

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT MEETING
SENATE JUDICIARY STANDING COMMITTEE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

April 26, 2024

1:35 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

SENATE JUDICIARY

Senator Matt Claman, Chair
Senator Jesse Kiehl, Vice Chair
Senator James Kaufman
Senator Cathy Giessel
Senator Löki Tobin

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

SENATE JUDICIARY

All members present

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Senator Jesse Bjorkman

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Rauscher
Representative Dibert

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): THE WAY FORWARD, A REPORT OF THE ALYCE SPOTTED BEAR AND WALTER SOBOLEFF COMMISSION ON NATIVE CHILDREN

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI, Alaska
United States Senator
Washington, D.C.

POSITION STATEMENT: Briefly introduced and commented on The Way Forward Report from the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children.

GLORIA O'NEILL, Chief Executive Officer
Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered a presentation on a report from the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children titled The Way Forward.

DON GRAY, Vice President
Oil and Gas and Marine Services
Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corporation
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered a presentation on a report from the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children titled "The Way Forward".

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CHAIR MATT CLAMAN called the joint meeting of the Senate Judiciary Standing Committee and the Senate Education Standing Committee to order at 1:35 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Tobin, Kiehl, Kaufman, and Chair Claman from the Judiciary Standing Committee and Senators Stevens, Kiehl, Gray-Jackson, and Chair Tobin from the Education Standing Committee. Senator Giessel from the Judiciary Standing Committee arrived shortly thereafter.

PRESENTATION(S) : THE WAY FORWARD, A REPORT OF THE ALYCE SPOTTED BEAR and WALTER SOBOLEFF COMMISSION ON NATIVE CHILDREN

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CHAIR CLAMAN announced The Way Forward Report from the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children.

He introduced U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski and invited her to comment.

[1:36:59 PM](#)

SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI, Alaska, United States Senator, Washington, D.C., briefly introduced and commented on The Way Forward Report from the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children. She commended members of the commission on its work and the committee for hearing the report. She stated that the well-being of Alaska Native children is a deeply personal issue and recalled beginning this work over a decade ago with former Senator Heidi Heitkamp from South Dakota, who proposed creating a Commission on Native Children. She explained that the Commission aimed to conduct an intensive study of federal, tribal, state, and local programs and grants serving American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian youth, with a focus on improving coordination and effectiveness of services addressing poverty, trauma, violence, education, and healthcare.

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SENATOR GIESSEL joined the meeting.

SENATOR MURKOWSKI reported that the Commission's findings highlighted serious challenges: in 2022, 26 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native youth earned less than \$500 per week, and 36 percent of families faced difficulty meeting basic needs. She emphasized the overrepresentation of Native children in the foster care and justice systems, as well as the alarming rates of maltreatment investigations and suicide attempts among Native youth, pointing to the role of intergenerational trauma.

SENATOR MURKOWSKI acknowledged the resilience of Alaska Native communities, especially through efforts such as cultural and language preservation, and noted that while challenges are immense, community-led initiatives offer hope. She stated that the Commission's report was transmitted to the President and Congress and that its recommendations call for increased community decision-making power and flexible funding to foster innovation.

SENATOR MURKOWSKI concluded by inviting listeners to a May 8 roundtable discussion hosted by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs to further examine the Commission's recommendations. She expressed appreciation for the legislature's engagement and stressed that collaboration will lead to safer, more empowering environments for Alaska Native children.

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CHAIR CLAMAN noted that Ms. O'Neill is the President and CEO of Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) and serves as Chair of the National Alice Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children. He praised Ms. O'Neill and CITC for advancing the Alaska Native community through initiatives such as the Alaska Native Justice Center, Get Out the Native Vote, Head Start, and Early Learning Centers.

CHAIR CLAMAN shared that Ms. O'Neill is originally from Soldotna and is of Yup'ik, Sámi, and Irish descent. She lives with her husband Roger Phillips, daughter Raven, and stepsons Owen and Hunter. He added that joining her was Mr. Gray, who also serves on the Commission and holds roles including Board Member of the Ukpeaġvik Iñupiat Corporation (UIC) and Director of UIC Oil and Gas, Environmental and Training.

CHAIR CLAMAN stated that Mr. Gray has an extensive background with Native organizations, including the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, and the Native Village of Barrow.

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GLORIA O'NEILL, Chief Executive Officer, Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), Anchorage, Alaska, delivered a presentation on a report from the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children titled "The Way Forward." She shared a two-minute video about the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) and its partnerships.

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MS. O'NEILL stated that as a lifelong Alaskan and Alaska Native woman, she believes the future depends on strong partnerships and working together. She shared that CITC's board recently met to consider how to deepen relationships with youth, viewing this as a pathway to self-determination approached through innovation. She explained that the Commission's report reflects this mindset—realigning resources, building partnerships, and supporting youth through a shared vision.

MS. O'NEILL emphasized the need to address education and workforce development challenges by combining Commission recommendations with historical knowledge and direct support for young people. She noted that CITC aims to meet people where they are, help them reach their potential, and create population-level impact locally, statewide, and even globally.

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MS. O'NEILL expressed appreciation for serving on the Commission with fellow Alaskan Mr. Gray, highlighting the importance of collaboration and shared identity in the work. She acknowledged the long journey since the Commission's formation in 2016 and praised the value of working alongside a strong Native male leader.

[1:51:17 PM](#)

DON GRAY, Vice President, Oil and Gas and Marine Services, Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corporation, Anchorage, Alaska, delivered a presentation on a report from the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children titled The Way Forward. He expressed appreciation for CITC's vast contributions to the Commission and Native communities. He thanked Ms. O'Neill for living her values and briefly introduced himself.

[1:52:28 PM](#)

MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 1, Commission on Native Children:

[Original punctuation provided.]

COMMISSION ON NATIVE CHILDREN:

- Congress established the **Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children** (2016):
- To conduct a **comprehensive study of the programs, grants, and supports available to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians** from birth through age 24.
- To make recommendations about **how this overall system could be strengthened, improved, and where needed, transformed** to better help Native children and youth thrive.

MS. O'NEILL stated that the Commission on Native Children was created to conduct an in-depth review of all federal programs, grants, and supports available to Alaska Native, American Indian, and Native Hawaiian children from birth onward. She emphasized the scale of the federal government and noted the Commission's unique independence, as it did not fall under any single agency or department.

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MS. O'NEILL explained that it took time for the Department of Justice to determine the Commission's structure, after which initial funding was approved. She said staff were detailed from the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Department of Labor, and Department of Education to support the Commission's work.

MS. O'NEILL highlighted that there are thousands of programs targeting Native communities, especially Native children, making the Commission's charge initially overwhelming. However, she stressed the importance of creating a comprehensive roadmap to align federal investments toward transforming outcomes and improving the well-being of Native children.

MS. O'NEILL noted that some federal programs had not been reviewed since the 1930s or 1940s, underscoring the need to strengthen and modernize the overall system serving Native youth.

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MR. GRAY credited Senator Murkowski for helping establish one of the most comprehensive and well-funded commissions to date. He emphasized the impressive scope and depth of the Commission's work. He noted that the commission heard from exceptional subject matter experts from across the country. He commended Senator Murkowski's leadership and involvement with the commission.

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MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 2, Primary Goals

[Original punctuation provided.]

PRIMARY GOALS:

- To **develop sustainable systems** that can deliver **effective wraparound services** to children, youth, and their families
- To **amplify the unique factors offered by Native cultures** that **promote resilience** among Native children and youth

MS. O'NEILL explained that the commission aimed not only to analyze funding streams and investments but also to design a sustainable, comprehensive system that supports young people

throughout different life stages. She said the Commission used a life cycle framework from birth to age 24 to identify what a positive developmental path would look like and structured investments accordingly. She emphasized that culture emerged as a foundational element of effective investment, a belief the Commission shared from the beginning and heard echoed across the country.

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MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 3:

[Original punctuation provided.]

COMMISSIONERS:

DR. DOLORES SUBIA BIGFOOT (Caddo)
STEPHANIE BRYAN (Poarch Creek)
DR. TAMI DECOTEAU (Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara, Turtle Mountain) JESSE DELMAR (Navajo)
ANITA FINEDAY (White Earth)
DON ATQAQSAQ GRAY (Utpeagvik)
DR. LEANDER (RUSS) MCDONALD (Spirit Lake)
ELIZABETH MORRIS
GLORIA O'NEILL (Yupik, Sami and Salamatof Tribe)
MELODY STAEBNER (Turtle Mountain Chippewa)
CARLYLE BEGAY (Navajo)*(inactive as of March 2022)

MS. O'NEILL highlighted the diverse Native leadership involved, representing all regions and bringing expertise in education, child welfare, juvenile justice, behavioral health, and all levels of education—from elementary through college.

MR. GRAY added that expertise in education was from elementary through collegiate.

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MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 4, Our Process.

[Original punctuation provided.]

OUR PROCESS:

- **10 regional public hearings** throughout the United States
- **25 virtual hearings** on specific topics to gain targeted information

- **26 site visits** to urban, rural, and reservation-based programs serving Native children and youth
- **298 witnesses:** community members, Tribal leaders, Native and non-Native scholars and practitioners

MS. O'NEILL stated that the Commission began in 2016 and became one of the longest-running commissions due to delays caused by COVID-19, funding issues, and legal complexities in establishing an independent commission. She emphasized the Commission's commitment to producing a final report that would guide federal, state, tribal, and community-level investments.

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MR. GRAY said the Commission heard testimony that revealed deep brokenness, resilience, and optimism, often expressed simultaneously. He noted that many heart-wrenching stories were grounded in hope for the future. He emphasized the personal, historical, generational, and ongoing trauma shared by witnesses. He stated that these personal experiences, combined with insights from researchers, contributed to the development of a comprehensive report.

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MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 5:

[Original punctuation provided.]

KEY THEMES:

- **Cultural engagement and language learning** are critical components of healing and resilience.
- **Community control and community-level decision-making** yield the best results.
- **Flexible funding** approaches support innovation and responsiveness.
- **Trauma is a root cause** of many of the issues with which Native children, youth, and families wrestle today.
- Native community leaders, service delivery practitioners, and other experts generally have a

broad understanding of who qualifies as a "Native" child.

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MS. O'NEILL said half of the Commission's report focused on in-depth research, reflecting both community input and a thorough review of presented studies. She expressed admiration for the number of highly skilled Native researchers contributing to subjects across the Commission's scope. She explained that the report balanced personal stories and community voices with evidence-based practices and stated that this combination shaped the Commission's recommendations and key themes.

MS. O'NEILL said she handed the report to Senator Murkowski in February and reflected on the six years she dedicated to the work. She recalled Senator Murkowski responding that the work was just beginning and asking what she had learned. She shared that she learned Native children are not only resilient but also intelligent and deeply aware of their own needs.

MS. O'NEILL emphasized that when young people are supported by their community, connected to their culture, and grounded in their identity, they have what she called "the best medicine." She stressed that investments from federal and state governments must reinforce community, cultural identity, and language learning to support the long-term well-being of future generations.

[2:00:54 PM](#)

MR. GRAY stated that Native youth will take their heritage forwarded given the opportunity to build a relationship with their culture and community. They are full of optimism and hope.

[2:01:25 PM](#)

MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 6, Key Themes:

[Original punctuation provided.]

KEY THEMES:

- **Cultural engagement and language learning** are critical components of healing and resilience.
- **Community control and community-level decision-making** yield the best results.
- **Flexible funding** approaches support innovation and responsiveness.

- **Trauma is a root cause** of many of the issues with which Native children, youth, and families wrestle today.
- Native community leaders, service delivery practitioners, and other experts generally have a **broad understanding of who qualifies as a "Native" child.**

MS. O'NEILL stated that from a self-determination perspective, giving communities more control and flexibility within funding enables investment strategies that directly respond to local needs. She noted that federal models exist which allow tribes and tribal organizations to consolidate funds from multiple departments into a single grant for community investment. She emphasized that while accountability and reporting remain, this approach empowers communities to create population-level impacts. She stressed the importance of flexibility and local control in decision-making to build a continuum of support services around children and families.

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MR. GRAY stated that trauma is a root cause of many challenges affecting life in villages, on reservations, and in surrounding areas. He emphasized the widespread need for trauma-informed care across all settings visited, including community schools, healthcare facilities, colleges, and homes. He highlighted that the urgency and importance of trauma-informed care were consistently expressed in every conversation and location visited.

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MS. O'NEILL stated that the charge was broad, focusing on all Native children, a population of nearly 10 million, with most living off-reservation in urban areas. She emphasized the need to include urban settings in site visits to understand how Native children are supported outside of reservations. She noted that embracing a broad definition of a Native child is critical for moving forward effectively.

[2:04:14 PM](#)

MR. GRAY stated that 90 percent of Native children attend public schools, not schools overseen by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), as he previously believed. He acknowledged that before his involvement with the Commission, he had mistakenly thought BIA was responsible for educating most Native children. He emphasized the importance of ensuring that Native children in

public schools have opportunities to maintain a connection to their culture.

[2:04:44 PM](#)

MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 7 and stated that the Commission developed 29 recommendations but would focus on 12 that align closely with the legislature's current work. She noted that cross-systems issues were not specifically pulled out but emphasized the importance of flexible funding. She highlighted the federal government's shift toward block granting for tribes and tribal organizations, allowing foundational investments that can be leveraged with additional funding and partnership.

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MR. GRAY stated that the 12 recommendations being presented focus on child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and mental health.

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MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 8:

[Original punctuation provided.]

RECOMMENDATIONS: CHILD WELFARE

- Enhance the capacity of **Tribal social services** and **Tribal courts**
- Ensure compliance with the **Indian Child Welfare Act**
- Strengthen **advocacy for Native children** and youth in child welfare cases
- Follow local **community standards for Native foster and kinship** placements
- Promote **family dependency treatment courts**

MS. O'NEILL emphasized the importance of a comprehensive tribal social service system that supports individuals and families across the lifespan, using a "cradle to grave" approach as practiced at Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC). She stressed the need for strong connections between tribal social services and tribal courts, noting the chronic underfunding of tribal courts in Alaska. She urged a shift away from hesitating to partner with tribes, advocating for innovative, community-driven models

that combine the efforts of local courts and tribes, citing successful examples across the country.

MS. O'NEILL highlighted the potential of demonstration projects, including an Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) court model, and encouraged bringing experts together to design and fund such initiatives. She referenced a reduction in out-of-home placements in Alaska from 3,000 to approximately 2,500 over the past year and called for continued efforts to support Native children through better court-tribal collaboration, increased kinship placements, and engaged families.

MS. O'NEILL also stressed the importance of understanding and effectively utilizing tribal court E-funding. She noted ongoing work with the federal government to access these funds and proposed building a revenue model around them, taking advantage of recent regulatory flexibility. She concluded that a small investment by the state could result in long-term savings and improved outcomes for a generation of children.

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MR. GRAY stated that successful Native and tribal courts across the country prioritized strong relationships with their communities and focused on treatment-centered models rather than punitive court date models. He emphasized that these courts worked to understand each family's current situation and needs to support their progress. He highlighted that the goal was not punishment, but rather how tribal courts could assist family growth and ensure children receive proper care.

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MS. O'NEILL acknowledged the state for its role in the ICWA (Indian Child Welfare Act) compact, noting that CITC (Cook Inlet Tribal Council) is one of the 19 co-signers. She described the compact as a starting point that continues to evolve. She emphasized the importance of identifying tools that support preventative services, family engagement, and involvement in foster care licensing. She advocated for a team-based, co-designed approach between tribal organizations and the state to shape future services collaboratively.

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MR. GRAY moved to slide 8, Recommendations: Juvenile Justice.

He shared that the juvenile justice recommendations resonated with him personally, recounting his experience of being removed from his young parents, placed in foster care, and later sent to

a group home that eventually turned him away at age 12. He described time spent on the streets, followed by placement in McLaughlin Youth Center, the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API), and Charter North. He emphasized the need to shift from detaining youth toward offering treatment and preventative measures. He advocated for accessible mental and behavioral health services to support children in becoming productive members of society.

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MS. O'NEILL stated that Tlingit and Haida's Juvenile Healing to Wellness Court offers a strong model locally. She noted that the court accepts diversions from the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), is culturally informed, and integrates with the tribe's resources and programs.

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MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 9, Recommendations: Education and emphasized the importance of a lifelong continuum of education, beginning at birth and extending through K-12 and beyond. She highlighted the report's inclusion of case studies, such as the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, which demonstrates how home-based support reduces child abuse, domestic violence, and neglect by keeping families intact and children safe. She advocated for expanding such programs by leveraging partnerships and federal investments. She also discussed CITC's Fab Lab as one of the organization's best educational investments. The Fab Lab provides a hands-on learning environment where youth engage with 21st-century technology, design, and cultural programming—described as a modern version of shop class “on steroids.” She shared a story about a group of youth who organized a meeting to advocate for keeping the Fab Lab open, underscoring its deep impact. One student, who had experienced 12 foster placements and family instability, credited the Fab Lab with providing stability and purpose. She concluded that such models prove education can be made relevant and flexible, and encouraged public education systems to invest in similar innovations that meet youth where they are.

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MR. GRAY expressed a strong passion for education, calling it essential to reversing negative outcomes in Native communities. He highlighted the Anchorage School District's 54 percent graduation rate for Alaska Native students as unacceptable. He emphasized that real change requires simultaneous progress in education, engagement, and economic development. He connected

current challenges to generational trauma stemming from boarding schools and stated that many families are learning how to parent for the first time in generations. He underscored the importance of in-home support programs that help families establish values and build parenting skills without judgment.

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MS. O'NEILL recognized the Alaska Humanities Forum for its impactful program, C3, which helps prepare teachers entering rural Alaska by educating them on local culture. She noted that teachers who participate in the program tend to stay an average of three years longer than they otherwise would. She emphasized the value of this effort, especially given its limited funding, and encouraged identifying and supporting best and promising practices like this through collective action.

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MR. GRAY moved to slide 10, DEED: Culturally Relevant Schools and stressed the importance of teaching and exposing educators to [Native] cultures so they understand the communities they serve. He stressed the importance of knowing what it means to be culturally competent, including awareness of local struggles and how they impact education.

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MS. O'NEILL emphasized the importance of connecting the federal commission report to recent work completed by CITC that was reported to the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), which involved traveling statewide to gather community input and reimagine education. She noted that CITC created a website to support an ongoing, statewide conversation about relevant education today and in the future.

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MS. O'NEILL moved to slide 11, Our Youth: Our Future Ancestor, and shared four recommendations that emerged from the effort, aligning closely with national findings: the importance of multigenerational learning, including elders and cultural storytelling in classrooms; the development of new models for tribal connections; the potential for demonstration projects in tribal compacting; and the need to acknowledge and understand historical context.

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MR. GRAY shared that an elder once told him, "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care," emphasizing the value of storytelling in education. He advocated for

incorporating stories into classrooms as a meaningful way to connect with students and enhance learning. He also noted that Harvard University recently shifted its entire curriculum to story-based learning, reinforcing the effectiveness of this approach.

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MS. O'NEILL shared a video created for the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) that presented the history of education in Alaska through the perspective of Alaska's First People. The narrative detailed a long legacy of systemic harm, including forced assimilation, suppression of Native culture, and inequitable access to education. It outlined key historical milestones and emphasized the need for a reimagined education system grounded in cultural relevance, healing, and Indigenous self-determination.

Key historical events included:

- **1784** - First white settlement established by Russians at Three Saints, Kodiak Island; bilingual church and school created.
- **1867** - Western churches begin establishing schools under assimilationist ideologies.
- **1878** - First U.S. boarding school for Native children established in Sitka by Presbyterian missionaries.
- **1888** - Alaska Board of Education directed to define the curriculum for government schools.
- **1900** - Congress permits towns with 300+ people to establish schools, excluding many Native communities.
- **1905** - The Nelson Act creates racially segregated schools, privileging white and mixed-race children.
- **1917** - Federal boarding schools established in White Mountain and Eureka; additional schools built by religious institutions.
- **1932** - Control of Native education transferred to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA); Wrangell Institute opens.
- **1947** - Mount Edgecumbe boarding school opens; Native students also sent to out-of-state institutions.
- **1950** - Johnson-O'Malley Act transfers schools from federal to state and local control.
- **1971** - Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) passed, promoting self-determination.
- **1975** - Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act enacted by Congress.
- **1976** - *Molly Hootch* case results in local high school programs for 126 Native villages.

- **1991** - Alaska tribes formally recognized by Congress.
- **1999–2012** - Court rulings affirm that Alaska’s education funding model was racially discriminatory.
- **2022** - Alaska formally recognizes all 229 Alaska Native tribes.

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The video concluded with a call to action informed by more than 600 stories gathered across Alaska. Key priorities voiced by Alaska Native communities included:

- **Multigenerational learning** - Inviting elders into classrooms as teachers and cultural guides.
- **Language and culture** - Teaching Native languages and oral traditions to both Native and non-Native students.
- **Tribal connections** - Strengthening partnerships between schools and tribal communities.
- **Healing from trauma** - Truthfully acknowledging and teaching the past to foster healing and prevent repetition.

The video emphasized that although the past cannot be changed, there is still time to shape a future that honors Native heritage and values. The speaker challenged decision-makers to reflect deeply and ask: *"What are we going to do next?"*

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CHAIR CLAMAN invited questions from the committee.

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SENATOR TOBIN described the video as incredibly powerful and used it to frame a concern about current education reform efforts. She referenced a presentation earlier that day to Senate Finance regarding legislation to increase the base student allocation (BSA) and expressed concern that some of the governor’s proposed reforms—such as shifting control to the State Board of Education and expanding virtual school options—would diminish local community input. She emphasized that meaningful education decisions must be made with local involvement from parents, elders, and community members. She questioned how lawmakers could ensure that the lessons shared in the video are not lost in political debates. Drawing on the work of Ray Barnhardt and others, she asked for thoughts on how to support culturally responsive, community-driven education. She called for actionable steps that could be taken during the current legislative session to improve outcomes for Alaskan students and ensure lasting, positive change.

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MS. O'NEILL responded by acknowledging the complexity of education reform and speaking from her experience as an Alaskan and former member of the University of Alaska Board of Regents. She agreed that reform is needed and emphasized that the current education model has more flexibility than is often recognized. She noted challenges such as aging infrastructure, increasing fixed costs, and population shifts, but stressed that the goal must remain focused on equipping students with the skills they need to succeed. She expressed doubt that future education models will be based solely on brick-and-mortar schools, pointing instead to the growing role of technology and industry-driven change. As an example, she highlighted CITC's Fab Lab, which has been introduced to 23 communities and is in demand by both schools and tribes as a hands-on learning tool. She advocated for a co-designed approach to education that makes learning relevant for students while leveraging existing structures and partnerships. She emphasized the importance of aligning education with workforce development, noting the high job-to-worker ratio in Alaska. She recommended focusing on internships, apprenticeships, and earlier career exposure starting in middle and high school. While acknowledging she did not offer a direct policy solution, she encouraged an approach grounded in respect, local values, and flexibility to ensure Alaska's youth are prepared for meaningful opportunities. She said the issue is complicated.

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CHAIR CLAMAN acknowledged Representative Dibert joined the meeting.

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SENATOR TOBIN agreed that education reform is complex and emphasized the importance of locally driven partnerships. She stated that true collaboration and support hold power when they are invited by and centered on the interests of the local community. She highlighted the importance of approaching development work "with, not to or at" communities.

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MR. GRAY shared his vision for rural schools to function as community centers that address broader needs beyond academics. He recalled a personal story of escaping the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) as a child, only to return hours later—not because he was caught, but because he needed food. He explained that school was the only place he could consistently eat, emphasizing how critical schools are for food security. He

stressed the importance of returning local control to communities so they can tailor education and support services to their specific needs. He highlighted the high cost of housing in villages, food insecurity, and domestic violence as challenges that make schools some of the safest and most stable spaces for children. He criticized the current education system for being built around outdated agricultural models and argued that it must reflect local cultural rhythms—for example, allowing flexibility for subsistence activities like whaling or hunting. He advocated for empowering communities to define school schedules, access to food, and use of facilities in ways that align with local life and values.

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SENATOR TOBIN highlighted that the Yupiit school district has a waiver to operate on a subsistence calendar. She opined that great things are happening there and it serves as an example to other school districts.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked how implementation could move forward in Alaska.

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MS. O'NEILL thanked Senator Claman for inviting her to present and acknowledged his deep familiarity with the report, noting that his wife, Lisa Rieger, was a lead co-author. She said the federal process would begin with a roundtable hosted by Senator Murkowski on May 8 or 9, followed by community listening sessions and committee meetings. She emphasized the importance of identifying actionable recommendations—both legislative and regulatory—and expressed appreciation for the Alaska Legislature's interest in the report. She shared that Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) is exploring flexible funding and has integrated an electronic health record system within tribal nonprofit services related to all treatment investments. She said the intent is to expand the system to behavioral health and mental health investments, with a particular focus on Child and Family Services in collaboration with the Office of Children's Services. Through this approach and with proper accreditation, CITC aims to create a revenue generation model similar to that of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium. She stated that everything needed is currently within regulation and expressed confidence that the model, once developed, will be unique and impactful within Alaska.

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SENATOR STEVENS reflected on his time as Kodiak School Board President and recalled an elder expressing concern that education was leading youth to leave and not return [to villages]. He noted that some Alaska Native corporations have nearly 50 percent of their membership living outside the state. He emphasized the need to create opportunities, jobs, and a strong economy to retain young people and families in Alaska. He expressed disappointment in the University of Alaska's educator training, stating it produces fewer teachers than the number who leave each year, and asked for thoughts on how to ensure young Alaska Natives choose to stay.

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MR. GRAY stated that relationship-building is the foundation of effective systems, using the military's boot camp model as an example of how strong bonds create lasting loyalty. He emphasized that Alaska's success depends on strengthening relationships within communities and with culture, noting that the loss of youth and teachers stems from a lack of connection.

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MS. O'NEILL shared a conversation she had with her son who cited high housing costs and student debt as reasons for not returning to Alaska, and stressed the need for a collective, multi-generational vision where young people can see a future for themselves. She concluded that Alaska must focus on creating the conditions for life to flourish by lowering housing costs and improving connectivity through roads, air, and water infrastructure.

[2:58:03 PM](#)

MS. O'NEILL described a recent multi-generational conversation involving baby boomers, Gen X, and younger participants, where baby boomers identified key challenges and urged the next generations to address them. She said Gen X often serves as the "scrappers" in the middle and stressed the importance of including young people in shaping a shared vision for Alaska's future. She emphasized the need for youth to see themselves in that vision and to have the means to support themselves and their families. She concluded that building this collective vision is a shared responsibility among all Alaskans.

[2:59:18 PM](#) FIX

MR. GRAY emphasized the importance of creating conditions that allow life to flourish and make living in Alaska sustainable. He identified the high cost of homeownership—up to \$600 per square foot—as a major barrier and proposed infrastructure development,

such as building roads, as a solution. He stressed the need to improve connections through roads, water, and air to lower costs and increase reliability. He concluded that strengthening these connections is key to Alaska's path forward.

[3:00:17 PM](#) FIX

CHAIR CLAMAN thanked the presenters for a powerful presentation with much to consider. He reflected on the previously cited statistics regarding the overrepresentation of Native children in Child in Need of Aid (CINA) cases and of Native people in the prison system. He acknowledged the seriousness of these challenges and agreed on the need to look forward and focus on solutions.

[3:00:45 PM](#)

MS. O'NEILL apologized for not saying through the chair.

[3:01:16 PM](#)

MR. GRAY echoed that no disrespect was intended.

[3:01:43 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committees, Chair Claman adjourned the Joint Senate Judiciary and Education Standing Committees meeting at 3:01 p.m.