

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT MEETING
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 10, 2025
8:01 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Jesse Kiehl
Senator Mike Cronk

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

All members present

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

All members present

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Elexie Moore

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): ALASKA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

BOBBY BURGESS, Member

Fairbanks North Star Borough School Board

Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

AUDRA HULL, Parent

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District

Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

MORGAN DULIAN, Member

Fairbanks North Star Borough School Board

Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

PHYLLIS EVAN, Member

Kuspuk School Board

Lower Kalskag, Alaska

Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

REBECCA STALLWORTH, Director

Administrative Projects

Kuspuk School District

Aniak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

KERRY IRONS, President

Kodiak Island Borough School Board

Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

OLIVE JACKSON, Student

Kodiak High School

Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

MINNA TRENER, Student

Kodiak High School

Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

REBECCA HAMON, Member
Bristol Bay School Board
Naknek, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

AUBREE SCHNITTKER, Student
Bristol Bay High School
Naknek, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

ADRIANA PACHECO, Student
Bristol Bay High School
Naknek, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools

TONY LOVELL, Chair
Southeast Island School Board
Thorn Bay, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

TEYANA TAYLOR, Student Representative
Southeast Island School District
Thorn Bay, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

TERRY MANN, Member
Dillingham City School Board
Dillingham, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

REAGAN WINGARD, Student
Sitka School District
Sitka, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

FRANCIS MYERS, Student
Sitka School District
Sitka, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

OLIVIA SCAN, Student
Sitka School District
Sitka, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

JASMINE WOLFE, Student
Sitka School District
Sitka, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

DARLENE TRIGG, President
Nome School District Board
Nome, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

ANGELA OMEDELINA, Student Representative
Nome Beltz Middle High School
Nome, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

KAY ANDREWS, President
Southwest Region School Board
Dillingham, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

STEVE KAUFMAN, Member
Yakutat School Board
Yakutat, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

NELLIE VALE, Student
Yakutat School District
Yakutat, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

SARAH ARMSTRONG, Member
Lake and Peninsula School Board
Iliamna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

BETH HILL, Member
Lake and Peninsula School Board
Kokhanok, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

DALEN NICOLAI, Student
Yupiiit School District
Akiachak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

MELANIE KASAYULIE ALEXIE, Member,
Yupiiit School Board

Akiachak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

IVAN IVAN, Member

Yupiit School District

Akiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

EMERSON KAPP, Student Representative

Kenai Borough School District

Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

PENNY VADLA, Member

Kenai School Board

Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

DAVID GIBSON, President

Unalaska School Board

Unalaska, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

AMANDA SCHMAHL, Member

Unalaska School Board

Unalaska, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

KERRY MAHONEY, Member

Unalaska School Board

Unalaska, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

BRIAN RANKIN, Member

Unalaska School Board

Unalaska, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

LAURIE THOMAS, President

Yukon Flats School Board

Fort Yukon, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

MELINDA PETER, Member

Yukon Flats School Board

Fort Yukon, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

JENNA HAMM, Member
Denali Borough School Board
Healy, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

PEYTON HAMMOND, Student
Denali Borough School District
Healy, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

JENNA SHAY, Student
Service High School
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

ELLA WHEELLES, Student
Dimond High School
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

KAI GRADY, Youth Representative
Anchorage Assembly
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

BELLA GUNTHER-CHAVEZ, Student
South High School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

SAVANNAH OVERBAY, Student
Minto School
Yukon Koyukuk School District
Minto, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

BARB JEWELL, President
Cordova School Board
Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

PETE HOEPFNER, Member
Cordova School Board
Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

MERLIN MATCHIAN, Student
Chevak School
Kashunamiut School District
Chevak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

SHARAI PINGAYAK, Student
Chevak School
Kashunamiut School District

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

TAW LINDSEY, Superintendent
Annette Island School District
Metlakatla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

REESE TAYLOR, Student
Metlakatla High School
Annette Island School District.
Metlakatla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on Alaska's Public Schools.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:01:15 AM

CO-CHAIR HIMSHOOT called the joint meeting of House and Senate Education Standing Committees to order at 8:01 a.m. Present at the call to order were Representatives Dibert, Eischeid, Underwood, Schwanke, Elam, Co-Chair Story, and Co-Chair Himschoot.

CO-CHAIR HIMSHOOT turned the gavel over to Chair Tobin at 8:01:51 a.m.

CHAIR TOBIN stated that present at the call to order were Senators Bjorkman, Cronk, Stevens, Kiehl, and Chair Tobin.

PRESENTATION(S): ALASKA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS - LEGISLATIVE FLY IN

8:02:40 AM

CHAIR TOBIN announced the presentation Alaska's Public Schools and thanked testifiers for their willingness to share what is happening in schools throughout Alaska.

FAIRBANKS NORTH STAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

8:03:47 AM

CHAIR TOBIN invited members from the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District to testify.

8:04:03 AM

BOBBY BURGESS, Member, Fairbanks North Star Borough School Board, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He stated that the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District eliminated 200 jobs, including teaching and support staff, and 25 administrative positions. He said the district cut programs such as elementary band and orchestra, the Extended Learning Program, and closed Ben Eielson Junior/Senior High School, a military-connected school on Eielson Air Force Base, along with six elementary schools. He noted average class sizes increased to 25 in kindergarten, 29 in elementary grades, and 31 in junior high and high school, with some classes exceeding these numbers. He emphasized that continued stagnant state funding forced repeated budget cuts over the past five years, severely impacting the district's structure and the community.

MR. BURGESS said the district has made difficult choices and found all possible efficiencies to balance the budget while remaining accountable. He shared that after extensive public engagement—including work sessions, listening sessions, public hearings, and hundreds of emails and conversations—the school board voted to close three more elementary schools. He described the emotional impact of that vote, particularly closing Pearl Creek Elementary where one of his close friends teaches. He warned that without a significant increase in revenue from the state, the district will face further cuts that will compromise the quality of education.

8:06:14 AM

AUDRA HULL, Parent, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She described sitting through hours of meetings after learning her children's school was on the closure list. She explained that Hunter Elementary has the highest percentage of Alaska Native and American Indian students at 45.9 percent and the highest rate of economically disadvantaged students at 67 percent. She noted Hunter is the only trauma-informed elementary school in the district, serving students who face challenges such as food insecurity, unstable housing, and violence. Despite these hardships and ongoing staff reductions, educators at

Hunter achieved a 16.4 percent gain in the district's leading goal, surpassing the district target of 5 percent.

MS. HULL shared that while her school was ultimately spared from closure, three others were not, and she sat with grieving parents who lost their school communities. She expressed both guilt and concern for how long her school could remain open given continued budget cuts. She emphasized that six elementary schools have already been closed and questioned how much more the district can withstand.

[8:07:45 AM](#)

MORGAN DULIAN, Member, Fairbanks North Star Borough School Board, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said as a board member and parent she voted on February 4 to close her own children's school, Pearl Creek Elementary, along with Midnight Sun and Two Rivers Elementary. She recalled her son crying the next morning, telling her he wished she had voted differently. She stressed that even after outsourcing custodians and closing schools, the district still faces an \$8.7 million deficit. She urged lawmakers to fund education immediately and work across the aisle to find a compromise on HB 69, warning that Fairbanks is the "canary in the coal mine" and the district is suffocating.

KUSPUK SCHOOL DISTRICT

[8:09:22 AM](#)

PHYLLIS EVAN, Member, Kuspuk School Board, Lower Kalskag, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She expressed gratitude for funding recently provided to schools in Crooked Creek and Sleetmute. She stated that other district schools, built over 40 years ago, now face similar infrastructure issues and will require support in the near future. She emphasized the importance of both certified and classified staff in rural schools and shared her perspective as a former substitute teacher, highlighting the need to adapt instruction to meet students' needs, including addressing housing and visa challenges. She urged lawmakers to continue supporting small communities to ensure students have safe, warm buildings and consistent access to education, regardless of location.

[8:12:15 AM](#)

REBECCA STALLWORTH, Director, Administrative Projects, Kuspuk School District, Aniak, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She shared her experience working in the district

office and previously serving as a principal for three years. She said she was consistently short-staffed and often had to fill roles such as cook or substitute teacher due to staffing shortages in rural villages. She stressed that schools in these areas face difficult conditions, including building closures from lack of heat, and emphasized the importance of keeping schools open to provide a safe space for students who cannot easily access boarding schools. She urged support for increasing the Base Student Allocation (BSA) to ensure access to student services, hire counselors, and recruit more teachers.

KODIAK ISLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT

8:13:45 AM

KERRY IRONS, President, Kodiak Island Borough School Board, Kodiak, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She stated she would be speaking as a member of the school board and as a retired educator and community member. She introduced the student testifiers from Kodiak.

8:14:16 AM

OLIVE JACKSON, Student, Kodiak High School, Kodiak, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She stated that decreased school funding has directly impacted her education by reducing the number of available teachers, leading to staff burnout and overcrowded classes. She explained that her Spanish II class was combined with Spanish III and IV, making it extremely difficult to learn effectively due to the wide range of skill levels. She noted that the teacher responsible for this course also teaches multiple subjects and serves as the student government advisor, calling the workload unsustainable. She expressed concern that such demands will eventually drive away even the most dedicated educators.

8:15:58 AM

MINNA TRENER, Student, Kodiak High School, Kodiak, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said she is a junior and class sizes have increased significantly over the past three years, demonstrating a lack of state prioritization for education. She explained that overloaded teachers struggle to provide individualized support, leaving many students confused and underserved. She acknowledged that teachers take on multiple roles, including emotional support, in the absence of other resources. She urged that quality education and passionate teachers should be treated as essentials, not privileges.

8:17:17 AM

MS. IRONS stated that the school board, in partnership with the superintendent and staff, prioritizes being responsible stewards of public funds while striving to deliver quality education as efficiently as possible. She explained that to address a \$4 million deficit in Fiscal Year 2025—about 8 percent of expenditures—Kodiak cut administrative, teaching, counseling, coaching, and library positions, along with student activities, resulting in larger class sizes and decreased support for staff and students. She reported that for Fiscal Year 2026, the district plans another \$4 million in cuts, including the closure of an elementary school—a painful decision that has deeply affected the community. She warned that without increased state funding, further reductions will likely impact student activities and essential programs, and she questioned how the district can continue fulfilling its mission given the growing gap between revenue and costs.

BRISTOL BAY SCHOOL DISTRICT

[8:20:12 AM](#)

REBECCA HAMON, Member, Bristol Bay School Board, Naknek, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She introduced the student testifiers from Bristol Bay.

[8:20:30 AM](#)

AUBREE SCHNITTKER, Student, Bristol Bay High School, Naknek, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She stated that mental health significantly impacts everyone in her community, including students, staff, elders, and adults. She noted that many turn to substances as a way to cope, highlighting the need for professional mental health support. She explained that social-emotional learning is currently funded by the local clinic, not the school budget, and while some students value these lessons, others dismiss them. She expressed strong support for HB 41, which focuses on mental health in schools, stating it would help students and staff grow into healthier community members.

ADRIANA PACHECO, Student, Bristol Bay High School, Naknek, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She expressed strong support for HB 69 and highlighted how low funding is negatively affecting basic and essential school services. She explained that the school lunch program suffers due to inflation and high shipping costs, leaving students with very limited meal options. She added that teachers often pay out of pocket for educational resources and that broken bathroom stall locks compromise student privacy. She emphasized that lack of funding

threatens elective programs like band, dance, cultural classes, and before- and after-school activities, which are crucial in a small community where limited recreational options can lead youth toward drugs and alcohol out of boredom.

8:22:52 AM

MS. HAMON stated that despite stagnant or declining funding, the district has implemented creative solutions such as a regional career and technical education (CTE) program shared by four districts. She explained that while this collaboration expands opportunities, it cannot serve all students equally. Although the district does not currently face a financial deficit due to conservative budgeting, she emphasized that it suffers from a severe deficit in educational offerings. Over the years, the school has lost programs including music, art, home economics, shop, the library, classroom aides, middle school staff, and sports, and now has no electives, school nurse, or single-grade elementary classes. She noted that fixed costs, such as a \$20,000 monthly electric bill, are difficult to manage with limited funding and low enrollment. As program quality and availability decline, more families are choosing to leave the state in search of better educational opportunities for their children. She urged lawmakers to consider the long-term future of Alaska by investing in public education so students can envision building successful lives within the state.

SOUTHEAST ISLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT

8:26:38 AM

TONY LOVELL, Chair, Southeast Island School Board, Thorn Bay, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He urged legislators to prioritize education funding to ensure all children, regardless of geographic location, have access to quality education. He highlighted that the district serves rural communities and plays a vital role in student success, economic development, and cultural preservation. He outlined key funding priorities, including equity in student success, teacher recruitment and retention through competitive salaries and housing support, infrastructure and facility upgrades, and expanded Career and Technical Education opportunities in skilled trades and natural resource industries.

MR. LOVELL emphasized that students face significant geographic and financial barriers, and flat funding will result in a \$962,000 shortfall for the district, excluding inflation. He warned that without additional resources, the district will encounter teacher shortages, reduced programs, and worsening

facility conditions. As school board president, he stressed the importance of equitable funding to support teachers, students, and the long-term stability of Alaska's communities. He called on the committee to act now to invest in students and secure the future of the state.

[8:30:49 AM](#)

TEYANA TAYLOR, Student Representative, Southeast Island School District, Thorn Bay, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools and the critical importance of adequate school funding. She acknowledged strengths at her school, such as a strong free lunch program and committed teachers, but noted serious issues including failing heating systems, lack of mental health and academic counselors, and an unstable curriculum. She said staff are overextended and often shared across the district, and essential programs like band, choir, and foreign language are not offered. She warned that with no remaining areas left to cut, school closures are becoming a real threat, and emphasized that underfunding schools now jeopardizes the future workforce and leadership of Alaska.

[8:32:16 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSHOOT asked which school Ms. Taylor attends.

MS. TAYLOR replied Thorn Bay.

DILLINGHAM CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

[8:32:53 AM](#)

TERRY MANN, Member, Dillingham City School Board, Dillingham, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He stated he is a graduate of a small school in Kokhanok on Lake Iliamna and shared that he is a father of six, a veteran, a commercial fisherman, and a member of his regional corporation. He spoke about the loss of his daughter to a fentanyl overdose just days after her graduation and 18th birthday, explaining that her passing motivated him to join the school board to better protect and support children's education. He expressed support for HB 41 and emphasized his primary purpose in testifying was to advocate for Alaska's youth.

MR. MANN called HB 69 a necessary and urgent step to address the ongoing erosion of school funding, which has resulted in the loss of vital programs, staff, and students. He urged legislators to pass HB 69 not out of obligation but because it is the right and immediate course of action, stating any adjustments to the bill should increase its funding level. He

reflected on how schools serve as critical anchors in rural communities—for education, economic stability, and cultural identity—and shared personal memories of relying on school meals as a child. He concluded by urging lawmakers to act decisively, emphasizing that the state can no longer afford to go backward.

SITKA SCHOOL DISTRICT

[8:37:15 AM](#)

REAGAN WINGARD, Student, Sitka School District, Sitka, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said she feels fortunate to be part of the Sitka School District, which offers strong extracurricular programs, resources, and highly dedicated teachers. She explained that despite these strengths, the district has made significant cuts, including 24 staff positions, the elementary music program, and all librarian roles. Without an increase to the BSA, she said the district's \$2 million debt is projected to double by next school year, in addition to facing \$25 million in needed roof repairs. She emphasized that even with strong local support, the district still struggles and that many other districts are in far worse financial situations, highlighting that continued underfunding is threatening education across Alaska.

[8:38:40 AM](#)

FRANCIS MYERS, Student, Sitka School District, Sitka, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He stated that testimony has made it clear the current model of education funding is unsustainable and change cannot be delayed any further. He emphasized that as deficits grow, schools are forced to reduce staff and cut programs, making any delayed action a matter of playing catch-up in an already worsening situation. He supports HB 69, explaining that it addresses both inadequate funding and budget uncertainty. He stressed that schools are required to submit budgets before knowing their actual funding from the state, leading to premature cuts and forcing administrators to focus on budgeting rather than improving the school experience for students. He shared his vision for a school where students are excited to learn, but this cannot happen without addressing the foundational issue of adequate funding.

[8:39:55 AM](#)

OLIVIA SKAN, Student, Sitka School District, Sitka, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She emphasized that underfunding schools affects not only current students but also Alaska's future workforce and economy, especially as students who intend to become teachers are more likely to stay in Alaska.

She highlighted the importance of Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in preparing students for careers and noted that without strong public schools, families will be less inclined to move to or remain in Alaska. She urged support for HB 69, stating that the issue impacts the entire state and that students will continue to advocate for the future they deserve.

[8:41:12 AM](#)

JASMINE WOLFE, Student, Sitka School District, Sitka, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She stated that as a high school senior she is deeply focused on her finances and future, especially as the rising costs of tuition and housing increase pressure on students. She acknowledged these expenses as necessary investments in long-term success and personal growth. She emphasized that the most difficult part of passing HB 69 is securing access to the required funds, but argued that it is the constitutional responsibility of the legislature to prioritize the well-being of children and the state's future. She concluded that education is the highest priority and urged lawmakers to support HB 69 as an essential investment in students and the future of Alaska.

[8:42:31 AM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked Ms. Wingard if she was aware that the State Education Department proposed a regulation to reduce the amount of local tax dollars the Sitka Borough Assembly can contribute to the local school district. He asked whether she opposed the regulation or had a different perspective.

MS. WINGARD stated that she would oppose the proposed regulation because it limits the amount of funding directed to the district and ultimately to the students.

NOME PUBLIC SCHOOLS

[8:43:31 AM](#)

DARLENE TRIGG, President, Nome School District Board, Nome, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She spoke in support of HB 69 and emphasized that Nome Public Schools is a unique district with diverse programs, including two brick-and-mortar schools, a charter school, a correspondence program, and a career and technical education (CTE) program in partnership with Bering Strait School District. She noted the district also holds one of five tribal compacts for education grants. She stated that many proposed bills this session will impact the district.

[8:44:26 AM](#)

ANGELA OMEDELINA, Student Representative, Nome Beltz Middle High School, Nome, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She testified in support of HB 69 and introduced herself as the junior representative at Nome-Beltz High School and Co-President of the United Youth Courts of Alaska. She described long-standing facility issues at her school, noting that the gym has not been updated in decades and that oil buckets are present in classrooms and hallways. She shared concerns about outdated technology and Wi-Fi disruptions that affected student learning. She emphasized a lack of access to Advanced Placement (AP) and college courses, shared her frustration with ongoing challenges faced by teachers and students, and called for meaningful change.

[8:46:27 AM](#)

MS. TRIGG reinforced points made by Angela, highlighting that Nome-Beltz High School is an aging facility over 60 years old and was originally a boarding school. She acknowledged recent funding for repairs but noted it is insufficient to meet all facility needs. She emphasized challenges in teacher retention due to Nome's high cost of living and the district's inability to offer competitive wages. She urged lawmakers to finalize decisions early to allow for proper planning, asked that any new policies be accompanied by adequate funding, and stated that while the Reads Act has brought some success, Nome's small scale limits its impact. She concluded by recognizing the difficult decisions ahead and encouraged early action.

[8:48:35 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked if school counseling positions at Nome schools were cut in the past few years.

MS. OMEDELINA replied yes.

SOUTHWEST REGIONS SCHOOL DISTRICT

[8:49:19 AM](#)

KAY ANDREWS, President, Southwest Region School District Board, Dillingham, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She stated that Alaska's students are the state's strongest future asset and need proper investment to grow into leaders and a capable workforce. She highlighted rising district costs, including health insurance, transportation, fuel, utilities, and building maintenance, which limit funding for instructional support. She emphasized the growing need for mental health services, including school counselors and psychologists, and

noted recent student suicides as a tragic reminder of this urgency. She described critical infrastructure issues in the Southwest Region School District, including leaking roofs, failing HVAC and boiler systems, and aging facilities, with over \$45 million in deferred maintenance identified in the six-year capital improvement plan.

MS. ANDREWS stated that the Southwest Region School District strongly supports HB 69 and several components of the governor's omnibus bill, including safe learning environments and increased pupil transportation funding. She affirmed support for early literacy through the Alaska Reads Act, noting that the district had already prioritized reading proficiency before the act's passage. She advocated for funding through an increase in the Base Student Allocation (BSA) to ensure access to high-quality literacy instruction, materials, and summer school across all eight district schools. She emphasized that education is foundational to Alaska's future and called for a BSA increase as an investment in the state's workforce and prosperity.

8:54:43 AM

CHAIR TOBIN reminded attendees that they do not need to apologize for their strong advocacy on behalf of students.

8:55:12 AM

STEVE KAUFMAN, Member, Yakutat School Board, Yakutat, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He shared that he received an exceptional education in the 1960s from the Clark-Gross School District near Portland, Oregon, with access to a wide range of extracurricular programs. He contrasted that experience with the limited opportunities available to students in Yakutat, citing flat funding since 2017 and compounded inflation of nearly 40 percent, which has severely reduced educational resources. He stated that it is nearly impossible to provide students with the education they deserve under current funding levels. He urged the legislature to back Alaska's claim of being the greatest state by fully investing in education.

8:56:44 AM

NELLIE VALE, Student, Yakutat School District, Yakutat, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She introduced herself as the student council president of Yakutat High School and spoke in support of HB 69, citing severe funding shortages at her school. She reported that the high school currently has no sports programs and only one extracurricular activity—student government. Due to a lack of teachers, the school offers rotational classes, combines entire grade levels into single

classrooms, and struggles to maintain adequate staffing. Despite these challenges, she chose to stay because of a strong special education program, close-knit community relationships, and advocacy efforts led by the principal and superintendent. She warned that with a projected 13 percent budget cut, even the few remaining strengths of the school are at risk without increased funding.

LAKE AND PENINSULA BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

9:00:00 AM

SARAH ARMSTRONG, Member, Lake and Peninsula School Board, Iliamna, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She identified herself as a parent and former teacher. She explained that, beginning in 2017, the district cut 20 days from the school year to preserve essential programs such as preschool, food service, and limited sports. She emphasized that extracurriculars in this geographically large district are not optional—they offer rare chances for students to travel, learn beyond their villages, and form broader connections. She detailed the harmful impact of funding cuts on student morale, the recent loss of the food service program, and the increased burden on already struggling communities. She warned that continued underfunding threatens both the quality of education and the stability of rural communities and called HB 69 an investment in Alaska's future.

9:02:44 AM

BETH HILL, Member, Lake and Peninsula School Board, Kokhanok, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said she is a former teacher and a parent who has lived in Kokhanok on Lake Iliamna for 17 years. She supports HB 69. She agreed that Alaska's education system needs change and described her initial vision upon joining the school board five years ago, which included creating a place-based curriculum, a locally sourced meal program, indigenous language instruction, and expanded career and technical education (CTE) opportunities. She expressed frustration that schools remain focused on maintaining aging infrastructure rather than advancing innovation and noted the repetitive cycle of changing tests, curricula, and training without meaningful results. She urged the legislature to provide stable and sufficient funding to allow schools the flexibility to pursue lasting, forward-thinking improvements.

9:04:54 AM

SENATOR STEVENS asked Ms. Hill which proposed changes in the governor's bill she supports.

[9:05:01 AM](#)

MS. HILL stated that she supports changes to curriculum and believes Alaska needs to reconsider how and what students are being taught. She emphasized the need for forward-thinking, collaborative efforts to achieve meaningful progress. However, she expressed concern over the repetitive cycle of new tests, curricula, and training, which she believes fails to produce true innovation in the education system.

YUPIIT SCHOOL DISTRICT

[9:06:30 AM](#)

DALEN NICOLAI, Student, Yupiit School District, Akiachak, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He said students at Akiachak schools face challenges, noting that with only 15 teachers for 141 students, staff are overworked and at risk of burnout. He praised the dedication of the teachers and expressed concern that losing them would hurt student success. He reported that a two-month power outage last year caused food spoilage, leaving many students hungry and unable to focus. He added that broken facilities, including bathroom doors that offer no privacy, further disrupt learning and morale.

[9:07:42 AM](#)

MELANIE KASAYULIE ALEXIE, Member, Yupiit School Board, Akiachak, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said her district serves 512 students with 45 teachers, many of whom are working beyond capacity, and the district lacks a guidance counselor, leaving graduates without direction after high school. She reported that the school in Akiachak is sinking due to climate change, classrooms are overcrowded, and Tuluksak faces ongoing water and sewer issues. She emphasized that budget cuts harm students directly, and noted that schools serve as major employers in the community. She stressed the need for teacher housing and highlighted that flat funding of the Base Student Allocation (BSA) has placed serious financial strain on the district, which is dealing with aging facilities, rising fuel and electricity costs, and increased insurance expenses. She stated that under the current \$5,960 BSA, the district anticipates a \$1.5 million deficit in FY26 and urged lawmakers to raise the BSA by \$1,808 to match 2011 levels. She concluded by expressing optimism about the district's strategic plan to improve student outcomes.

[9:10:20 AM](#)

IVAN IVAN, Member, Yupiit School District, Akiak, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He introduced himself as a former House legislator. He acknowledged the challenge of expressing himself in English, as his first language is Yup'ik. He stated concern for student morale in the Lower Kuskokwim School District, which includes Bethel, and emphasized the importance of teaching children to be resilient and future educators themselves. He noted that flat funding since 2011 has not kept pace with rising costs, particularly in rural areas where fuel, food, and transportation via barge or air are significantly more expensive due to the lack of a highway system. He emphasized the district's efforts to engage elders and families in school activities. He acknowledged that teachers are overworked but remain dedicated. He urged the legislature to improve education funding statewide.

KENAI PENINSULA BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

[9:15:16 AM](#)

EMERSON KAPP, Student Representative, Kenai Borough School District, Soldotna, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She stated her opposition to HB 57 and acknowledged that personal cellular devices can be distracting but argued they can also serve as valuable learning tools. She compared cell phones to pencils—both can be misused, yet society teaches appropriate use rather than banning them. She emphasized that schools exist to teach students how to use tools effectively and that policies should reflect that educational purpose. She urged lawmakers to allow schools and districts to make individual decisions based on their specific needs and asked for trust in students' ability to learn and adapt.

[9:17:09 AM](#)

PENNY VADLA, Member, Kenai School Board, Soldotna, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She reflected on her 29 years as a teacher in Alaska, during which she saw schools thrive, and urged continued investment to maintain recent educational gains. She highlighted the variety of programs offered in the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD), including Middle College, career and technical education (CTE), arts, language, English as a Second Language (ESL), dual credit, job shadowing, and strong support for students with special needs. She reported a 37 percent improvement in early literacy under the Alaska Reads Act and expressed hope that similar progress could extend to higher grades. She warned that without sustainable funding, the state risks losing educators, staff, families, and key programs, which could lead to larger class

sizes and school consolidations. She emphasized the importance of public-school choice and called for an increase to the Base Student Allocation (BSA) to ensure excellence in education continues across Alaska.

UNALASKA SCHOOL DISTRICT

[9:22:03 AM](#)

DAVID GIBSON, President, Unalaska School Board, Unalaska, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He stated that he is a former science and math teacher who worked in the Unalaska City School District for nine years before switching careers to become a full-time firefighter due to the inability to financially support his family as a teacher. He noted that the district has consistently ranked among the top in the state. He urged the legislature to fulfill its constitutional duty to fund education, highlighting that Alaska educators are leaving at alarming rates. He reported that 33 percent of certified staff in his former district are leaving this year, citing low wages and the absence of a defined benefit retirement plan as major factors.

[9:22:59 AM](#)

AMANDA SCHMAHL, Member, Unalaska School Board, Unalaska, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She shared that although her degree is in music education, as a single mother of two, she cannot afford to pursue a teaching career. She analyzed the finances of a first-year teacher with a bachelor's degree on her island and found that after taxes, union dues, and retirement contributions, their take-home pay is about \$3,400 monthly. With rent averaging \$2,000, utilities and fuel at \$500, and groceries costing \$500 to \$700, teachers are left with as little as \$200 to \$500 for other expenses, making it difficult to afford living on the island. She explained that this financial strain leads to high teacher turnover, which disrupts students' ability to form lasting, meaningful relationships with educators. She emphasized the value of those relationships, both academically and emotionally, and expressed concern that without improved support and funding, students will continue losing the positive connections that help them thrive.

[9:25:45 AM](#)

KERRY MAHONEY, Member, Unalaska School District, Unalaska, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She urged support for Representative Himschoot's HB 69 and emphasized the need to inflation-proof education funding. She echoed earlier testimony

about the revolving door of teachers and administrators in Unalaska, noting that even a local graduate who returned to teach may not stay due to affordability. She cited high living costs, including \$1,600 for a single round-trip airline ticket off the island, as a major burden for early-career teachers. She called on legislators to fund HB 69 and ensure teachers receive a livable wage to support retention in rural communities.

[9:27:18 AM](#)

SENATOR CRONK asked how a \$15,000 incentive bonus proposed in the Governor's bill might help retain teachers on the island.

[9:27:29 AM](#)

BRIAN RANKIN, Member, Unalaska School Board, Unalaska, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He asked whether the \$15,000 incentive bonus is a one-time payment or an annual bonus.

SENATOR CRONK replied it is a \$15,000 bonus for three years.

MR. RANKIN responded that, in his opinion, the \$15,000 incentive bonus is not sustainable given Unalaska's current cost of living and described it as a temporary fix rather than a long-term solution.

[9:28:09 AM](#)

MR. CRONK stated he was a teacher. He asked what BSA amount would allow the Unalaska School District to offer teachers a \$15,000 pay increase.

MR. RANKIN replied he did not know.

YUKON FLATS SCHOOL DISTRICT

[9:28:57 AM](#)

LAURIE THOMAS, President, Yukon Flats School Board, Fort Yukon, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said that her district operates six schools above the Arctic Circle and faces extreme rural challenges, including limited access by air or boat. She expressed support for increasing the BSA and favors Representative Himschoot's HB 69. She noted that last year's increase was appreciated but insufficient. She cited high inflation, fuel prices—\$8.50 per gallon for gasoline and nearly \$10 for heating oil—freight costs, and ongoing impacts from the Yukon River fishing disaster, which has culturally and economically devastated communities. She added that rising health insurance costs prevent the district from hiring full-

time classified staff and contribute to teacher recruitment and retention issues. She also reported cutting the school guidance counselor, increases in suicide and alcohol abuse, and the constant threat of school closures.

9:31:55 AM

MELINDA PETER, Member, Yukon Flats School Board, Fort Yukon, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She stated that she has two children in the district. Despite underfunding, the district has seen improvements in reading and math scores, partially due to implementation of the Reads Act. She highlighted recent tribal support, including funding from the Gwich'in Tribal Government in Fort Yukon, which allowed the elementary school to launch a reading challenge called "Readers Are Tribal Leaders," with incentives such as reading pillows, book logs, and bicycles. Arctic Village Council also provided funding to help increase staff salaries and support student programs and travel. She noted the positive impact of the Tribal Leaders of Tomorrow (TLT) grant, now in its final year, which has funded activities such as Space Camp, university visits, career fairs, vocational training, and enrichment programs. She concluded by celebrating community fundraising efforts for sports travel and shared that the Fort Yukon Lady Eagles won their first 1A division state basketball championship.

DENALI BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

9:35:21 AM

JENNA HAMM, Member, Denali Borough School Board, Healy, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She introduced herself and Ms. Hammond.

9:35:33 AM

PEYTON HAMMOND, Student, Denali Borough School District, Healy, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said she supports HB 69 and emphasized that critical learning often occurs outside the classroom through career and technical education (CTE) and extracurricular activities. She stated that these opportunities, along with college guidance counseling, are typically the first to be cut during budget reductions, which weakens student preparation for life after graduation. She warned that ongoing budget shortfalls contribute to increased mental health crises and leave many students unsupported and directionless. She shared that as a member of student government, she has heard similar concerns from students across the state, especially in rural schools, and noted that school closures and long commutes are limiting student engagement and

access to resources. She concluded that HB 69 would help retain students in Alaska and strengthen the state's future workforce and infrastructure.

[9:38:14 AM](#)

MS. HAMM said she supports HB 69 and emphasized that adequate and predictable funding is essential to community stability. She noted that while the Denali Borough School District has been financially strategic, challenges remain. The borough contributes the maximum allowable local funding, comprising nearly a quarter of the district's budget. She highlighted the district's stable leadership under a superintendent of 10 years who prioritizes fiscal responsibility. As a school board member, she outlined two commitments: delivering a robust, individualized education through the district's "Denali Learning" model and maintaining small rural schools like Anderson School, which operate with one to two teachers and around ten students each. She stated that closing these schools would severely impact community vitality. She warned that without a BSA increase, the district's projected \$300,000 to \$400,000 deficit for FY26 could grow to \$1 million, jeopardizing both priorities. She thanked Representative Himschoot for sponsoring HB 69 and the committee for their attention.

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

[9:41:06 AM](#)

JENNA SHAY, Student, Service High School, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said she is a junior at Service High School in Anchorage and supports HB 69. She said her future and that of over 100,000 Alaska students depends on school funding decisions. She noted that the Anchorage School District faces a \$110 million deficit and, without increased funding, must make significant budget cuts. She reported that extracurricular programs have already been eliminated and more are at risk, including high school hockey, gymnastics, swim and dive, and all middle school sports. As the hockey cheer captain, she described the impact as devastating and unfair, emphasizing that students should not suffer due to the state's funding shortfalls. She urged legislators to support HB 69, stating it represents a commitment to students and their future success.

[9:42:48 AM](#)

ELLA WHEELLES, Student, Dimond High School, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said she is a junior at Dimond High School in

Anchorage. She expressed strong support for HB 69, which increases the BSA. She stated that after nearly 15 years of inadequate BSA funding, the Anchorage School District is in crisis, and students are suffering. She reported that, under proposed flat funding, Dimond would lose over 15 percent of its teachers and 20 percent of its administration, including her favorite science teacher who has supported her for years and remained resilient through a battle with cancer. She also noted that her curriculum principal, known for her care for students, may lose her position. She urged legislators to pass HB 69 to protect teachers, administrators, and students statewide.

[9:44:13 AM](#)

KAI GRADY, Youth Representative, Anchorage Assembly, Anchorage, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said that as the Youth Representative to the Anchorage Assembly and Secretary of the NAACP Youth Council she supports HB 69. She highlighted the overwhelming burden on special education teachers, sharing that her mother—a single parent of five—has experienced these challenges firsthand. She stated that due to underfunding, many special education teachers leave the state, resulting in students with disabilities being denied legally required individualized instruction. As the oldest sibling of four younger children—a brother in high school with an IEP who is motivated to do well in school because of football, and three younger siblings in elementary school—she emphasized the importance of proper funding to ensure that all Alaska youth receive a high-quality education and equal opportunity for success.

[9:45:14 AM](#)

BELLA GUNTHER-CHAVEZ, Student, South High School, Anchorage, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said she is a junior at South Anchorage High School, a participant in the Civic Leadership Program, an attorney and judge with Anchorage Youth Court, and a member of the Anchorage School District (ASD) Student Advisory Board. She emphasized her role as a representative of student voices and credited public education—including honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes—for shaping her into a strong student and leader. She warned that without adequate funding, the district cannot fulfill its promise to prepare students for college, careers, and life, and must cut engaging classes, electives, and teachers who inspire civic-minded leadership. She thanked those who support public education and urged lawmakers to consider their legacy, stating that investing in education through HB 69 is the only way to truly support Alaska's future.

YUKON-KOYUKUK SCHOOL DISTRICT

[9:47:06 AM](#)

SAVANNAH OVERBAY, Student, Minto School, Yukon Koyukuk School District, Minto, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said she is an ED Rising student state officer and she supports SB 41, an act relating to mental health education. She expressed gratitude that mental health is being recognized as a serious issue in education and explained that SB 41 would help develop personal safety curricula to guide students in addressing mental health in constructive ways. She stated that mental health challenges contribute to chronic absenteeism, substance abuse, and behavioral problems in her district, where many students face loss and difficult home environments. She shared that peers and family members who lacked healthy coping strategies often turned to alcohol or drugs, and she believes SB 41 will help reduce these issues by providing students with the education and tools they need to manage mental health.

CORDOVA CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

[9:49:41 AM](#)

BARB JEWELL, President, Cordova School Board, Cordova, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She noted that while other state departments have received inflation-proofed increases over the past 12 years, public education has not. She pointed out that the legislature awarded itself a 60 percent raise in 2023 but failed to provide a sustainable BSA increase, despite mounting inflation and flat funding. She explained that districts across Alaska, including Cordova, have cut staff, increased class sizes, reduced course offerings, and depleted reserves. She shared that, despite receiving \$680 in one-time funding last year—about \$600,000—the district still faced a \$900,000 deficit. A \$700,000 donation from the local tribe covered food service and activities, and the district rented facilities over the summer to make up the difference.

[9:53:19 AM](#)

PETE HOEPFNER, Member, Cordova School Board, Cordova, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He read from student reflections on the value of sports like wrestling and basketball, emphasizing how those programs foster discipline, persistence, and personal growth.

MS. JEWELL concluded by stating that Cordova now faces a \$1.5 million deficit and risks losing all student activities, food

services, and 4 to 6 certificated positions out of 25 total. She emphasized that this is not due to poor management but to a decade of flat funding amid rising inflation. She called for a BSA increase that meets 2025 needs and improvements to the state retirement system, warning that Alaska cannot expect better academic outcomes while funding schools at 2011 levels.

[9:55:26 AM](#)

MR. HOEPFER invited every legislator to visit Cordova and explain to the students what is happening with education funding, stating that the students do not understand the current situation.

[9:55:42 AM](#)

SENATE STEVENS clarified for the record that the Senate rejected the proposed raise for legislators on Friday.

MS. JEWELL responded that she had noticed the legislature did not inflation-proof itself.

KASHUNAMIUT SCHOOL DISTRICT

[9:56:32 AM](#)

MERLIN MATCHIAN, Student, Chevak School, Kashunamiut School District, Chevak, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He expressed support for HB 69, stating that its approval would help address issues such as staff shortages, facility repairs, and support for extracurricular activities. He recalled that in 2020, during the COVID-19 relief period, a similar after-school program had strong student participation and created a positive impact. He emphasized that expanding such activities would increase student engagement and interest in attending school.

[9:57:42 AM](#)

SHARAI PINGAYAK, Student, Chevak School, Kashunamiut School District, Chevak, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He stated that the school is short-staffed and in urgent need of increased funding, including higher wages, which would help retain staff. She reported that poor teacher housing conditions—such as water and sewer issues—make teachers uncomfortable and unwilling to stay.

[9:58:53 AM](#)

MR. MATCHIAN clarified that teachers often do not choose to leave but are pulled out by their sponsors, and when this happens, the school is not adequately prepared. He shared that, last year nearly all teachers were pulled out at once, which

forced students into online classes. He stated that he personally does not like online learning and prefers in-person instruction, noting that only one student at his school liked the online format.

ANNETTE ISLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT

9:59:39 AM

TAW LINDSEY, Superintendent, Annette Island School District, Metlakatla, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. He stated that he is in his 21st year with the district and sixth year as superintendent, to advocate for support of HB 69. He explained that the Annette Island School District (AISD), the only district in Alaska located on a federal reserve, serves students from the Metlakatla Indian Community. While the district was historically insulated from state budget crises due to federal revenue sources, flat BSA funding combined with inflation has now placed the district in a financial shortfall. Without a BSA increase, AISD projects a \$1.5 million deficit; even with the proposed \$1,000 increase in HB 69, the district would still face a \$500,000 shortfall, which it plans to cover using its unrestricted fund balance. He stressed that AISD serves a high-needs population, with 23 percent of students on IEPs, including 19 intensive needs students, and the district has experienced multiple student tragedies, including two suicides in the past year. He emphasized that mental health and social-emotional support services are vital and costly, and warned that without an increase to the BSA, the district may no longer be able to maintain those supports. He urged the House and Senate Education Committees to do everything possible to pass HB 69 at the proposed funding level.

10:01:44 AM

REESE TAYLOR, Student, Metlakatla High School, Annette Island School District, Metlakatla, Alaska, testified on Alaska's Public Schools. She said she is a sophomore at Metlakatla High School and supports HB 69. She shared that from her first day in the Annette Island School District, she felt accepted, loved, and welcomed, and attributed that environment to teachers who themselves felt safe, supported, and empowered. She questioned what a school experience would feel like if educators lacked those same supports due to inadequate funding. She explained that job insecurity can make it harder for teachers to build strong relationships with students and deliver high-quality instruction. She warned that without increased funding, many programs that enrich student experiences—especially in remote areas—will no longer be possible. She closed by expressing her

hope that all students in Alaska can feel what she felt: loved, accepted, and free to be themselves.

[10:03:47 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no further comments or questions.

[10:04:31 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the joint House Education Standing Committee and the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 10:04 a.m.