter school funding is determined the same way as traditional schools through the BSA.
- Charter schools are public schools, chartered by local school districts.
- Governed by an Academic Policy Committee under the general oversight of the local school board.
- Charter school staff are district employees although hiring latitude is common within each charter.

- 31 charters exist in Palmer, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, North Pole, Wasilla, Bethel, Eagle River, Nome, Homer, Juneau, Soldotna, Ketchikan, Utqiagvik, and Hooper Bay.

[3:47:51 PM](#)

MR. WOOTEN moved to slides 8-10 and spoke about Residential Boarding Schools:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Residential Boarding Schools

- 1st boarding school was in Sitka in 1878 & operated by Presbyterian missionaries.
- Unfortunately, the story of Alaska's boarding schools is a sordid tale that did unspeakable harm to many of our citizens.
- Sadly the early boarding schools motive was to detribalize our indigenous citizens and assimilate them into Euro-American culture.
- By the late 20th century most of these schools had closed.
- School districts with approved residential boarding schools may be reimbursed with a per-pupil stipend to assist in with operational costs. The district must provide appropriate dormitories, food service & daily access to a public school.
- Residential school construction costs allow cities/boroughs/municipalities to apply for funding through bond debt reimbursement. However, there is a moratorium on new construction through 2025.
- In addition to the state operated Mt. Edgecumbe residential program, there are 7 district operated district residential schools.
 - Galena Interior Learning Academy
 - Kuskokwim Learning Academy (Bethel)
 - Nenana Living Center
 - Northwestern Alaska Career & Technical Center (Nome)
 - Ready Academy (Bethel)
 - Star of the Northwest Magnet School (Kotzebue)
 - Voyage to Excellence (Chugach - Anchorage)
 - Mt. Edgecumbe (Sitka)

[3:50:13 PM](#)

MR. WOOTON moved to slide 11 - 13 and discussed the following points about homeschooling formats in Alaska:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Home School

Alaska's Homeschooling Formats:

- Parents may contact their local school district and select correspondence programs that the district has designed or supports.
- Each district correspondence program and student funding allotment will vary.
- Parents aren't limited to district correspondence programs. They may select a recognized statewide correspondence program that is sponsored by another school district in Alaska.
- Statewide programs are similar to the local school district option, except that parents will contact a school district in which they are not a residence. Statewide correspondence programs and the student funding allotment will vary.

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- Parents may also elect to participate in the centralized option, which has evolved into the AK Virtual School. This statewide program provides a virtual classroom environment for students across Alaska. Some school districts have opted out of participating in the AK Virtual School, but parents in those school districts may still choose to have their children participate in the program.
- For more information, visit Alaska Statewide Correspondence Schools or contact Donald Enoch, Education Administrator II (907) 465-2972.

[3:52:05 PM](#)

MR. WOOTEN shared that his granddaughter participated in the Galena program. He stated he served on the Kodiak Island Borough

School District Board for 30 years, and the board reached out to work with homeschool programs, which was a benefit to the schools and students. School choice is alive and well in Alaska and is willingly embraced by the public school system.

[3:53:38 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked if homeschool programs receive money from the state.

MR. WOOTEN replied that if they participate in a correspondence program, most school districts offer a stipend to all students to purchase materials, such as books and computers.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON clarified that homeschool programs receive funding for correspondence materials, but they do not receive a BSA contribution.

[3:54:46 PM](#)

MR. WOOTEN replied that is correct.

[3:54:54 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL noted that Alaska is not a mandatory enrollment state. Alaska students can attend private schools and families in Alaska can homeschool without public programs, which receives no funding. He stated his family has used the full spectrum of options except private school. He thanked Mr. Wooten for focusing on the public options that are paid for by citizens.

PRESENTATION:
ALEUTIAN REGION SCHOOL DISTRICT EDUCATION MODELS

[3:56:03 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of a presentation on Aleutian Region Schools and introduced Mr. Hanley.

[3:56:30 PM](#)

MICHAEL HANLEY, Superintendent, Aleutian Region Schools, Anchorage, Alaska, introduced himself and stated the Aleutian Region School District is one of the smallest school districts in Alaska and is the furthest out on the Aleutian chain. The district recently received permission to reopen the Nikolski school after being closed for 12 years.

MR. HANLEY said the opportunities he had to serve at both the classroom level, sitting beside students, and at the state level have shown him the importance of personal interactions with

children, families, and the community, as well as having a system that ensures all 54 of Alaska's districts work towards a common goal. That goal is for Alaska's kids to be prepared with the necessary skills for further education and jobs when they graduate, keeping every door of opportunity open. He appreciated that Mr. Wooten highlighted the public-school options recognized in statute.

MR. HANLEY stated the state's role is to set parameters, guidelines, and expectations for what kids need when they graduate, accomplished through setting educational standards. As commissioner, he noted that while many students were reported proficient in basic skills, they often required remedial courses in university. In response, new higher standards were adopted in 2014 to aim for higher levels of proficiency necessary for success. He emphasized that the state supports districts by providing guidelines but allows them to determine how best to meet these standards.

[4:00:03 PM](#)

MR. HANLEY highlighted the flexibility in Alaska's educational system, noting the existence of variable-term residential schools where students can attend 2 - 4-week intensive courses not offered at their home school. He mentioned other performance-based models in use, where age does not dictate grade level, allowing students to learn at their appropriate skill levels. For example, in Chugiak, a student graduated with both a diploma and an associate degree, while another received a diploma and a pilot's license.

MR. HANLEY described various school models, including four-day weeks and subsistence calendars, which meet the state requirement of 170 student days within a 180-day school year. He explained that Anchorage has 37 alternative schools and eight charter schools, each focusing on specific needs and interests, such as the ABC School with rigorous expectations, an open optional model, Montessori, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math (STEAM), and multiple language immersion schools.

[4:04:24 PM](#)

MR. HANLEY noted that these programs are successful, and data supports their effectiveness. However, he cautioned against trying to make all schools like charter schools, as each one is unique and specialized. He said the Harvard study that shows Alaska's success with charter schools shouldn't be used to promote the idea that one size fits all. Each district knows its

community best and offers tailored programs to meet specific needs. He said that in his tiny district, the focus is on individualized education, akin to homeschooling with a certified teacher, to best serve the small student population.

[4:06:26 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked what category of school are Specialized Academic Vocational Education (SAVE) schools 1 and 2.

MR. HANLEY replied that the SAVE schools in Anchorage are alternative schools.

[4:07:09 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked Mr. Hanley for his thoughts on consolidating school districts to save administrative costs and potentially put more money into the classroom.

[4:07:37 PM](#)

MR. HANLEY replied that, speaking objectively and without concern for job security, consolidation offers minimal financial benefit and significant drawbacks. His district already operates with minimal administrative costs. Consolidating with a distant district like Lake and Peninsula could save some money but would result in losing local school board members and their influence, distancing decision-making from the students. He said experience when they lost ADAC last year makes him questioned the overall benefit of consolidation given these costs.

PRESENTATION:
YUKON-KOYUKUK SCHOOL DISTRICT EDUCATION MODELS

[4:10:03 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of a presentation Yukon-Koyuku School District Education Models.

[4:10:31 PM](#)

SCOTT MACMANUS, Director, Grants and Special Projects, Yukon-Koyukuk School District, Fairbanks, Alaska, said he was asked to talk about his personal experience with the models of education that are available in Alaska. He described his education in Alaska as a child and as an adult, and then went on to describe his work history as a teacher. He has strived to complete tasks efficiently and effectively and his experience in education has informed him of what works and why. He said Alaskans have a broad selection of opportunities to meet their educational needs and listed the options. Alaska's education system is highly

flexible, and students can achieve associate degrees or a pilot license while still in high school. This flexibility is necessary because no single model addresses the varied needs of students. Core skills, like those learned in the military, are different from academic skills, which require a different learning model. Governor Dunleavy's Alaska Education Challenge provided him guidance through COVID, school closures, and the design of remote delivery systems. While village schools are not the same, there are some similarities. As a child, most of the children in the village spoke Yupik as their first language. In his lifetime, this has changed, and the purpose of rural schools has shifted from supporting a nomadic, subsistence-based economy to providing skills for jobs.

[4:15:29 PM](#)

MR. MACMANUS said he and the students he grew up with were from low-income families. Although some of these students have died from suicide and drug abuse, others have become successful in their careers. Village schools use multi-level instruction, and schools are the center of the community.

[4:16:29 PM](#)

MR. MACMANUS said there are many homeschool programs but basically two types. First, there are unmonitored homeschool programs where the parent is the teacher. Many of these homeschool students do not take assessments because it is not required, so their effectiveness is unknown. The students who do test do well, but the results are anecdotal. At Alaska Gateway School District (AGSD), approximately 90 percent of correspondence students in the REACH program did not test, and at Yukon-Koyukuk School District (YKSD), approximately 70 percent did not test. Homeschool programs are also required to file for financial education services even though they do not receive funds, which is an added burden. Facilitated homeschool programs are different. They are hybrid programs where students are required to check in daily, receive teacher support, take assessments, and have peer interaction. The hybrid program emerged during COVID, and students in the program are successful.

[4:18:00 PM](#)

MR. MACMANUS said the Harvard study on Alaska's charter schools was done five years ago and only addressed grades 4-8. He is excited that Alaska's charter students lead in education and is interested to know why they are successful.

[4:18:20 PM](#)

MR. MACMANUS said Alaska has a successful language immersion school in Bethel with 100 percent teacher retention over the last five years. Only 5.3 percent of the students are in special education. Parents must apply for enrollment and participate in the school, and class sizes are limited to 20 students. Schools with these types of benefits do well. By comparison, Tok has 18 percent of enrolled students in special education, and YKSD has 25 percent. He opined that these percentages change outcomes.

[4:19:03 PM](#)

MR. MACMANUS addressed district consolidation, stating it is promoted as a cost-saving measure, but he does not see how it will save money unless there is a change to the Base Student Allocation (BSA). Studies indicate that a loss of local control will result in negative student performance. He opined that he does not see how it will save even five cents and believes it will increase the complexity of how students are served. He said the key question is what works because education excellence is what Alaskans want. Educational excellence is simple but hard to achieve because it requires a stable team of excellent teachers, involved and committed parents who believe in the value of education, and sufficient resources for schools. However, both the country and state denigrate teachers, which discourages people from entering the profession. The damage from this is greater than realized.

[4:20:10 PM](#)

MR. MACMANUS stated Alaskan children are not lazy and will work for something that interests them. He remarked that it is easier to tear something down than to build it up. The education system has become politicized and weaponized by individuals dedicated to undermining it. He opined that it is important to maintain local control and adjust where needed. Simply asking for more money is not the answer. Creating more accountability measures for administrators and schools is unnecessary because they are already accountable to parents, school boards, state legislators, and the state education system.

CHAIR TOBIN noticed Mr. Macmanus's new title as Director of Grants and Special Projects. She asked what auditing requirements he must adhere to and provide to the federal and state government.

[4:21:45 PM](#)

MR. MACMANUS replied there are about 20 different federal and state funding sources. Currently, monitoring is taking place for Tanana as it becomes part of Yukon-Koyukuk School District

(YKSD). Monitoring is extensive, and he has spent over a month addressing questions on parent communication, teacher qualifications, funding, and procurement. Every school district undergoes a comprehensive fiscal audit, including tests of various funds, reviews of retirement system payments, and all large payments. Preparing for the audit takes an entire business office three months while continuing daily work and one exclusive week to answer auditors' questions. Grant audits differ as they involve a close examination of individual purchases and ensuring money was correctly spent.

PRESENTATION:
FIREWEED ACADEMY

[4:23:54 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of a presentation Fireweed Academy.

[4:24:40 PM](#)

TODD HINDMAN, Presenter, Fireweed Academy, Homer, Alaska, said he is a recently retired principal. He gave a description of his 33-year work history in education at schools of choice. He provided information based on his experience working in schools of choice within the public school system and shared his opinions about proposed changes to charter schools in the state. He stated his belief that the success of schools relies on the collaboration of staff, supportive parents, and students. He emphasized that everyone must have a say in the process to achieve the school's goals, which fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility. He has observed that shared responsibility among students, parents, teachers, support professionals, and administrators leads to better problem-solving, and a strong school culture based on local needs.

MR. HINDMAN highlighted that Alaska's charter schools are unique, established by parents, teachers, and community members across the state, each with a specialized educational focus. He suggested that the Alaska legislature can support charter schools by providing a localized, flexible, and responsive system with meaningful oversight and resources. He noted that the process of authorizing charter schools is crucial for their success and that having authorizers based in the same community as the schools is best practice.

[4:27:42 PM](#)

MR. HINDMAN cited the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) as stating that while school districts were initially the main authorizers of charter schools in the U.S., other entities were later allowed to increase the number of charter schools. The NCSL determined that the quantity of charter schools did not affect the quality of education that charter schools provided. In addition, states that saw the largest increase in charter schools also experienced increased rates of charter school failures. He argued that limiting authorizers to local school districts is not a barrier to charter school development and that financial support and suitable facilities are more significant factors.

[4:27:48 PM](#)

MR. HINDMAN discussed the roles of various authorizers, including institutions of higher learning and state boards of education, noting their limitations in supporting K-12 schools effectively. He emphasized that local school districts are the best suited to authorize charter schools because of their experience with day-to-day operations, ability to provide timely assistance, and understanding of the local community. Local districts make up 90 percent of authorizers. Outside authorizers may hinder community trust and local control.

[4:31:54 PM](#)

MR. HINDMAN stressed the importance of local control in public education, which is a fundamental belief in Alaska and the U.S. He stated his belief that those closest to the schools are best suited to determine their needs. Charter schools in Alaska thrive on this philosophy, given autonomy to make decisions about academic focus, instruction, staffing, leadership, and daily operations. Local control is the greatest strength of Alaska's charter school system.

[4:32:58 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked why one of Alaska's most successful charter schools has had very low teacher turnover.

[4:33:16 PM](#)

MR. HINDMAN replied that teacher turnover in any school is a major concern. He said that having lived in Nome for 17 years he witnessed the impact of high turnover in rural Alaska. New teachers often do not know the students, instructional philosophies, or curriculums well. Schools must spend money and time on training, and new teachers are not as effective initially. He stated that he was fortunate to work in a school in Nome where the staff remained consistent for most of his

tenure. When staff members work together over time, they understand each other's strengths and weaknesses, collaborate effectively, and build strong relationships with students, enhancing their education.

**PRESENTATION:
IDEA HOMESCHOOL PROGRAM**

[4:34:28 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of a presentation IDEA Homeschool Program. IDEA is the longest operating and largest homeschool program in Alaska.

[4:34:50 PM](#)

DEAN O'DELL, Director, IDEA Homeschool Program, Anchorage, Alaska, said the Interior Distance Education of Alaska (IDEA) Homeschool Program is part of the Galena City School District, is accredited through Cognia, and is a school of universal support.

[4:35:29 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL moved to slide 2 and said IDEA is a school of choice but we are a public school which means that we have open enrollment year-round. Some homeschool programs are charters, but most are public schools. IDEA serves more than 7,300 students in Alaska, currently in 111 communities. IDEA has six regional offices, two extension offices and two business offices in Fairbanks and Galena:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Service to Alaska

IDEA is a public school, and a school of choice.

IDEA serves approx. 7,300 students living in 111 communities, and we do so from six regions and 10 offices including two business offices in Fairbanks and Galena.

- Region A/GA - Anchorage
Including rural communities with an Anchorage hub
- Region ER - Eagle River
- Region F/GF - Fairbanks
Including rural communities with a Fairbanks hub
- Region K/GK - Kenai Peninsula, with an extension office in Anchor Point.
Including Kodiak, Seward, Homer

- Region MS - Wasilla, with an extension office in Palmer
- Region SE - Juneau
Including rural southeast communities

[4:36:01 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL moved to slide 3, which provided IDEA's core values and purpose. He said the general information about homeschooling that he shares will be tied to IDEA's program policies and offerings and may not always represent every program.

[4:36:32 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL moved to slide 4 and stated that IDEA was created by homeschoolers for homeschoolers and honors parents as the most important teacher a student will ever have. IDEA believes that regardless of whether children are homeschooled, individualized education is the goal of every educational model. Homeschooling is perhaps the most unique opportunity to meet a student's individual needs. Building relationships is at the core of IDEA. Relationships are needed to learn about the students and their families and to build open lines of communication. Families know their students best, but IDEA can contribute to that formative data in new ways. IDEA builds a toolkit of curriculum resources, instructional strategies, and interventions with families to help them discover their own educational goals and achieve them. He said one of the reasons more families are homeschooling is that student socialization is no longer seen as an issue. IDEA's calendars are full of clubs, groups, and activities. IDEA works to develop learning communities in its offices, remotely, and virtually. The success of IDEA's students takes many forms.

[4:38:11 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL moved to slide 5 and discussed enrollment criteria at IDEA:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- **Enrollment criteria (simplified):**
 - Physically present in Alaska and able to homeschool.
 - Requires a minimum number of classes, type of classes and 'fundable' classes.
 - Faith-based courses can be done for credit but cannot be counted toward fundable enrollment criteria: State funds cannot be used for sectarian materials.

[4:38:44 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL moved to slide 6 and said the following are requirements to remain in the program:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- **Ongoing requirement (simplified):**
 - Families must be willing to communicate and collaborate with certified staff.
 - An individual learning plan (ILP) documenting required enrollment criteria and other classes must be created in that collaboration.
 - Quarterly samples and semesterly grades must be reviewed in that collaboration.

[4:39:35 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL moved to slide 7 and discussed family allotments:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- **Allotment purchases (simplified):**
 - Purchases must be tied to the established learning plan, must not conflict with regulation, and must abide by policies that IDEA has established as 'not excessive' and 'appropriate'.
 - Allotments are monitored through our Family Allotment System Tracker (FAST) electronic system.
 - Regulation requires that materials be returned to IDEA if they are not consumable or otherwise depreciated.

[4:40:16 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL moved to slide 8 and said IDEA always strives to go beyond what is required in support of services to families. She stated the following is a partial list of services. Parent advisory committees play a key role in IDEA's continuous improvement:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Service to Alaska

IN EACH OF OUR REGIONAL FACILITIES, WE PROVIDE:

- Certified Contact Teachers and private meeting spaces
- Libraries, curriculum resource rooms and Resource Room Coordinators
- Public spaces for clubs, activities and educational community events.
- A series of Curriculum Fairs that draw curriculum providers from across the nation.
- Tech departments and tech support
- Field Representatives to support enrollment, advocacy and event planning
- Parent Advisory Committees

- Classified staff (receptionists, coaches clerical, and/or administrative) to support general needs, student records and ordering

- Certified Special Education Teachers, and special education services: Consultation on interventions and tools; evaluations by school psychologists; speech/language pathologists; occupational therapies; arrangements for physical therapies and counseling

- Site Administrators

- Allotment, equipment
 - & more...

[4:41:03 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL moved to slide 9 and 10 and stated special education is a significant responsibility that IDEA takes seriously:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Special Education

Like all public schools, IDEA must live into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and provide a free and appropriate public education. IDEA Homeschool serves...

- Over 500 special needs students (2023- 2024)

Put in perspective...

- Of the 54 school districts in Alaska:
 - 31 of those districts have a total enrollment (regular and special education) of fewer than 500 students. (Most recent data published by DEED, 2022-2023)

The number of special needs students in IDEA is greater than the total enrollment for many individual school districts in Alaska.

IDEA HOMESCHOOL PROVIDES:

- Certified Special Education Staff—to develop IEPs (together with parents and other certified staff) and to provide ongoing consultation, interventions, tools and support
- School psychologists
- Speech/language pathologists
- Occupational therapists
- Physical therapy
- Mental health services
- Classified special education record keepers
- Significant ongoing support from our regular education certified and classified staff

[4:42:05 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL moved to slide 11 and discussed post-secondary opportunities and success as part of IDEA's strategic planning goals:

IDEA supports the post-secondary goals of all students!

College bound students can begin university courses in high school, and they have access to a wide range of college prep opportunities - as well as IDEA created post-secondary planning and workshops.

Career and vocational students have access to a wide variety of curriculum, as well as a growing number of partnerships in trades, apprenticeships, welding, industrial training, aviation, carpentry, video production, emergency services... and more!

Counseling, SEL, and general mental health support

Non-competitive clubs, groups and activities

Competitive clubs

Individualized success through individualized education

2022-2023 IDEA State Champions!

Pentathlon

Lightbotics (Robotics)

Gadget Girls (Robotics)

Battle of the Books - grs. 5/6

2022-2023 IDEA State 2nd Place!

Academic Decathlon

Battle of the Books - high school

Battle of the Books - grs. 3/4

Hungry Robots (Robotics)

MR. O'DELL opined that it is only a matter of time before IDEA students beat every school in the country in one or more of the competitive groups because they place well at nationals.

[4:43:57 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL said success looks different depending on the child. The flexibility of homeschool provides students the opportunity to follow their dreams. He referred members to the appendix [IDEA: Measuring Success One Story at A time!] for examples of student's success stories.

[4:45:09 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL expressed gratitude for the students and families that IDEA serves and for colleagues in traditional residential schools and alternative programs, because education is never one-size-fits-all.

[4:45:24 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked about the testing rate among Alaska homeschool students and ideas for improving data collection, noting that the statewide rate is much lower than IDEA's rate. He mentioned hearing once that if a person walked into the Department of Education claiming two-thirds of homeschool kids do not know how to read, the department wouldn't have data to prove otherwise. He asked what could be done to increase these rates.

[4:46:06 PM](#)

MR. O'DELL admitted there are challenges. He noted that the most recent testing rate with AK STAR has been 15 percent. Before the change to AK STAR, the rate was initially 15 percent when parents could opt out, which grew to 30 percent. He mentioned the hope of reaching 40 to 50 percent or higher because parents find value in the data. He said maintaining consistency in the test and addressing the delays in score reporting would be beneficial because parents struggle to see the value in data when they can't trust or predict the timing of results.

[4:47:40 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL derailed train of thought.

[4:47:53 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said Mr. O'Dell could send additional suggestions to the committee in writing.

PRESENTATION:
THE NATIONS CHARTER REPORT CARD

[4:48:04 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of a presentation, The Nations Charter Report Card and introduced Mr. Peterson.

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PAUL PETERSON, Professor, Public Policy, Harvard University Professor, Cambridge Massachusetts, moved to slide 2 said he directs the program on education, policy, and governance. He conducted a study of charter schools in the United States using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation's Report Card. Set up initially in 1969 and greatly expanded in 1990, NAEP has provided high-quality data on student performance in math and reading since 2000. Every two years, representative samples of students in each state are tested, with other subjects tested less frequently. Sample school districts and charter schools are expected to participate. Although NAEP was not specifically designed to evaluate charter schools, it has collected a representative sample of charter school students over time. This data allows for an analysis of states with high-performing charter schools and those with lower performance.

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MR. PETERSON moved slide 3 and said his research looked at the results from 24 of surveys. He stated that they combined them into a total of 145,000 tests nationwide, with Alaska having

2,430 tests, which is sizable enough to draw reasonable conclusions. Peterson mentioned that a good poll typically needs 1,000 students.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slide 4 and said the study adjusted for the background of the students to compare similar students from different states. Adjustments were made for students' ethnicity, gender, grade, eligibility for free and reduced lunch, location (urban or rural), special education status, English Language Learner status, computer availability at home, number of books at home, and parental education. These adjustments aim to put the students on a common scale.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slide 5 and said the students were ranked based on their scores from 2009 to 2019. He emphasized that high-quality data has not been available since 2019 and that post-COVID data for this analysis is still unavailable. He clarified that the study compares charter schools to one another across the country, not charter schools to district schools. The analysis examines whether schools in one state perform better than those in another, measured in standard deviations. Peterson noted that one standard deviation equals four years of learning, so 0.3 standard deviations represent a little more than one year's worth of learning.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slide 6 and stated the study has some limitations. He noted that trends over time cannot be traced, there is no information about virtual charter schools, and only fourth and eighth grade data is available. Peterson mentioned that the study does not include high schools and that the data ends in 2019.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slide 7 and said he and other charter school researchers were surprised to find that Alaska has the highest student performance in the country. Alaska's charter school students outperform those in Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Florida, all known for strong performance in this sector. The difference between Alaska and the average charter school student in the United States is equivalent to one year's worth of learning. If compared to Tennessee, the difference in learning is two years. Peterson noted that not all charter schools are alike. He concluded that Alaska has a

constellation of effective charter schools or at least high-performing students in those schools.

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SENATOR KIEHL noted that the standard deviation for these tests is presented in terms of points on the website. He mentioned that a third of a standard deviation for fourth-grade reading equates to 13 points on a 500-point scale, which corresponds to a year of learning. He asked if, on average, a fifth grader would score 13 points higher in reading than a fourth grader on a 500-point scale.

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MR. PETERSON replied that he did not have the point scale on hand. He estimated that a standard deviation in points is approximately 32 points but was not certain.

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SENATOR KIEHL observed that the tests are normed by years and asked if the tests are given in years other than fourth and eighth grade.

MR. PETERSON replied that the tests are administered in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. However, twelfth grade was not included in the study due to an insufficient number of twelfth-grade charter school students. He stated that a fourth-grade student would score one standard deviation below an eighth-grade student on the eighth-grade test and vice versa. He explained that if an eighth grader took the fourth-grade test, the eighth grader would perform four years of learning better than the fourth grader. He clarified that one standard deviation higher is equivalent to four years of learning.

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SENATOR KIEHL said he would take a closer look at how the test is devised.

MR. PETERSON said he would provide a written explanation to the committee.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slide 8, a chart comparing state charter and public-school rankings. He noted the chart was created by the Urban Institute based on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results. He explained that not all states are included because some do not have charter schools or have too few charter schools for statistical analysis. Among the 35

states compared, Alaska ranks first for charter schools and last for public schools. He highlighted this as remarkable since states usually have similar rankings for both public and charter schools, citing Massachusetts and Colorado as examples of high performance in both categories.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slide 9 and stated that Alaska ranks number one only after making background adjustments, such as eligibility for free and reduced lunch. Using raw scores, Alaska ranks seventh.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slide 10, a chart showing the ranking of states on adjusted fourth and eighth grade performances of charter students in math. He said that in math Alaska charter students did a lot better than Massachusetts and Colorado charter students.

MR. PETERSON moved to slide 11, which displayed a chart ranking states on adjusted fourth and eighth grade performances of charter students in math and reading. He noted that in reading, Alaska charter students ranked third, with scores slightly below New Hampshire and Colorado but slightly above Massachusetts. He added that when reading and math scores are combined, Alaska ranks number one due to the high math scores.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slide 12, which displayed a chart ranking states on adjusted fourth and eighth grade performances of lower-income charter students. He stated that the study also analyzed findings based on income, determined by a student's eligibility for free and reduced lunch. He highlighted that lower-income Alaska charter school students ranked first.

MR. PETERSON moved to slide 13 and said the chart shows that higher-income charter school students in Alaska ranked third. He stated this data suggests that Alaska charter schools are effectively serving students across the socioeconomic spectrum.

MR. PETERSON moved to slide 14 and noted that the population of White charter students in Alaska was large enough to compare against other states. When this comparison was done, Alaska charter students ranked third. This indicates that Alaska's high ranking is not solely due to White students, as the overall ranking rises to first when all students are included. He mentioned that Indigenous students make up the second largest

population of charter students in Alaska, at approximately 17 percent of the NAEP sample. He affirmed that although the sizes of this and other groups are too small for statistical comparisons against other states, the data does not suggest that charter schools are more effective for White students. In fact, the data implies that charter schools are more effective for non-White students.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slides 15 - 16 and said Alaska ranked first for both urban and rural classifications. Alaska generally performs well statewide.

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MR. PETERSON moved to slides 17 - 18 and said both boys and girls do well in Alaska's charter schools.

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MR. PETERSON said that it is reasonable to say that the findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress are quite consistent. Alaska's charter sector shows consistency in all domains and does remarkably well compared to charter schools elsewhere.

[5:01:45 PM](#)

MR. PETERSON moved to slide 19 and discussed additional findings from the study:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Additional findings

- Charters authorized by state agencies (board or department) outperform charters authorized by other entities
- Charters authorized by higher education institutions show lower performances
- Standalone and for-profit charters do not perform as well as those in nonprofit charter school networks
- Specialized charters outperform those with generic objectives
- No effects of funding level, or the percentage of charter students in state

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MR. PETERSON moved to slide 20 and concluded with the following points:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Take-aways

- Charter student performance varies widely by state even after adjusting for student background.
- Alaska stands first in overall rankings and for many subgroups.
- Alaska stands first in math and third (tied for second) in reading performances
- Charter performance is highest in schools authorized by state agency.
- Student performance is higher at specialized charter schools.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN inquired about the sample size of students taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test. Based on his experience teaching middle school, he observed that a very small group of students, if any, took the NAEP test each semester. [Referring to slide 3 of the presentation,] he noted that Alaska's ranking is based on 24 NAEP surveys over a 10-year period, involving 2,430 Alaska charter students. He asked if this means that 243 students were tested annually, with a sample size of 121 students per semester.

MR. PETERSON replied that the test is administered every two years, not every semester. He clarified that there are 24 waves of tests, including fourth and eighth grades, and covering reading and math. He emphasized that conclusions should not be drawn from any single test. However, when combining representative samples over an 11-year period with 24 different surveys and ensuring the sample sizes are representative of the population, it is reasonable to conclude there are enough observations to draw a conclusion.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN replied that according to his quick calculation that would be 61 kids per test taken.

MR. PETERSON replied no conclusions should be drawn based on one test.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN agreed but asked if the study is based on [61] students taking each test per grade.

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MR. PETERSON replied that he does not know the exact number of students per test, but the combined total number of tests taken by students was 2,400. He explained that the study is not broken out by year to show growth over time to avoid drawing conclusions based on a single test. Instead, the study examines results over time to determine the overall performance level.

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CHAIR TOBIN said statewide NAEP is unable to make assumptions on black students in Alaska because the sample size is too small. She therefore found it curious that the study by Mr. Peterson could draw conclusions about students of color in Alaska attending charter schools.

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SENATOR KIEHL noted that there are about 30 charter schools in Alaska. He asked what assurance exists that charter school administrators are not selectively sending Ivy League-bound students to take the NAEP assessment.

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MR. PETERSON replied that state proficiency tests, administered and required by No Child Left Behind and subsequent legislation, test every student, making each classroom's results and teacher performance estimable from the data. Schools are held accountable for student performance, which raises concerns about data manipulation to appear more favorable. He noted that cheating has occurred in cities like Atlanta and Chicago, indicating efforts to manipulate test performance are a known issue with high-stakes tests. State testing regimens are high-stakes tests, whereas NAEP is a low-stakes test, with student identities kept anonymous. This anonymity makes it difficult to access and analyze specific data. The Department of Education has ensured that no information is leaked that could identify individuals. Because NAEP is a low-stakes test, it is unlikely that administrators would selectively send only high-performing students to take the test.

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SENATOR KIEHL [indiscernible]

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CHAIR TOBIN mentioned that she looked for the data used in the charter school study and found that it is restricted. She questioned how the study could be replicated.

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MR. PETERSON replied that the data is available to qualified researchers. Anyone can replicate the study, if they are willing to go through a long-complicated process to obtain the data.

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CHAIR TOBIN said she might go through that process as she is going through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process for another study. She noted that Mr. Peterson's report referenced data from a 2003 report by Caroline Hoxby, which had sparked a significant academic debate regarding its efficacy. She expressed concern about Mr. Peterson referencing that data and questioned how members can trust the accuracy of the presented data.

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MR. PETERSON replied that his study did not rely on Ms. Hoxby's work. He referenced the 2003 data to highlight the limited research on Alaska's charter schools. He stated he had no comment on the quality of that study. He questioned whether members trust the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to obtain a representative sample of students, given their 75 years of expertise. He emphasized that he would not have conducted the study if he did not believe in the government's capacity to perform this task effectively.

MS. TOBIN responded that she looks forward to knowing when NAEP would be able to quantify folks like her.

[5:14:08 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL remarked that a cynic might suggest maintaining the status quo. However, he acknowledged people have significant interest in expanding and replicating successful models. He referred to a potential cause for success mentioned in the presentation—authorizers. He noted that the presentation pointed out state agencies as authorizers lead to greater success, but in Alaska, local school districts authorize with the potential for appeal. He asked for thoughts on why Alaska is an outlier in the data regarding authorizers as a potential causal factor.

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MR. PETERSON replied that he did not know why and that discovering the reason would be remarkable. He admitted he had

not studied Alaska's culture, traditions, and practices in depth, so no conclusions should be drawn from his work regarding the reasons behind the data. His study aimed to highlight a level of performance in Alaska's charter schools that had not been previously recognized and to suggest that the Alaska charter sector warrants further consideration. He emphasized that understanding why requires more study and that insights from people who have lived in Alaska would be more valuable. He suggested that this question be directed at fellow members of the legislature.

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SENATOR KIEHL replied that with 60 members there would be at least 80 strong opinions.

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CHAIR TOBIN mentioned that an excellent principal started a charter school in Nome with her father. She expressed her excitement about the information presented and her anticipation for future research.

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MR. PETERSON clarified in response to Chair Tobin's previous comment about data on Black students that the population size is too small to draw conclusions. He reiterated that White charter students in Alaska ranked third, but all charter students in Alaska ranked first. He noted that other students are lifting the ranking, but there is no data to indicate which group(s) are responsible.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 5:18 p.m.