

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE LABOR AND COMMERCE STANDING COMMITTEE

February 13, 2023

1:34 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Jesse Bjorkman, Chair
Senator Click Bishop, Vice Chair
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson
Senator Kelly Merrick
Senator Forrest Dunbar

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION - ALASKA
WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

- HEARD

PRESENTATION(S): ASSOCIATION OF ALASKA SCHOOL BOARDS
WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

TOM KLAAMEYER, President
National Education Association-Alaska (NEA)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave an NEA-Alaska presentation on Alaska's
Public Education Workforce.

LON GARRISON, Executive Director
Association of Alaska School Boards
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a presentation on the need to improve
the recruitment and retention of school district staff.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CHAIR JESSE BJORKMAN called the Senate Labor and Commerce Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:34 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Dunbar, Merrick, Gray-Jackson, Bishop, and Chair Bjorkman.

PRESENTATION(S): NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION - ALASKA WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

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CHAIR BJORKMAN announced a presentation from the National Education Association-Alaska and the Alaska Association of School Boards.

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TOM KLAAMEYER, President, National Education Association (NEA) - Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, gave an NEA-Alaska presentation on Alaska's Public Education Workforce. He expressed pride in testifying on behalf of almost 10,000 educators, including classroom teachers, specialists, teacher aides, and other excellent educators in schools statewide. He said the association is committed to policies that promote equal educational opportunity and high-quality education for all students. He represents teachers with firsthand expertise in delivering lessons and creating environments conducive to learning.

MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 3, stating Alaska used to be a top destination for educators in the country. Alaska offered competitive compensation and benefits packages that attracted and retained top-notch educators. He recalled that when he first applied for a teaching job at the Anchorage School District (ASD) in 1996, he feared ASD would not hire him. That was a legitimate fear at the time as stories abounded about teachers subbing for three years or longer before getting hired. As the Eagle River High School social studies department chair, he hired for one vacancy that had 75 applicants on the "eligible to hire" list in 2010. More teachers applied, but only 75 got through the first vetting. He said he chose from the best teachers in his district, applicants from across the state, and many from the Lower 48. That was the norm at that time.

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 4, stating he has seen a sea change in the workforce and a sharp decline in the number of applicants during his tenure. At job fairs, more administrators are in attendance than applicants. Alaska has always been an importer of teachers, but a national teaching shortage has intensified the demand for more teachers in recent years. Researchers at Kansas State University estimate that the nation has more than 36,500 teaching vacancies and more than 163,000 positions filled by teachers who are not fully certified or fully certified in the subject area they teach. Washington state alone has over 15,000 educators in their classrooms with only emergency certification; a staggering 1 out of 5 teachers still need full licensure in that state.

MR. KLAAMEYER reviewed slide 5, which showed a University of Alaska "ATP Alaska Teacher Placement" website page. He said that like with most industries, it is harder to recruit workers to Alaska. It gets progressively difficult the further a community is from the road system. Slide 5 indicated Alaska had 1,144 open teaching positions as of February 9, 2023, when school districts were well through half of the school year.

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MR. KLAAMEYER reviewed slide 6, which showed a "quick facts" data summary from the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) website. Slide 6 reads:

2010 - 2011

Pupil to teacher Ratio (PTR) - 15.60

Number of classroom teacher - 8,468 including part-time

2021-2022

Pupil to Teacher Ratio - 17.17

Number of classroom teachers - 7,427

There are 1,000 fewer certificated educators supporting student learning in Alaska's public schools today than in 2010.

He summed up slide 6, stating over 2,100 fewer adults work with kids in schools today than a decade ago. Educators face larger class sizes, annual budget fights that include layoffs and pink slips, and a growing awareness that the teacher's retirement system puts them at financial risk. It all leads to increased workloads, stress, and burnout, accelerating the cycle of those that leave Alaska and the education profession.

MR. KLAAMEYER said that every day that Alaska fails to take steps to retain the best and brightest and attract new hires to fill vacancies, school districts would slip further and further behind as other states step up for their kids and communities by investing in their children's futures.

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MR. KLAAMEYER summarized a University of Alaska report titled "A Plan for Revitalizing Teacher Education in Alaska." The state could improve outcomes by attracting and keeping the best educators in Alaska. The state needs to invest in growing and retaining its own education workforce. Alaska graduates less than 200 newly certificated teachers each year; he said that he heard Steve Atwater of [SGA Education Consulting] say the number of graduates is closer to 160. He compared the number of certificated teachers to the number of new teachers Alaska needs each year, which is 1,000. He cited an Alaska Public Media article detailing the findings of a study that tracked 6,000 Alaskans after graduation. Of those class of 2005 students who earned a two or four-year college degree in Alaska, 55 percent had remained in the state as of 2011. However, of those that earned their degrees outside of Alaska, only 25 percent lived in the state by 2021. The state's university system does not produce enough teaching graduates in Alaska, so school districts have to recruit educators from outside. He wondered how to attract teachers from outside Alaska without incentives. If Alaska funded tuition assistance or tuition forgiveness to teach in the state, more would choose to teach, and with a defined benefit retirement option, more would choose to stay.

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MR. KLAAMEYER reviewed slide 8, stating NEA believes:

Restoring a defined benefit retirement option is one of the most effective retention tools we have

He elaborated that this is the critical component to keeping more of Alaska's educators living and working in the state. He said the state's actuarial analysis last year showed that it is possible to do this and save the state over \$60,000,000 in the near term.

MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 9 and thanked the governor for his initiative, work, and his commitment to the Teacher Retention and Recruitment Working Group. He said forthcoming reports and an action plan will include substantial policy

recommendations. Slide 9 pictures the cover page of the April 2021 teacher retention and recruitment survey results prepared for DEED by Dr. Barbara L. Adams of Adams Analytic Solutions.

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MR. KLAAMEYER summarized results of one survey on slide 10, titled "Table 1.2: Personal Importance Top 15 Rankings for Subgroups by Role." He said this was perhaps the largest survey of certificated educators ever conducted in the state. Educators ranked factors of personal importance that kept them in public education in Alaska. The top four factors for certificated educators were:

- Salary
- Working conditions
- Connecting with students
- Fixing the state's broken retirement system.

MR. KLAAMEYER said school administrators ranked retirement benefits number one. Alaska administrators identified improved retirement benefits as the top tool for teacher retention. The survey had over 4,000 respondents who provided feedback and solutions to retention challenges.

MR. KLAAMEYER reviewed slide 11, which discusses the survey question on solutions to attracting and retaining educators. The results are compelling. Of the top eight solutions, three had to do with retirement. Respondents identified a return to a defined benefit retirement system as the top solution. This issue is of paramount importance for educators.

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slides 12 and 13 to describe why restoring a defined benefit retirement option is important to educators. He displayed an Anchorage Daily News opinion piece by Janice Strickland, English Department Chair at Bettye Davis East Anchorage High School. She wrote:

"a homegrown Alaskan, but she's leaving because we have no retirement program...Lack of retirement also plays a role in (the other teacher's) decision to leave...And I hate to say this, but I believe I'm losing two more next year."

MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 14, stating Alaska ended its pension system in 2006 and is now the only state that does not offer teachers a defined benefits option for retirement. Teacher

retirement system (TRS) members are denied the safety net of Social Security. Further, teachers who have earned Social Security in other jobs before becoming a teacher, or accrued enough earnings through summer and weekend jobs, lose a substantial portion of those Social Security benefits because of an arcane rule called the government pension offset (GPO) [and] windfall elimination provision (WEP). The chart on slide 14 overviews teacher retirement offerings by state, comparing Social Security coverage, DB access, and plan types.

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 15, which likened the legs of a three-legged stool with Social Security, a pension plan, and personal savings. With all three financial legs firmly on the ground, one can reasonably expect stability and security in retirement. However, without a pension or Social Security, Alaska puts educators at financial risk in retirement. It gives teachers a huge disincentive to stay in the state after their five-year vesting period, taking their defined contributions (DC) to invest elsewhere for retirement.

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SENATOR MERRICK asked about opting out of Social Security. She expressed her understanding that teachers voted around the time of statehood to make that decision. She asked what it would take to reverse that decision and what the impetus was to make that decision in the first place.

MR. KLAAMEYER replied that it is his understanding that it happened about 1951. The decision was made that the retirement system offered through the territory at that time was better than Social Security. This has become a problem since the erosion of the state pension system because the issue has not kept up with the times. For those in the DC program, Social Security considers it a pension even though it is not for purposes of GPO penalties. A number of mechanisms are available to return to Social Security through a vote at the municipality, borough, or school district level. Statewide it is more complex and difficult; it would obligate districts to contribute an additional 6.2 percent to Social Security with an employee match, creating additional pressure on district budgets.

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SENATOR BISHOP directed attention to the chart on slide 14, comparing teacher retirements by state. He asked whether Alabama has Social Security coverage.

MR. KLAAMEYER replied that about one dozen states have opted out of Social Security. He said that he could not name all of them, but all public employees in Alabama have Social Security.

SENATOR BISHOP sought confirmation that Alabaman teachers have both Social Security and a defined benefit plan.

MR. KLAAMEYER replied that is correct. He clarified that some states on the chart have defined benefit access, meaning they have hybrid plans, some are optional, and some have both DB and DC. Alaska is the only state that has no choice for a defined benefit.

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MR. KLAAMEYER discussed a "target date simulation exercise" on slide 16, which explores the level of financial security a DC plan participant could expect in retirement:

"Target Date Fund Simulation Exercise" or "multiple probability simulation"

- Developed by the Department of Revenue at the request of the Department of Administration in consultation with investment consultant Callan
- Simulates 10,000 30-year-careers and shows the probability of having enough retirement savings to have a 30 year retirement
- Find the full analysis here:
<https://bit.ly/AKmontecarlo>

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to the chart on slide 17. Based on the "target date simulation exercise" calculations, the chart compares the probability of financial success PERS, Police/Fire, and TRS employees should have in retirement.

Probability of Success

	PERS	Police/ Fire	TRS
	[by percentage]		
30-Year Career, No SBS	22	22	31
30-Year Career, No SBS, With 6.13 percent Deferred Comp.	48	48	56
30-Year Career, With SBS	69	69	*
30-Year Career, With SBS, With 6.13 percent			

Deferred Comp.	83	83	*
25-Year Career, No SBS	6	6	10
25-Year Career, No SBS, With 6.13 percent Deferred Comp.	22	22	28
25-Year Career, With SBS	43	43	*
25-Year Career, With SBS, With 6.13 percent Deferred Comp.	61	61	*

Success in retirement is defined as having 70 percent of your final pay available to you for 30 years.

MR. KLAAMEYER reviewed the chart, stating the percentage of teachers expected to run out of money in retirement is appalling and unacceptable. It is no wonder teachers are leaving the state.

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to the graph on slide 18. He said this shows the same data as slide 17 but in graph format. The graph demonstrates only the top quartile of TRS retirees are projected to have enough money in retirement. He repeated this issue needs to be fixed.

MR. KLAAMEYER reviewed slide 19 to discuss reasons pensions are not only good for teachers but for the state too:

Why pensions?

- More efficient use of our investment dollar
- Liability to the state can be managed and/or mitigated
- Absolutely improves retention
 - Reduces recruitment costs
 - Increases investment in Alaska
 - Keeps more taxpayer dollars in the state
 - Improves student outcomes!

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MR. KLAAMEYER reviewed slide 20 to address defined benefit plans and their liability to the state. More specifically, he addressed how the state's unfunded liability developed:

How did Alaska's unfunded liability develop?

- Escalating and generous health care costs
- Declining investment earnings during the recession of 2000 - 2003
- Bad actuarial advice from Mercer

"when the actuary, Milliman, audited Mercer in 2002 they found that the number Mercer used was 14% too low. In a lawsuit against Mercer, by the state, it was later found that the Mercer actuaries not only erred, but lied and covered up the errors for more than one valuation."

MR. KLAAMEYER said pensions themselves are not the problem. They are beneficial to employees, employers, communities, and the state if they are managed properly. The specter of an unfunded liability is eliminated if contributions in and payments out are managed properly.

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 21 and spoke to a study conducted by the National Institute of Retirement Security (NIRS):

A BETTER BANG FOR THE BUCK 3.0

Post-Retirement Experience Drives Pension Cost Advantage

- **Longevity risk pooling.** The pooling of longevity risk in DB pensions enables them to fund benefits based on average life expectancy, and yet pay each worker monthly income no matter how long they live. In contrast, DC plans must receive excess contributions to enable each worker to self-insure against the possibility of living longer than average.
- **Higher investment returns.** DB pensions realize higher net investment returns due to professional management and lower fees from economies of scale.
- **Optimally balanced investment portfolios.** DB pensions are "ageless" and therefore can perpetually maintain an optimally balanced investment portfolio rather than the typical individual strategy of down-shifting over time to a lower risk/return asset allocation. This means that over a lifetime, DB pensions earn higher investment returns as compared to DC accounts.

Read the full report NIRS "A Better Bang for the Buck 3.0" at <https://bit.ly/NIRSBetterbangforthebuck>

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 22 and continued the review of the NIRS study:

Even with updated assumptions and methodology, DB pensions still offer substantial cost advantage over DC plans. The analysis finds:

- A typical DB plan, with advantages based on longevity risk pooling, asset allocation, low fees and professional management, has a 49 percent cost advantage compared to a typical individually directed DC plan:
 - The longevity risk pooling that occurs in the DB plan accounts for 7 percent cost savings;
 - The DB plan's ability to maintain a more diversified portfolio drives another 12 percent cost savings;
 - Superior net investment returns, due to lower fees and professional management, generate an additional 30 percent reduction in cost.

MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 23, stating every other state offers their public servants an option to earn a pension, Social Security, or both. Many states have stable pension plans with predictable and manageable costs. The Tax Foundation reports Wisconsin's pension plan is 96 percent funded, Idaho's is 94 percent funded, and South Dakota's is 99 percent funded.

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 24 to discuss the attributes of these solid, sustainable, affordable pension systems:

- **Cautious assumptions about rate of return.** Plans are built to become overfunded over time.
- **Stabilizers and triggers are built-in to mitigate liabilities.**
- **Employee risk sharing mechanisms include:**
 - Reducing or eliminating post-retirement cost-of-living adjustments.
 - Inceasable employee contributions.

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slides 25 and 26 to discuss additional benefits of reinstating a defined benefit plan. He said that pensions provide a powerful incentive for educators to stay in the state, which benefits the state economically. Educators who remain in Alaska are more likely to buy homes, invest in their communities, and put down roots. Since 2006, educational tourists have enjoyed a five-year Alaska adventure while vesting in their DC plan. With no compelling reason to stay, they leave, taking their training, experience, and an estimated 40 million in defined contribution dollars with them annually. More teachers would stay with a defined benefit retirement option, and more would remain after retirement. This would cause a multiplier effect, meaning the money invested in educators is spent in the state supporting local businesses and stimulating the economy.

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SENATOR DUNBAR directed attention to slide 24, which mentions employee risk-sharing mechanisms. He asked what Mr. Klaameyer thought the details of a good, efficient retirement system would look like for teachers.

MR. KLAAMEYER replied that one of the Alaska Teacher Retention and Recruitment Working Group (TRR) subcommittees is on retirement, and this subcommittee commissioned a NIRS study to look at those mechanisms. The study should be available before session adjourns this year. House Bill 220 from the previous legislature included the risk-sharing mechanisms listed on slide 24: post-retirement cost of living reduction and the adjustable employee contribution. The bill had provisions for a vesting period, an escalating formulaic retirement based on years of service, the option for a DC or DB plan, and the option for DC members to convert 403(b) dollars to the defined benefit plan.

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MR. KLAAMEYER summarized slide 27. He spoke about recruitment costs, stating the following Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) numbers are from 2017. He expressed that the costs are probably higher today. At that time, it cost school districts \$20,000 per person to recruit and retrain a replacement teacher for one who had left for a total of \$20,000,000 statewide annually. The state reduces school district costs if it retains more teachers. The cost to retrain school administrators is larger, in the \$75,000 or higher range per person.

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MR. KLAAMEYER advanced to slide 28 to discuss student outcomes, stating that student performance suffers from the ongoing revolving door of educator turnover. Diane Hirshberg, Professor of Education Policy, UAA Center for Alaska Education Policy Research at ISER, researched and identified a clear connection between teacher turnover and student outcomes. He said that it is apparent students perform higher from stable, consistent, experienced, talented staff that build relationships and connect with their students in a nurturing environment. The chart below illustrates that student performance in schools with the lowest teacher turnover is nearly twice that of students in schools with the highest teacher turnover:

In Alaska high teacher turnover correlated with poor student achievement.

	Average Teacher Turnover	Average Percent of students scoring proficient in Reading
5 Lowest Turnover Districts	8.7 percent	85.8 percent
5 Highest Turnover Districts	37.9 percent	46.9 percent

UAA Center for Alaska
Education Policy Research
University of Alaska Anchorage

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MR. KLAAMEYER reviewed slides 29 and 30, stating that the state needs to act before it worsens. He presented a story about James Harris, 2017 Alaska Teacher of the Year. The Alaska Teacher of the Year award is the highest distinction bestowed on a teacher in the state. Mr. Harris was a published author and a hockey coach and had an incredible personal story of overcoming childhood trauma and adversity. He was an inspiration to his students and community. The financial risk of staying in the state as an educator outweighed his love for Alaska and his students. He felt he had no choice but to leave. A phenomenal teacher and role model was lost. Mr. Harris was the face of the best and brightest. Alaska will continue to lose these teachers until state entities work together to change the system and invest in students, educators, schools, communities, and the state's financial future.

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SENATOR BISHOP asked if he had an estimate of how many foreigners are teaching in Alaska.

MR. KLAAMEYER replied that he does not. He said that he heard there is a significant number of J-1 VISAs and that there is

supposed to be a cultural exchange. However, there have been difficulties with that. It is a good stop-gap measure to ameliorate teacher vacancies, but foreigners can only stay for two years. The program's success has mixed results; it certainly is not a retention tool.

SENATOR BISHOP said this might be a good data point for future meetings for those who like Alaska hire.

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At ease.

PRESENTATION(S) : ASSOCIATION OF ALASKA SCHOOL BOARDS
WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

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CHAIR BJORKMAN reconvened the meeting and announced a presentation from the Association of Alaska School Boards. He invited Mr. Garrison to put himself on the record and begin the presentation.

[2:12:59 PM](#)

LON GARRISON, Executive Director, Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB), Juneau, Alaska, gave a presentation on the crucial need to improve the retention and recruitment of school district staff. He read the following letter, shown on slides 1 and 2, into the record:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Senate Education Committee Supporting Retention and
Recruitment - Testimony

Lon Garrison, Executive Director
Association of Alaska School Boards.

February 13, 2025 [2023]

Good afternoon Chair Bjorkman and members of the Senate Labor & Commerce Committee. My name is Lon Garrison. I serve as the Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards. We are a nonprofit association established in 1954 and serve 52 of Alaska's 54 school districts. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about the crucial need to improve the retention and recruitment of school district staff.

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AASB's Board of Directors has adopted three legislative priorities for this year. They are:

- Sufficient, sustainable, and predictable education funding
- Retention and recruitment of teachers, administrators, and staff
- Student wellness and safety

These priorities and the supporting resolutions and beliefs of the AASB membership are appended to this testimony.

School districts face an unprecedented crisis of retaining and recruiting qualified, effective teachers, administrators, and support staff. This personnel crisis seriously hinders our ability to provide Alaska students with a quality education. It makes it extremely difficult for school boards to fulfill the state's constitutional responsibility to provide a quality public education for every student every day.

Public schools are a complex system of students, personnel, policy, regulation, standards, assessments, curriculum, and governing boards of education. To make all of this work, we rely upon a multitude of staff and elected officials playing their part.

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As you have heard many times before, one of the single most important determinants of whether a student succeeds in school is the quality of the educator that works with the student. While effective learning requires a high-quality teacher, the entire school system must support that crucial opportunity for that teacher and student to be together. This means a multitude of other staff is needed to make the learning experience the best that it can be.

Here is a sample of the staff required to make a student and teacher's learning opportunity worthwhile: School secretaries, facility maintenance staff, janitors, cooks, para-professionals and classroom aides, librarians, bus drivers, principals, special

education directors, curriculum directors, principals, assistant superintendents, and superintendents to name a few.

So while we focus on retaining and recruiting certified staff, we must remember the importance of all positions, working together to make that hour of language arts, math, science, social studies, and don't forget ART, the best that it can be.

As we think about improving student outcomes, we must recognize the collective impact that all the pieces of this complex system have on educating every student every day.

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School districts across the state struggle to fill many of these critical positions. School boards have few options to entice staff to stay on or new staff to join the team. So what can be done?

1. An increase in school funding through the BSA is essential to providing the resources to hire and appropriately compensate the staff necessary to support good teaching and learning.
2. The state must institute a competitive retirement and health benefits system to attract both out-of-state candidates and, more importantly, motivate our citizens to take up a career in education.
3. Improve and expand our teacher preparation and certification programs within Alaska. Alaskans have the greatest propensity to stay in our communities and provide long-term, positive impacts on student outcomes.
4. Our public education system needs to do far more to facilitate and guide Alaskan students to postsecondary opportunities, whether that is college or a skilled trade. We have untapped and frankly neglected resources (our students, our businesses, our tribes, and local governments) that can significantly aid in filling the workforce deficit.
5. We can stop the finger-pointing, the vitriol, and the distrust. Instead, let's roll up our sleeves,

come together as Alaskans and solve this issue by agreeing to focus on what is best for students and, in turn, the state of Alaska.

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Locally elected school boards have been delegated the authority to implement a system of public education on behalf of the state of Alaska. Public education is a complex system that requires a comprehensive approach, and this committee's leadership and support are crucial to its success. School boards implement the local control model that has served Alaska well, but they depend on your support. AASB strongly encourages your efforts to address policies and regulations that will create competitive benefit programs, grow-our-own workforce development, and assist our own students in taking advantage of opportunities for postsecondary training.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Lon D. Garrison, Executive Director, AASB

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SENATOR BISHOP directed attention to bullet number 4 and read, "Our public education system needs to do far more to facilitate and guide Alaskan students to postsecondary opportunities." He said the state created career pathways for this in 2010. It was endorsed by the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD), and the University of Alaska (UA). Every school district has a copy of it. The template is there, and it has been revised. Twenty-five percent of graduating seniors need to attend college, and the other 75 percent need to learn a trade. He said the state is not hitting those marks, and all involved need to double down on the pathways and hit those marks.

SENATOR BISHOP stated accountability is determined by more than kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) outcomes, which are important factors, but do not encompass all elements in measuring accountability. He recalled a 2005 DOLWD 10-year post-graduation study, stating the full measure of accountability includes what happens after high school graduation. Some pupils may not be A, B, or C students, but if they get a trade and start contributing to society after graduation as skilled tradespersons, that's success. He expressed his opinion that this is what the system should be doing.

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CHAIR BJORKMAN asked how school districts are innovating to incentivize and win over prospective employees.

MR. GARRISON replied that is a tough question because there is not a lot districts can do. He said it is difficult to incentivize educators to teach in rural areas, especially areas that lack basic amenities like running water that people from urban areas are accustomed to having. Signing bonuses are the most common incentive. Other incentives, depending on school district constraints, include compensation in the form of professional development and advancement in the step and lane system [salary schedule]. An alternate idea is doing the best marketing job possible, highlighting the unique experience of rural teaching, village life, and the people. Without incentives for retirement and wage security, it is difficult to compete with positions in the Lower 48 that offer financially viable, long-term plans.

CHAIR BJORKMAN asked whether the communities on the road system that resemble communities in the Lower 48 can compete for the best employees.

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MR. GARRISON answered it is a bit easier for communities on the road system; however, the gap between roadside and rural communities is diminishing. A contributing factor is high PTRs, which the Anchorage school district is experiencing. Their pupil-teacher ratios are beginning to increase dramatically. He explained that teachers with 30 6th or 7th graders experience burnout; this does not incentivize teachers to stay on. Fewer teachers correlate to fewer auxiliary staff that help support teachers in the classroom, creating a compounding effect. He expressed his opinion that the disparity between roadside and remote districts is diminishing, and urban and rural districts are coming together to advocate for practically the same thing.

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SENATOR DUNBAR recollected that his school had two teachers who taught about 20-25 students, one taught K-6th grade, and the other taught 7-12th grade. He said it is incredibly challenging to teach that many grade levels simultaneously. He commented that his question has to do with various ways to measure outcomes.

SENATOR DUNBAR said one of the arguments against increased funding is that Alaska has one of the worst outcomes in the nation. This argument conflates the outcomes of uniquely challenged school districts, like he just described, with districts like Anchorage, which performs reasonably well relative to its demographics and economics. He said when it is advantageous to do so, statewide school district outcomes are conflated to substantiate the argument against increased funding based on poor outcomes.

SENATOR DUNBAR asked whether outcomes have improved or declined over the last 20 years.

MR. GARRISON answered outcomes have not improved as much as school districts would like to see, and in some cases outcomes have declined. He said one of the reasons for the decline is that the state has not adequately invested in Alaska's education, which has meant eliminating important programs.

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SENATOR DUNBAR said if it is the case that the state has had declining outcomes over the past 20 years, the single largest change during this period was switching to a defined contribution system. He suggested the legislature establish accountability measures for its policy choices; past policy choices appear to have not worked. The legislature's policy choices increased workforce turnover, it had damaging effects, and over the last five years, education was flat-funded, all of which exacerbated student outcomes. He expressed his opinion that accountability measures are very important. Looking at the largest change in the last twenty years that has driven the decline in outcomes, policy choices shifted to a defined contribution plan that adversely affected teacher recruitment and retention.

MR. GARRISON added that the result needs more context when statewide outcomes are combined to calculate a mean. A lot of districts have done a lot of good, and graduation rates have increased dramatically. The focus on literacy has increased. He said that it is more appropriate to say student outcomes have not increased the way districts would like them to; rather than student outcomes are worse overall. He emphasized that investment means the state should see increased outcomes but has not done that.

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SENATOR BISHOP dovetailed on student outcomes, stating standardized testing has changed three times in the last ten years. He said getting a good measure of outcomes is difficult if the benchmark is constantly changing. He agreed that there are school districts out there doing a marvelous job.

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CHAIR BJORKMAN brought up a previous statement about school district class sizes and the correlation to support staff. He sought confirmation that when school districts choose to have larger PTR numbers, they have already eliminated support staff and programs that ensure students get a holistic and healthy education.

MR. GARRISON clarified that school boards, like the legislature, must allocate a finite resource. School boards make decisions that keep the system running and best benefit those in their charge, including determining the number of pupils in a classroom and whether to increase the PTR. The discussion usually begins with the primary grades, then moves up through middle and high school. These decisions come down to funds and priorities, meaning there may be insufficient funds to hire support staff for a classroom of 30 1st-graders. It is difficult for superintendents and school boards to figure out how to fund their schools, administrators and the board grapple with this dilemma every year at this time.

[2:35:32 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN asked whether there is a trade-off between larger class sizes and outcomes according to scholarly journals and research based on PTR and class size.

MR. GARRISON replied that the data is pretty clear that lower PTRs generally result in higher student outcomes in literacy, reading, mathematics, and science. He recalled standards were changed when he was first elected to the school board. The standards were the first big change, followed by multiple test changes. He expressed his belief that it is hard for the state to monitor outcomes when tests are changed every three years. Still, maintaining the lowest possible PTRs, especially in the elementary grades, is one of the biggest factors in ensuring students will be more successful for the rest of their educational careers. It provides a greater opportunity to ensure students are proficient in reading by third grade.

[2:37:21 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Bjorkman adjourned the Senate Labor and Commerce Standing Committee meeting at 2:37 p.m.