

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 15, 2024

3:30 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: ALASKA VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL CENTER

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: AVTEC EXCEL

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

CATHY LECOMPTE, Director
Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTEC)
Seward, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the Alaska Vocational Technical Center Update.

JAMIE KLAES, Director of Aviation
Alaska EXCEL
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-delivered the presentation Alaska EXCEL.

CHRISTA WILSON, Executive Finance Director
Alaska EXCEL
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-delivered the presentation Alaska EXCEL.

NELLIANN SMITH, Graduate
Alaska EXCEL
Tuntutuliak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-delivered the presentation Alaska EXCEL.

NOAH ULROAN, Graduate
Alaska EXCEL
Chevak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-delivered the presentation Alaska EXCEL.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:30:51 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 Gray-Jackson, Kiehl, and Chair Tobin. Senator Bjorkman arrived thereafter.

PRESENTATION: ALASKA VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL CENTER

[3:32:59 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced a presentation on the Alaska Vocational Technical Center Update.

[3:33:34 PM](#)

CATHY LECOMPTE, Director, Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTEC), Seward, Alaska, moved to slide 2 and spoke to the layout of AVTEC and that it is a Division of the Department of Labor and Workforce Development. The mission of AVTEC is workforce development through training. It is the only post-secondary training center owned by Alaska for 50 years. There are only a few post-secondary training centers nationwide:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Leadership and Support

- Commissioner's Office
- Management Services
- Labor Market Information
- Technology Services (New)

Protect Workers

- Alaska Labor Relations Agency
- Workers' Compensation
- Labor Standards and Safety

Income Replacement

- Unemployment Insurance
- Disability Determinations

Workforce Development

- Alaska Workforce Investment Board
- Employment and Training Services
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Alaska Vocational Technical Center
- Office of Citizenship Assistance (Updated)

[3:34:49 PM](#)

MS. LECOMPTE moved to slide 3 and said AVTEC is a really great place for students from rural areas. She discussed the following aspects of AVTEC:

Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTEC)

- Residential training center
- Located in Seward, Alaska
- Nationally accredited
- Student success
 - 90 percent Completion
 - 90 percent Employment
- Little to no student loan debt

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MS. LECOMPTE moved to slide 4 and stated that in FY 23 student participation was 1,3336 from all economic regions of Alaska:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Anchorage Matsu 27 percent
 Statewide 9 percent
 Southeast 8 percent
 Interior 6 percent
 Northern 3 percent
 Southwest 14 percent
 Gulf Coast 33 percent

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MS. LECOMPTE moved to slide 5 and described the model of AVTEC stating students learn through experience at half the cost and one-third the time of traditional post-secondary education:

[Original punctuation provided.]

AVTEC Experience

- Clock hours, not credit hours
- Subject matter experts train student with crosscutting technical and employability skills
- Life skills and employment assistance

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MS. LECOMPTE moved to slide 6 and described AVTEC's training programs where students participate in person and online:

[Original punctuation provided.]

ACTEC TRAINING PROGRAMS

- Alaska Maritime Training Center
 - United States Coast Guard
 - In-person and online
- Alaska Culinary Academy
 - Basic culinary skills training

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MS. LECOMPTE moved to slide 7 and continued speaking about the training programs offered by AVTEC:

- Applied Technologies
 - Diesel Heavy Equipment Technology
 - Industrial Welding
- Business and Office Technology
 - Accounting Technician
 - Administrative Office Assistant
 - Medical Office Assistant
 - Networking Technician

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MS. LECOMPTE moved to slide 8 and continued sharing training programs:

- Energy and Building Trades

- Construction Technology
 - Industrial Electricity
 - Plumbing & Heating
 - Refrigeration

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MS. LECOMPTE moved to slide 9, and said the list is industries where students find work. AVTEC tries to follow the priority occupations that are identified by the Alaska Workforce Investment Board:

[Original punctuation provided.]

AVTEC Students Work in Priority Industries

Alternative & Renewable Energy
 Construction
 Education
 Fisheries, Seafood, & Maritime
 Healthcare
 Information Technology
 Mining, Oil, & Gas
 Service Industry
 Transportation

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SENATOR BJORKMAN arrived at the meeting.

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MS. LECOMPTE moved to slide 10 and said because AVTEC is small it has flexibility and can arrange customized training. Currently AVTEC is working to meet the needs of Trident Seafoods. AVTEC also partners with the Alaska Energy Authority to train power plant operators for rural areas:

Other Workforce Training at AVTEC

- Apprenticeships
- Related Technical Instruction
- IT Apprenticeship

- Customized Training
- Power Plant Operator
- Residential Building and Maintenance

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON said she was fascinated by AVTECH's work, particularly in their inclusion of tiny house construction. She asked about the square footage of the tiny houses built through the program.

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MS. LECOMPTE replied that the tiny houses are approximately 300 square feet. She added that materials cost about \$25,000 and noted that AVTECH partners with others who provide the materials, while AVTECH handles the construction.

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CHAIR TOBIN inquired about the student population, noting that in FY 23 there were just over 1,300 students. She asked whether this number represents an increase or decrease from previous years and how it compares to pre-pandemic enrollment levels.

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MS. LECOMPTE stated that current enrollment is nearly back to pre-pandemic levels. She explained that in fall 2019, AVTEC was on track for its highest enrollment in five years. She noted that AVTEC previously had a health program in Anchorage, which attracted many students, but this program closed around 2015. Since then, AVTEC has built enrollment in its long-term four- and eight-month programs, which can accommodate about 165 students. Most students come through the maritime training program, which remains robust, serving 900 to 1,000 mariners annually. Overall, enrollment is nearly back to fall 2019 numbers.

CHAIR TOBIN asked if the maritime training program includes certifications like the Operator Six-Pack License or if it offers other types of certifications.

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MS. LECOMPTE explained that AVTEC's maritime training program offers various certifications, including the Six-Pack, 100-Ton, and 200-Ton licenses, along with radar renewal, fire safety, and basic training. AVTEC partners with the Alaska Marine Highway to train able-bodied seamen. The program also includes a "hawsepipe" pathway, allowing individuals to train, accumulate sea time, and gradually advance their licenses, with some reaching the rank of First Mate. She highlighted that the director of AVTEC's Maritime Training Center is an AVTEC graduate who attained her position through this hawsepipe pathway.

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CHAIR TOBIN thanked the presenter for sharing the impressive course offerings at AVTEC.

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At ease

PRESENTATION: ALASKA EXCEL

[3:57:43 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and announced a presentation on Alaska EXCEL.

[3:58:22 PM](#)

JAMIE KLAES, Director of Aviation, Alaska EXCEL, Anchorage, Alaska, said she would co-present the presentation and moved to slide 2 to discuss the background of Alaska EXCEL:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Alaska EXCEL Background:

- November 2012: Established
- 2014: Students served - 16; 4 school districts
- 2015: Students served - 375; 8 school districts
- 2023: Students served - 677; 12 school districts; 797 HS credits; 440 Industry certificates
- 2024: Students served - 900 (projected)

MS. KLAES said shared that Alaska EXCEL, an educational nonprofit based at the Alaska Pacific University (APU) campus in Anchorage, is celebrating its 10th anniversary. Serving rural Alaskan students from grades 7 to 12 across 13 partner school districts, the program is inclusive, with no GPA requirement, aimed at engaging all students, especially those who may be less engaged. Established in 2012 and starting with 16 students in 2014, Alaska EXCEL has grown significantly, with projections to serve over 900 students this year. Students attend intensive sessions, rather than a boarding school, with sessions increasing in length as students progress through grades. She said recently, Alaska EXCEL held their largest session to date, hosting 90 students at the South Atwood Building on the APU campus.

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MS. KLAES moved to slide 3 and reported that Alaska EXCEL has served a total of 2,434 students to date, with rapidly increasing enrollment. The program is accredited, with over 2,000 high school credits awarded and numerous industry certifications. Alaska EXCEL partners with industry professionals, like certified flight instructors for aviation and retired law enforcement for public safety, ensuring students learn directly from experts. The program has a 98.5 percent completion rate, attributed to its robust coaching and mentorship approach, as well as low staff turnover, allowing students to reconnect with familiar instructors. Alaska EXCEL's work has positively impacted graduation rates in partner districts, particularly for students who attend multiple sessions, known as "EXCEL concentrators." The program receives Federal funding, so Alaska EXCEL tracks its data annually:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Impact on Rural Students

- Total Rural Alaskan Students served: 2,434
- Total High School credits Earned: 2,213
- Total Industry Certifications Earned: 1,655
- EXCEL Session Completion Rate: 98.5 percent
- High School 4-Year Graduation Rate: 88 percent graduation rate for EXCEL Concentrators.

*Concentrator is a student who has attended two or more Alaska EXCEL sessions. Data collected from 2017 through 2023

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MS. KLAES moved to slide 4 showing a schematic of the data shared and also listing district partners. She stated Hoonah just partnered with Alaska EXCEL and other would like to partner but currently the program is at capacity. Current district partners are:

- Lower Kuskokwim School District
- Iditarod School District
- North Slope Borough School District
- Nenana City School District
- Tanana City School District
- Kuspuk School District
- Yukon Flats School District

- Yukon-Koyukuk School District
- Yupiit School District
- Kashunamiut School District
- Alaska Gateway School District
- Non Rural Students
- Hoonah

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CHRISTA WILSON, Executive Finance Director, Alaska EXCEL, Anchorage, Alaska, moved to slide 5 and provided information on the three faucets of the Alaska EXCEL program:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Foundational Sessions

Career Development, Leadership Budgeting, Personal Well Being,

- EXCEL 7 (4-days)
- EXCEL 8 (5-days)
- EXCEL 9 (6-days)
- EXCEL 10 (8-days)
- EXCEL 11 (10-days)
- EXCEL 12 (12-days)

CTE Sessions [CAREER PATHWAYS]

Fall Session - Intro (12-days)

Spring Session - Intermediate (13-days)

Summer Session - Advanced (30-days)

- Construction Trades
- Photography/Multimedia
- Heavy Equipment/Skilled Laborer
- Medical/1st Responders
- Cosmetology/Hairdressing
- Piloting
- Aviation Mechanics
- Public Safety
- Education
- Credit Recovery/Post-Secondary Prep

Internship Sessions

Connecting recent graduates with industry partners

- Graduate Transition

- Flight School
- George River
- MAPTS Capstone

MS. WILSON noted that while it is beneficial for students to attend all sessions it is not necessarily realistic for the demographic that the program works with. However, the graduation rate is 80 to 88 percent for concentrators because the more sessions a student attends the more likely they are to graduate on time, and more likely they are to successfully transition into a career after high school. Students also create a portfolio as they go through high school to relate their skills and work values to jobs and training opportunities. Students also take college assessments and receive help applying for scholarships and creating resumes. She mentioned students visiting AVTEC to get acquainted with the campus.

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NELLIANN SMITH, Graduate, Alaska EXCEL, Tuntutuliak, Alaska, shared that, with support from Alaska EXCEL, she has become the first woman pilot from her hometown. She is an instrument-rated and private pilot currently working toward her commercial license. Alaska EXCEL's classes provided her with the tools and support to pursue her dream, and she hopes to inspire others, especially Native people, and women. The courses helped build her confidence, including her ability to speak up, which was initially challenging for her.

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MS. WILSON said after students complete a career pathway they have the opportunity to do job internships.

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NOAH ULROAN, Staff, Alaska EXCEL, Chevak, Alaska, said he is a former student and graduate of Alaska EXCEL and is a private pilot with an instrument rating. He said he is currently working towards obtaining a commercial license. He now works as a dorm parent at Alaska EXCEL and as a ramp agent for FedEx. He stated that the program has transformed his life and those of other students. Through an internship, he gained hands-on experience with a local air taxi, learning the operations from the ground up while continuing his flight training.

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MS. WILSON mentioned other internships that are available at Alaska EXCEL such as George River in partnership with the Department of Fish and Game.

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MS. WILSON moved to slide 6 and said that last year when Alaska EXCEL staff visited the Capitol, they were asked how the alumni were doing so this year they were able to contact 188 alumni and found that 80 percent were currently working in a career cluster, 12 percent were in college, trade school, or the military, and 8 percent were not working.

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MS. KLAES said from the data Alaska EXCEL learned that 94 percent of the 188 graduates said they remained in Alaska with 70 percent still living in rural Alaska. Furthermore, 68 percent continue to live a subsistence lifestyle.

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MS. WILSON moved to slide 7 and discussed the following challenges Alaska EXCEL faces. She mentioned that students that had signed up were turned away due to lack of bed space:

[Original punctuation provided.]

CURRENT CHALLENGES

- Student waitlists exceed 30 percent current capacity
- Current growth rate 20 percent
- Additional Rural School Districts want to partner
- Alaska EXCEL's current Lease Agreement with APU does not have room for expansion of the program

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MS. WILSON moved to slide 8 and said that a project has been submitted to the Capital Project Submission and Information System (CAPSIS) to request funding for a new, larger campus in the Palmer-Wasilla area, which would expand program capacity by 44 percent and allow more students to gain workplace skills. This expansion aims to improve educational equity for rural Alaskan students. She explained that many Alaska EXCEL students come from small village schools with only one or two teachers serving pre-K through 12th grade, offering fewer educational resources than urban schools. Alaska EXCEL helps bridge this gap, providing rural students with more equitable educational opportunities.

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MS. WILSON moved to slides 9 - 10 showing a conceptual design of the front of the building and an arial view of its location. She

explained that the charter school currently occupying the building plans to relocate. She described the project layout: image number 1 (in blue) shows the existing 440,000-square-foot building; building number 2 would serve as a dormitory for 152 students in the 7th-12th grade program; building number 3 would be a cafeteria; and building number 4 would provide a transition dorm with 75 beds.

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MS. WILSON moved to slide 11 and explained that the budget for the project spans four years:

Pre-Development and Design - 2024

\$10,863,810

Construction of the 150-bed dormitory - 2025

\$9,586,817

Remodel of existing building and adding on a cafeteria and atrium - 2026

\$7,277,597

Construction of the transition dorm - 2027

\$5,861,297

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MS. WILSON moved to slide 12 and reviewed the chart and pie graph detailing funding projections and the total project budget. She highlighted strong partnerships with Chalista Corporation, Doyon, and Arctic Slope Regional Corporation (ASRC), as many students come from these regions. Chalista has provided a verbal commitment, while discussions are ongoing with other industry partners. ConocoPhillips, a key partner, donates over \$100,000 annually and has shown strong interest in supporting this project. She added that the project has been submitted to CAPSIS, with a five-year budget request totaling \$15 million, including \$6 million in the first year to purchase the building and land. Efforts to secure additional funding have included meetings in Washington, D.C. with Senator Lisa Murkowski for federal earmark support, as well as applications to the Denali Commission, Mat-Su Health Foundation, Alaska Mental Health Trust, and an active capital campaign.

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CHAIR TOBIN stated there were no questions on the presentation from committee members.

4:20:20 PM

MS. KLAES expressed that staff from Alaska EXCEL are available to meet with legislators.

4:21:27 PM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:21 p.m.