

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 5, 2025

9:06 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Co-Chair  
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair  
Representative Ted Eischeid  
Representative Jubilee Underwood  
Representative Rebecca Schwanke  
Representative Bill Elam

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Maxine Dibert

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION(S): SPECIAL EDUCATION IN ALASKA

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

TOM KLAAMEYER, President  
National Education Association Alaska  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave a presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska."

KIM WARD-MASSEY  
Language Pathologist  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered committee questions on the presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska"

DONALD ENOCH  
Alaska Special Education Director  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered committee questions on the presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska"

JOSH GIRARD, Intensive Needs Paraprofessional  
Kenai Peninsula Education Association  
Kenai, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified on the presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska".

JADA KAHL, School Occupational Therapist  
Juneau Education Association  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified on the presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska".

### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[9:06:47 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:06 a.m. Representatives Eischeid, Schwanke, and Story were present at the call to order. Representatives Elam, Himschoot, and Underwood arrived as the meeting was in progress.

### **PRESENTATION(S): Special Education in Alaska**

[9:08:11 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the only order of business would be a presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska."

[9:09:20 AM](#)

TOM KLAAMEYER, President, National Education Association Alaska, gave a presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska. He began on slide 1, which outlined which specific teachers are serving special education students and continued to slide 2, which highlighted that 40 percent of Alaska's teacher and personnel vacancies are in special education positions. He moved to slide 5, which gave background to specific State and Federal policies that affect special education in Alaska.

[9:13:28 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM asked if the teacher and personnel statistics displayed on slide 3 had more specific regional data.

MR. KLAAMEYER answered that the further off of the road system a school district is, the harder it is to fill the position.

[9:15:05 AM](#)

MR. KLAAMEYER resumed the presentation on slides 6-8, which provided more specific background information regarding special education in Alaska. He skipped to slide 10, which emphasized three critical actions to be taken in the name of strengthening public schools in Alaska. He moved to slide 11, which highlighted the need for special educators to be compensated with a competitive salary.

[9:18:46 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked the invited presenters if they were going to speak on the 4 different levels of special education in Alaska.

MR. KLAAMEYER invited Kim Ward-Massey to answer the question.

[9:20:21 AM](#)

KIM WARD-MASSEY, Language Pathologist, answered committee questions on the presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska" She explained that tier I students are general education, tier II students are students who need more assistance, tier III students are students who might be on an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and tier IV students are students who are on an IEP or might have intensive needs.

[9:25:10 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Donald Enoch about the different special education categories and how a student might qualify for each category.

[9:25:31 AM](#)

DONALD ENOCH, Alaska Special Education Director, answered committee questions on the presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska". He listed 14 categories for determining eligibility, those being learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, deaf, hearing impairment, deaf-blind, orthopedic impairment, visual impairment, speech-language impairment, other health impairment, multiple disabilities, early childhood developmental delay, autism, and traumatic brain injury. He said

that any one may make a referral for a student to get evaluated for special education needs, but the student's parent must approve the evaluation.

[9:28:59 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE asked Mr. Enoch for insight on how school districts face underfunded correspondence special education students. She asked if additional funding should be granted to school districts to service the needs of special education teachers in rural school districts.

MR .ENOCH said that if a student's needs are so severe that they cannot be met in a correspondence environment, the student is encouraged to attend their local public school to obtain such instruction. He said that he could not answer any state budget or regulatory questions.

[9:33:26 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked if school districts do not have a strict criterion to follow when qualifying a student for special education services.

MS. WARD-MASSEY answered that a student must receive a medical diagnosis and have the tested needs confirmed by a special education team.

[9:35:42 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE asked Mr. Klaameyer if he was aware of a national shortage of special education teachers.

MR. KLAAMEYER returned to slide 6 to explain that there are an increasing number of special education students nationally and a decreasing number of special education teachers nationally.

[9:37:32 AM](#)

MS. WARD-MASSEY implored the committee to vote "yes" on HB 69 and increase the Base Student Allocation (BSA) and emphasized the importance of adequate funding as a means to provide a quality education to special education students in Alaska. She explained that school districts rely on adequate funding to recruit and retain speech-language pathologists and highlighted their critical role in supporting public school students of all ages in Alaska. She said that nearly one-third of speech

language pathologists in the Anchorage School District (ASD) are tele therapists, who are contractors that live in the contiguous united states and also require an in-person paraprofessional to deliver their services which amount to a cost of approximately \$1.2 million. She said that in-person speech-language therapists would eliminate the cost and emphasized the disconnect that students experience when they receive their therapy online.

[9:42:25 AM](#)

JOSH GIRARD, Intensive Needs Paraprofessional, Kenai Peninsula Education Association, testified on the presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska". He urged the committee to vote to increase the BSA and explained how the current funding shortfalls have impacted his daily workload and his ability to deliver a quality education to his students. He said that he was often working past contract hours to meet the needs of his students and highlighted the need for a full-time, in-person teacher in all school districts in Alaska. He said "teachers and paraprofessionals like me should be able to afford to live in the community where we work" and said that teachers are consistently being asked to do more with less.

[9:45:17 AM](#)

JADA KAHL, School Occupational Therapist, Juneau Education Association, testified on the presentation titled "Special Education in Alaska". She read from a prepared statement [not included in the committee packet] which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

My name is Jada Kahl and I work as an Occupational Therapist for the Juneau School District. In the schools OT is a related service to special education, so all serviced students must be identified with a disability with significant sensorimotor delays along with unmet needs. An OT helps students develop, improve, or maintain the skills needed for daily activities that are essential for learning and participation such as fine motor skills, interpreting sensory information, and even self-cares (like getting dressed or using the restroom). Required job duties include supporting students and staff. support ranges from direct student support, to school wide or program support to indirect collaboration support. Therapists must assess, write

and update eligibility reports and individualized education plans (IEPs) for every student on their caseload (mine currently sits over 40 students), write treatment encounter notes for each session (therapists average 6-10 students per day). write progress reports, attend weekly special education meetings for all covered school sites ( I attend 3), attend student specific meetings, mandatory trainings, complete modifications to assignments and not to mention supporting students in crisis.

These past two weeks alone I spent over 7 hours supporting a student due to an unfilled vacancy. I also spent over 3 hours in collaboration and modification of assignment for 1 student and spent time supporting a student in crisis who isn't even in my caseload.

So while yes a portion of my role is to provide direct therapy services to around 40 students, , that is only part of my job duties. You see my job is more than just a caseload number, it is a workload that is very multifaceted and can be a bit unpredictable.

In order to support my students with their learning they require access to a variety of resources. Resources including tangible objects, to equipment and space.

But most importantly our students require the resource of adequate staffing. Highly trained and educated staff who are able to support their needs. Staff who have the time to work together, to collaborate, to modify assignments, to observe and provide feedback and to support the whole student.

Understaffing is a major concern in our state, especially in my district. We have emergency certificated staff in numerous buildings, all with various levels of experience or education themselves. This year alone we have gone through countless vacancies in regular education, special education and related service providers alike. My own daughter has had 3 different social studies teachers just this year. JSD has gone through 3 different OTs and continues to have vacancies amongst related service providers. I continue to get asked to do "just this one", or to "just take a look and let us know what you think" Who do you think suffers when staffing positions are unfilled? The student. In the words of my daughter, "The switching, switching, switching just

brings so much stress to the already stressed out teens of today”

These staffing issues are not a “this year's” problem. They ARE the problem.

Year after year we lose staff and year after year our districts begin to outsource our Alaskan jobs to contractors who don't even live in our state or our communities.

Why do people keep leaving?

Why can't we retain the high quality educators?

Because our jobs have become unsustainable. Understaffed Districts keep pushing a higher and higher caseload onto the special education teachers and related service providers, while not seeming to even consider the WORKLOAD that it takes to support the student. The workload we are asked to do with fewer and fewer resources is mind blowing. The number of students we are asked to support continues to grow yet the support of resources does not. Students' needs are being unmet

So now you tell me how are we supposed to support our students without having a cap on the Workload that each educator and related service provider is asked to do? How do our students get the resources they need? And how are any of these resources possible without FUNDING?

How are we supposed to attract, retain and compensate our staff without funding?

We CAN'T

I urge you to appropriately Fund education, to cap caseloads by using tools such as a workload calculator and to do better by our students. They are our future. If we continue to do what we are doing we will continue to lose high quality educators and fail our AK students.

[9:50:30 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY reminded the committee of an amendment deadline for CSHB 57 (L&C) and delivered committee announcements.

[9:51:56 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:51 a.m.