

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 29, 2025

3:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Jesse Kiehl
Senator Mike Cronk

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Maxine Dibert
Representative Stapp

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): EDUCATION FUNDING IMPACT ON ANCHORAGE TEACHERS

- HEARD

PRESENTATION(S): FAIRBANKS NORTH STAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT
UPDATE

- HEARD

PUBLIC TESTIMONY: STATE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ALASKA

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

CORY AIST, President
Anchorage Education Association
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered the presentation Education Funding Impact on Anchorage Teachers.

LUKE MEINERT, Superintendent
Fairbanks North Star Borough School District
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District Update.

MELISSA BURNETT, President
Fairbanks North Star Borough School District
Board of Education
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District Update.

SHARON HANSEN, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

ERIKA BURR, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

CHRISTINA TURMAN, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

ROZLYN GRADY-WYCHE, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

MOLLY PROUE, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

AMY SKRABA, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

JACQUELINE MUEHLBAUER, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

CHRISTINA RIED, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

REBECCA SIEGEL, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

ASHLEY MINAEI, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of school funding.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:30:15 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. Present at the called to order were Senators Bjorkman, Cronk, Kiehl, and Chair Tobin.

PRESENTATION(S) : EDUCATION FUNDING IMPACT ON ANCHORAGE TEACHERS

[3:32:20 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the presentation Education Funding Impact on Anchorage Teachers.

[3:32:40 PM](#)

CORY AIST, President, Anchorage Education Association, Anchorage, Alaska, Offered the presentation Education Funding Impact on Anchorage Teachers. He stated he began teaching in 1996 with the Anchorage Education Association (AEA) and Anchorage School District (ASD), spending 10 years at Muldoon Elementary, a Title I school, and 14 years at Polaris K-12. He has taught all elementary grade levels over his 29-year career. He described Alaska's public education system as being in crisis, citing low student outcomes, record-high class sizes and special education caseloads, uncompetitive conditions compared to Lower 48 urban districts, and an increase in classrooms led by long-term substitutes or non-certified staff.

[3:34:07 PM](#)

MR. AIST moved to slide 2 and stated that inaction by Alaska's government is worsening the state's educational crisis, with no meaningful steps taken to improve student outcomes. He emphasized that teachers are leaving both the state and the profession at unsustainable rates, with Anchorage-home to over 42,000 students-experiencing the most severe impacts. He indicated he would share data to illustrate how this teacher shortage is affecting student performance and why urgent legislative action is being demanded by families and communities.

[3:34:56 PM](#)

MR. AIST moved to slide 3 [5] and reported that in the past year, 400 educators in the Anchorage School District (ASD) resigned, retired, or transferred to non-teaching roles, contributing to over 1,500 departures in four years—half of ASD’s certificated staff. He noted that these figures do not include those moving into principal or district roles, which adds another 20 to 50 annually. He highlighted the unsustainable turnover rate among early career educators: 48 percent of those who resigned last year were in their first five years, and 42 percent were in their first three years. Currently, 35 percent of ASD teachers are within their first five years, and 26 percent are in their first three. He stated that while early career teachers bring energy, they are overwhelmed by large class sizes, limited time for individualized instruction, and increasing behavioral and school-wide management challenges.

[3:36:53 PM](#)

MR. AIST moved to slide 4 and stated that the beginning of the school year is critical for establishing classroom tone, building community, and setting expectations. He emphasized that the growing number of unfilled classrooms is disrupting this process and significantly impacting student learning.

[3:37:15 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN referenced a figure from the previous slide showing that it costs over \$27,000 to manage a teacher resignation and asked for a breakdown of what contributes to that amount.

[3:37:33 PM](#)

MR. AIST explained that the \$27,000 figure was provided by the Anchorage School District as an estimate of the cost to recruit a single educator from outside the area. He stated that this includes travel, staff time, hiring incentives, and related expenses, with the district estimating it spends over \$10 million annually on recruitment efforts.

[3:38:09 PM](#)

MR. AIST moved to slide 5 [6] which presents results from an October 2024 Anchorage Education Association survey of educators regarding workload. He noted that over 2,160 respondents—more than two-thirds of ASD certificated staff—reported feeling either overwhelmed, unable to sustain their workload, or only “so-so” about it. He emphasized that these levels of stress, driven by increased class sizes and caseloads, have a direct impact on educator retention.

[3:39:15 PM](#)

MR. AIST moved to slide 6 [7] and explained that the survey also asked educators to rate morale within their school buildings, not just their personal morale. He noted that the responses—ranging from very high to very low—show a clear link between increasing caseloads, heavy workloads, and declining morale among staff.

[3:39:48 PM](#)

MR. AIST moved to slide 7 [8] and addressed survey responses on work-life balance, noting that educators consistently report difficulty maintaining balance due to job demands. He stated that work-life balance is a key factor in teacher retention, alongside financial and retirement considerations. He emphasized that educators are overwhelmed by tasks such as student support, grading, and managing behavior, making it increasingly hard to sustain their roles.

[3:40:32 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for clarification how many certified staff were surveyed, the method of survey, and how many were returned.

MR. AIST explained that the survey was conducted using SurveyMonkey and distributed to all approximately 3,000 Anchorage Education Association educators. He stated that they received nearly 1,100 responses, or about one-third of the total membership. He noted that survey results were extrapolated to reflect the full group for reporting purposes and offered to provide the raw data if requested.

[3:41:41 PM](#)

MR. AIST continued on slide 7 [8] and stated that high educator turnover significantly affects students and families in several ways. He explained that new teachers need time to learn curriculum, policies, and school practices, which slows instructional effectiveness. He emphasized that students lose valuable relationships when teachers resign, and those connections are critical for attendance and engagement. He added that veteran educators often sustain school culture and student programs, and their departure disrupts long-standing activities that motivate and inspire students.

[3:42:37 PM](#)

MR. AIST moved to slide 8 [9] and stated that the ongoing staffing crisis is causing larger class sizes, more frequent and severe student behavior issues, and high absenteeism—all of which contribute to declining student outcomes. He cited Department of

Education and Early Development (DEED) data showing statewide performance remains low and argued that outcomes would improve with a highly qualified educator in every classroom. He identified three consistently proven factors that most influence student success: smaller class sizes, strong family involvement, and high-quality certificated educators. He noted that curriculum and assessment tools are not among the leading indicators. He added that assessment results are skewed because high-performing students can opt out, and frequent changes in state testing tools over the past decade make year-to-year comparisons invalid.

[3:43:47 PM](#)

MR. AIST moved to slide 9 [10] and stated that educators often face negative rhetoric—such as accusations of mismanagement, selfishness, or being overpaid—which undermines morale and contributes to the broader education crisis. He emphasized that such narratives make educators feel unsupported and undervalued, leading many to leave Alaska for better compensation, defined benefit retirement systems in other states, or to exit the profession entirely. He clarified that his advocacy is not for educators alone but for students, families, and communities, stressing that investment in education strengthens the economy and community wellbeing. He concluded that accountability must be shared among all stakeholders, and called on the legislature to fulfill its role by funding smaller class sizes, reduced special education caseloads, and retention efforts, including programs like the Alaska Reads Act and national board certification supplements. He urged collective action to ensure a certificated educator remains in every Alaska classroom.

[3:47:37 PM](#)

At ease.

PRESENTATION(S) :
FAIRBANKS NORTH STAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT UPDATE

[3:48:14 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and announced a Fairbanks North Star Borough School District Update.

[3:48:34 PM](#)

LUKE MEINERT, Superintendent, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (FNSBSD), Fairbanks, Alaska, Co-presented the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District Update. He introduced himself.

MELISSA BURNETT, President, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District Board of Education, Fairbanks, Alaska, Co-presented the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District Update. She introduced herself.

[3:49:00 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 2 and began by highlighting the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District's accomplishments despite facing severe fiscal constraints. He outlined plans to discuss the district's recent budget impacts, including staffing and program cuts over the past five years, while reinforcing the district's commitment to transparency and accountability through clear, publicly shared goals. He shared a personal connection to the education system, noting he has two children in public schools and a wife who teaches in the district. He added that he is a 20-year Alaska educator with experience in both rural and urban districts, including Aleutians East and Yukon-Koyukuk, providing him with a broad understanding of statewide education challenges.

[3:50:19 PM](#)

MS. BURNETT moved to slide 2 - 5 and introduced herself and the current board members. She provided an overview of the district's school options, which include 15 elementary schools (Pre-K-5), K-8 programs, seven secondary schools (grades 6-12), five charter schools, and five additional schools of choice. She highlighted several schools recognized as Alaska Purple Star Schools for their support of military-connected students, including recent designations for Denali Elementary, Hutchison High, North Pole Middle, and others, with Ladd Elementary as the current honoree through 2026.

[3:52:36 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT stated that Fairbanks has the highest number of Purple Star Schools in Alaska, a distinction the district takes pride in. He noted that principals are encouraged to apply for the designation and establish dedicated support teams to assist military-connected families as they transition in and out of local schools.

[3:52:58 PM](#)

MS. BURNETT moved to slide 6, Enrollment. She reported that for the 2024-2025 school year, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District has 5,601 students enrolled in grades Pre-K through 5 and 6,204 in secondary grades, totaling 11,805 students. She noted this reflects a decrease of 650 students from the previous year.

[3:53:20 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 7, a graph on Neighborhood School Enrollment 2007- 2025. He addressed the district's ongoing enrollment decline, noting a shift in student distribution, including increased participation in charter schools and the district's BEST Homeschool Program. He clarified that contrary to recent narratives, most of the district's enrollment loss is not due to students switching to private or non-district homeschool programs. He stated that 70 percent of the enrollment decline is due to families moving out of state, particularly young families, reflecting broader demographic trends seen in Fairbanks, Alaska, and nationally. He emphasized that this decline is contributing to significant annual financial impacts on the district's budget.

[3:54:37 PM](#)

MS. BURNETT moved to slide 8 and stated that last year's focus for the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District was developed collaboratively between the school board, administration, and Superintendent Meinert. She noted that the district established clear and transparent goals centered on three key areas: literacy, school culture and climate, and student attendance.

[3:55:00 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 9, Literacy, charts showing mCLASS data. He reported that the 2023-2024 school year marked the first year of Alaska Reads Act implementation, and the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District saw strong literacy gains among K-3 students, as measured by the mCLASS assessment. He highlighted a 23 percent growth in reading achievement across all three early grade levels and noted that this progress has continued into the current year. He added that Fairbanks expanded literacy efforts beyond K-3, implementing reading interventions at the middle and high school levels, including walk-to-read programs and dedicated reading classes to ensure students graduate with reading proficiency.

[3:56:16 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted that some districts have reported challenges implementing the after-school and summer programs required by the Alaska Reads Act. She asked for an update on how the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District is managing these components of the legislation.

[3:56:32 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT acknowledged that the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District is also struggling to provide after-school and summer programs required by the Alaska Reads Act. He explained that a grant helped support these programs last year, but that funding was not renewed for the current year. He emphasized that the Alaska Reads Act is an effective accountability system showing clear results in Fairbanks and elsewhere, and that continued funding is essential to maintain progress. He shared that the state flagged Fairbanks' reading intervention groups as too large, which the district attributed to a shortage of educators and support staff—an issue that could be addressed with increased, targeted funding or adjustments to the Base Student Allocation (BSA).

[3:57:49 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 10, Attendance. He discussed student attendance as a key district goal following the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that like many other districts, Fairbanks has struggled to restore consistent in-person attendance. He emphasized that regular attendance—defined as students being present at least 90 percent of the time, including excused and unexcused absences—is particularly challenging in Alaska due to travel for sports, medical needs, and other logistical barriers. He reported strong improvement in attendance rates, which he attributed to increased family engagement. The district's Student Support Services team proactively called over 1,000 families before the school year began to identify and address potential attendance barriers, such as transportation or food insecurity. He also highlighted the use of digital tools like PowerSchool and ParentSquare to send regular reminders and messages to families, reinforcing the importance of daily attendance and making students feel welcome in school.

[3:59:49 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked whether the programs Fairbanks is using to address chronic absenteeism would be at risk without additional funding in the current year.

MR. MEINERT confirmed that the programs supporting efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism are at risk without additional funding this year. He stated that continued budget cuts have already affected staffing, and further reductions would likely lead to the loss of key programs that help improve attendance and literacy. He cautioned that eliminating these supports would result in negative trends in both areas.

[4:00:39 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 11, Culture and Climate, showing graphs of overall perceptions of FNSBSD. He stated that survey results consistently show staff, students, and families rate Fairbanks schools with an A or B average, countering the narrative that families are dissatisfied with public education. He emphasized that climate survey data demonstrates strong community support for local schools. He noted the district is transitioning from its own internal survey to the Alaska Association of School Boards (AASB) climate survey this year to allow for statewide comparison and improved data consistency.

4:01:25 PM

MS. BURNETT moved to slide 12, This Year's Areas of Focus, and highlighted continued growth in literacy, especially through the district's implementation of the Alaska Reads Act and emphasized a strong focus on K-5 student achievement. She shared that a successful pilot program is underway in a sixth-grade classroom, with plans to expand it districtwide. She also emphasized the district's commitment to family engagement, working to rebuild trust and strengthen partnerships with families. She praised the ParentSquare platform for improving communication, noting its ease of use and real-time interaction between families and teachers, which has enhanced collaboration across the district.

4:02:55 PM

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 13, Growth Targets for 2024-2025, an example screenshot of a spreadsheet FNSBSD uses for goals. He explained the district's structured process for setting and monitoring school-level goals, emphasizing that tracking progress is just as important as setting targets. He shared that schools create action plans aligned with district goals at the start of the year, using baseline data collected in the fall, followed by winter and spring check-ins to assess progress and make necessary adjustments. He stated that this system has been effective, with all but three schools meeting at least two out of three goals last year—a result he described as excellent.

CHAIR TOBIN asked whether the structured goal-setting and accountability system used in FNSBSD is common across Alaska or if it is a unique approach within the state.

MR. MEINERT responded that the use of accountability systems and growth tracking is very typical across Alaska school districts. He stated that the perception that districts lack goals or transparency is a myth, noting that many districts already have strong internal processes. He emphasized the need for clear expectations from the legislature so that districts can align

efforts accordingly and demonstrate measurable outcomes using existing data.

[4:04:52 PM](#)

MS. BURNETT moved to slide 14, District Data Dashboards. She highlighted the strength of the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District's data dashboard, describing it as one of the best available among school districts. She stated that it includes comprehensive information such as enrollment, graduation rates, school climate assessments, and discipline data, with records going back over a decade to 2011. She emphasized the dashboard's user-friendly design, making it easily accessible for parents and the public to explore key data about district performance.

[4:05:36 PM](#)

MS. BURNETT moved to slide 16, Budget Timeline and outlined the FNSBSD's annual budget timeline, which aligns with state and borough timelines from February to June. She explained that the district receives a proposed budget from administration in February, refines it through April 1, submits it to the borough, and then reviews the borough's changes before submitting the final version to the state and governor. She emphasized the difficulty of budgeting based on unknowns, noting that the district's current \$16 million deficit assumes continued \$681 one-time state funding and \$58 million in borough contributions. She recalled that after last year's governor's vetoes, the district faced an unanticipated \$4 million shortfall post-submission, underscoring how delayed funding decisions make it extremely challenging for districts to responsibly finalize and implement budgets. She said knowing funding amounts before June is instrumental to a school district's ability to budget.

[4:07:47 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for an estimate of how much staff time FNSBSD spends on budget revisions, rewriting, and scenario planning due to funding uncertainties.

[4:08:12 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT responded that budget revisions and scenario planning have consumed months of staff time, estimating that nearly half of his and his core cabinet's time in recent years has been focused on addressing budget cuts, school closures, and other fiscal challenges. He shared that the district has again begun exploring the consolidation of five schools and expressed a strong desire to shift focus away from budget survival toward improving student outcomes and implementing innovative programs.

[4:09:12 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL acknowledged that budgeting and resource allocation are a necessary part of district leadership, especially amid shifting demographics. He asked for an estimate regarding the amount of time that could be freed up if the district had early certainty on funding levels before beginning the budget process.

MR. MEINERT stated that an exorbitant amount of time could be freed up if the district had early certainty on funding, especially within the Base Student Allocation (BSA). He emphasized that the lack of predictability in the budget cycle directly affects staff recruitment and retention, noting that this year the district had unfilled elementary teaching positions for the first time due to an inability to take financial risks before knowing state funding levels. He explained that districts previously had fund balances to absorb uncertainty, but that is no longer the case, making it too risky to hire without confirmed funding—often not received until late June.

[4:10:50 PM](#)

SENATOR CRONK a former teacher and school board member, expressed frustration over districts claiming uncertainty in funding, particularly regarding the Base Student Allocation (BSA). He stated that the BSA has always been funded and questioned the accuracy of statements suggesting that districts do not know how much funding they will receive. He pointed out that the real uncertainty lies in one-time funding outside the BSA and asked whether Fairbanks was using the known BSA figures when making staffing decisions, especially regarding unfilled positions. He challenged the practice of issuing pink slips under the claim of unknown funding, suggesting that such messaging has been misleading for years.

[4:12:17 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT explained that in the past, school districts in Alaska could typically expect a small annual increase to the BSA, which allowed for more reliable budgeting. He stated that this pattern has changed, and districts can no longer count on yearly increases. While the baseline BSA amount is known, it has not kept pace with inflation, which has significantly increased costs for school districts. He emphasized the need to “right-size” the BSA with a substantial increase and called on the legislature to inflation-proof it going forward. He warned that without consistent adjustments, districts risk facing the same funding shortfalls in future decades due to rising costs.

[4:13:27 PM](#)

SENATOR CRONK asked what top three cost factors contributed to the problem.

MR. MEINERT identified personnel, utilities, and general goods and services as the top three cost drivers for the district. He emphasized that personnel and utilities are the most significant contributors to the district's financial challenges.

SENATOR CRONK asked if health and building insurance contribute.

MR. MEINERT replied yes, and he would include health insurance with personnel costs.

SENATOR CRONK asked what amount of a fair increase to the Base Student Allocation (BSA) would stabilize FNSBSD and allow it to meet its goals over the next six to ten years.

MR. MEINERT said he would get to the answer in a bit.

[4:14:28 PM](#)

MS. BURNETT moved to slide 17 and said the following reductions have occurred at FNSBSD since 2019:

- Closed Four Schools
- Class Sizes Have Increased
- Special Education Positions
- Extended Learning Program
- Supply & Activity Budgets Cut in Half
- Elementary Band & Orchestra
- Elementary Art
- Activity Funds
- Print Shop
- More than 250 jobs
- 20 percent reduction in administration

MS. BURNETT stated that the district is currently considering the consolidation of five additional schools and has already contracted out night custodial services. She reported that these actions still leave the district with a \$6 million deficit on February 17. She added that resolving the deficit will likely require further cuts, including another increase in the pupil-to-teacher ratio (PTR).

[4:15:57 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for the district's total top-line budget and the current number of staff in the finance department following the reported 20 percent reduction in administration.

MR. MEINERT replied that he did not know the exact number of staff currently in the business office but stated he would provide that information to the committee.

[4:16:31 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL explained that his question about administrative staffing stemmed from a broader concern that some school districts have reduced administration to levels that jeopardize financial oversight. He noted that while these cuts are often made to protect classroom resources, they can lead to serious accountability issues, including a lack of financial tracking. He pointed out that, unlike school districts, some areas of state government have failed audits or lacked sufficient records for auditing, while school districts are held to a higher standard—required to complete annual audits or risk formula funding being withheld. He cautioned that across-the-board cuts, though well-intentioned, can pose significant risks to financial accountability and the proper stewardship of public funds.

[4:17:55 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 18, FY 26 Budget Forecast, and stated that the district is currently working through a projected \$31 million deficit, which represents 15 percent of its general fund budget. He explained that if the one-time \$680 per-student funding from last year is repeated, the deficit would be reduced to \$16 million. He noted that the current budget assumes no change in the borough's local contribution and accounts for a decrease in state revenue and federal impact aid due to declining enrollment.

[4:18:34 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked how much money FNSBSD has in its fund balance to potentially deal with the deficit.

MR. MEINERT replied about \$7.5 million.

[4:18:52 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked how a potential change in the way local contributions are counted would affect FNSBSD. She referenced communication from the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) indicating that regulatory changes are under consideration.

[4:19:15 PM](#)

MS. BURNETT responded that the required local contribution (RLC) is a complex issue within the Fairbanks community. She stated that eliminating the RLC would shift full responsibility for school funding to the state, which she views with caution given the state's current fiscal challenges. At the same time, she acknowledged that the RLC places a burden on local taxpayers. She noted that the Fairbanks North Star Borough is currently only \$7 below its tax cap and does not fund education to the cap, as doing so would raise property taxes. She described the situation as delicate, with potential benefits on both sides of the issue. She stated that while she would like to see the borough in a position to fully fund education to the cap, it is not currently able to do so.

[4:20:54 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT clarified that the discussion appeared to be referencing funding outside the cap, which does not apply to the Fairbanks.

[4:21:01 PM](#)

MS. BURNETT moved to slide 19, FY 26 Budget Impact, and stated that the district is currently working with a \$16 million deficit, based on the assumption of receiving \$680 per student from the state and \$58 million from the borough. She reported that contracting shift night custodial services will save \$3 million, and consolidating five schools will save an additional \$7 million. Despite these reductions, the district will still face a \$6 million shortfall that the school board must address February 17.

[4:21:40 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked what portion of the reported \$7.5 million fund balance is unobligated and spendable, and requested the specific dollar amount that is available for use.

[4:21:59 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT clarified that the entire \$7.5 million fund balance he referenced is all unobligated funds.

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked what percentage the \$7.5 million represents of the total annual budget.

MR. MEINERT replied it is about 2 -3 percent.

[4:22:20 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked, including the rest of the fund balance, where the district currently stands in relation to the recommended 10 percent reserve it is expected to maintain.

MR. MEINERT responded that the district is nowhere close to the recommended 10 percent fund balance. However, the board has been trying to add to the fund balance. He noted that a few years ago the fund balance was at zero, and while it has increased since then, building it remains difficult amid ongoing budget cuts. He recognized the importance of having a fund balance.

[4:23:12 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 20, Subsidized Programs, and stated that transportation funding has not increased since 2015, and the district is now feeling the strain of insufficient funds in that area. He noted that Fairbanks uses general fund dollars to subsidize transportation and contributes \$500,000 to \$700,000 annually to support nutrition services. He expressed strong support for Representative Dibert's bill to provide additional funding for student nutrition programs.

[4:23:48 PM](#)

MS. BURNETT moved to slide 21, Targeted Funding Opportunities, and addressed the recent focus on targeted funding and listed areas where it could immediately benefit the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, including Alaska Reads Act implementation, career and technical education (CTE), positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and charter schools.

[4:24:28 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 22, \$1400 BSA Increase, and responded to Senator Cronk's earlier question by stating that a \$1,400 increase to the Base Student Allocation (BSA) is what the district needs to fill its budget gap this year. This level would prevent increases to class sizes, allow full implementation of Reads Act tutoring requirements, and address longstanding needs in curriculum, instruction, and technology.
insert

[4:25:12 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 23, \$1808 BSA Increase, and added that an \$1,808 BSA increase would enable the district to reinvest in classrooms—reducing class sizes, restoring gifted programs, elementary music and fine arts, and student activity funding. He emphasized the need to shift away from annual cuts and toward reinvestment in students.

[4:25:46 PM](#)

MR. MEINERT moved to slide 24, Measuring Success Through Student Growth, and concluded by encouraging a clearly defined accountability system based on student growth, and stated the district is not afraid of accountability but needs adequate resources to meet state expectations. He urged support for holistic, constitutionally grounded public education across the state.

[4:27:22 PM](#)

SENATOR CRONK thanked the presenters for coming and acknowledged previous conversations held outside the meeting. He expressed appreciation for the school board, noting they have made difficult decisions and will face more ahead. He stated the presentation clarified many issues and recognized that despite the changes made, the district still needs support.

[4:28:07 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN expressed appreciation for the Fairbanks team's presentation and acknowledged the district's accomplishments despite fiscal instability and unpredictability from the legislature. She agreed with the point about the lack of consistent BSA (Base Student Allocation) increases, referencing testimony from Lexi Painter that the state had previously made regular adjustments but has not done so in recent years, which has negatively affected schools.

PUBLIC TESTIMONY:
STATE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ALASKA

[4:28:37 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN continued public testimony on the state of education in Alaska.

[4:29:08 PM](#)

SHARON HANSEN, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said as a longtime Fairbanks resident and parent of two children—one attending a neighborhood school and the other a charter school. She expressed concern that the current structure of school choice forces parents to choose between personal needs and the health of their community, as neighborhood schools are closed and diminished due to underfunding. She emphasized that all schools, including charters, face inflationary pressures and need stable funding. She voiced full support for HB 69 and called on legislators to be

held accountable for their votes, urging inflation-proof education funding to keep Alaska communities strong.

[4:31:32 PM](#)

ERIKA BURR, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said she has been an educator for 15 years and emphasized that adequate funding enables reasonable class sizes, functional buildings, and strong programs, which foster student success and well-being. She stated that overcrowded classrooms harm student-teacher relationships, limit support, and drive educators to leave the profession. She urged legislators to invest in public education to retain families and teachers in Alaska.

[4:34:47 PM](#)

CHRISTINA TURMAN, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said that after significant school closures in Fairbanks, arguments about inefficiency or low enrollment no longer hold. She emphasized that even with drastic cuts, the district still faces a \$6 million deficit, and the quality of education has suffered. She urged legislators to collaborate across party lines and pass a sustainable education funding solution this session. She stressed that the situation is urgent and called on lawmakers to stop treating education as a political issue and take meaningful action.

[4:37:40 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN disclosed that she sits on board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from Alaska, Oregon, Washington Area State Conference, and that Ms. Grady-Wyche is the Alaska education chair for the organization.

[4:38:02 PM](#)

ROZLYN GRADY-WYCHE, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said she is a special education teacher, parent of five Anchorage students, and education advocate. She urged the Legislature to address systemic racism, educator retention, and chronic underfunding. She emphasized that overwhelming caseloads, lack of culturally responsive curriculum, and inadequate support are pushing educators out of the profession, especially educators of color. She called for funding, equity, and active legislative engagement in schools, stating that education is about justice, opportunity, and community. She challenged legislators to partner in creating meaningful change and to uphold Alaska's constitutional promise to all students.

[4:41:42 PM](#)

MOLLY PROUE, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said she is a Fairbanks parent and archaeologist. She expressed deep concern about the state of education funding, stating that for the first time she is questioning whether it's responsible to raise her children in Alaska. She emphasized that neighborhood schools are not only educational spaces but also vital community hubs that foster support networks and stabilize populations. She urged legislators to raise the Base Student Allocation (BSA) to reflect inflation, avoid further school closures, and protect the futures of Alaska's children.

[4:44:02 PM](#)

AMY SKRABA, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said she is a parent and firefighter and urged legislators to work together this session to address Alaska's education funding crisis. She shared that for the first time since moving to Alaska in 2008, her family is considering leaving due to the continued loss of resources, school closures, and rising class sizes. She described the situation as a "death spiral" and stressed that children should not bear the consequences of inadequate planning and funding. She asked lawmakers to prioritize and support increased school funding statewide.

[4:46:30 PM](#)

JACQUELINE MUEHLBAUER, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said she is a parent and volunteer at Pearl Creek Elementary School. She emphasized the value of after-school reading programs like Battle of the Books and their role in supporting working families. She urged the legislature to raise the Base Student Allocation (BSA), fully fund student transportation, and address deferred maintenance. She warned that stagnant funding forces harmful decisions like school closures and overcrowded classrooms. She highlighted a local proposal to convert Pearl Creek into a STEAM magnet school and stressed that such creative efforts require adequate state support to succeed.

[4:49:20 PM](#)

CHRISTINA RIED, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said she is a longtime Fairbanks resident, single mother, and first-year music teacher at Barnette Magnet School. She described Barnette as a successful, diverse K-8 school of choice with strong academic outcomes, no transportation costs, and a waitlist of 500

students. She warned that proposed budget cuts threaten the magnet school model and would disproportionately impact Title I schools and high-needs neighborhoods. She urged support for HB 69 and emphasized that schools of choice like Barnette offer a sustainable, high-performing option for public education in Alaska.

[4:53:13 PM](#)

REBECCA SIEGEL, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said she is a middle school teacher and testified that stagnant funding has led to cuts in teaching and special needs aide positions, even as student needs have increased. She stated that high pupil-to-teacher ratios hinder individual attention and relationship-building with high-risk students. She shared that low wages make it difficult to fill key roles, including substitutes and special education aides, and that classroom budgets are so limited she now buys science lab materials out of pocket. She urged the legislature to increase the Base Student Allocation (BSA).

[4:55:00 PM](#)

ASHLEY MINAEI, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of school funding. She said that she and her husband returned to Alaska to raise their children in the strong communities they remembered from their childhoods. She emphasized that quality education is essential to that vision and expressed concern that underfunded schools are driving families and young professionals out of the state. She shared that even her mother, a retired award-winning Anchorage School District (ASD) teacher, said she would not remain in the profession under current conditions. She urged legislators to invest in education and communities to give families a reason to stay in Alaska.

[4:57:47 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN held public testimony open on the state of education in Alaska.

[4:58:10 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:48 p.m.