

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

March 10, 2025
8:31 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

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

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

All members present

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative Maxine Dibert

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JAMES FIELDS, Chair
State Board of Education and Early Development
Glennallen, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the State Board of Education Report to the Legislature.

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner
Department of Education & Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the State Board of Education Report to the Legislature.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:31:17 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN called the joint meeting of the Senate and House Education Standing Committees to order at 8:31 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Kiehl, Cronk, Stevens, and Chair Tobin. Senator Bjorkman arrived thereafter; Representatives Eischeid, Underwood, Schwanke, and Co-Chair Himschoot. Co-Chair Story arrived thereafter.

PRESENTATION(S) : THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

[8:32:17 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the presentation of the State Board of Education Report to the Legislature.

CHAIR TOBIN noted that the report is required by statute.

[8:32:49 AM](#)

JAMES FIELDS, Chair, State Board of Education and Early Development, Glennallen, Alaska, co-presented the State Board of Education Report to the Legislature. He introduced himself.

[8:32:53 AM](#)

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner, Department of Education & Early Development, Juneau, Alaska. Co-presented the State Board of Education Report to the Legislature. She introduced herself.

[8:33:00 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slides 1-2 and said he appreciated the opportunity to engage with legislature in working together to ensure every Alaska student has access to an excellent education every day. He noted that the State Board of Education Report to the Legislature was transmitted to the legislature on February 6, 2025. The timeframe for the report spans from January 1, 2024, through December 31, 2024.

MR. FIELDS said the State Board of Education consists of seven voting members, a student advisor, and a military advisor. He reiterated that he serves as chair, representing the REAA districts and proceeded to introduce the members of the board:

- Sally Stockhausen serves as the First Vice Chair and represents the First Judicial District.
- Barbara Tyndall represents the Fourth Judicial District.
- Pamela Dupras and Kimberly Bergey are At-Large members.
- LTC James Fowley is the Military Advisor to the board.
- Joshua Pak is the Student Advisor to the board.
- Amber Sherman incoming Student Advisor.
- Kathy McCollumn has been appointed to the Third Judicial District and will go through the confirmation process this spring.
- We are currently seeking candidates for the Second Judicial District - the Second Judicial District encompasses the North Slope Borough, the Northwest Arctic Borough, and the Nome Census Area.

MR. FIELDS recognized former board member Lorri Van Diest, whose term ended last month after seven years of service. He said Ms. Van Diest was a retired educator, always well-prepared, thoughtful in her guidance, and deeply passionate about improving public education for all students. On behalf of the State Board of Education and the Department, he thanked her for her dedication and commitment to Alaska's students.

[8:35:14 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced Co-Chair Andi Story joined the meeting

[8:35:22 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slides 3-4, Table of Contents, and said the State Board of Education Report to the Legislature provides a comprehensive overview of the board's work over the past year. The two-page Table of Contents outlines the report's structure.

[Original punctuation provided.]

Table of Contents

- State Board of Education Members
- Alaska State Constitution Education Clause
- Mission, Vision, and Purpose
- Alaska's Education Challenge Overview
- Regulations, Resolutions, and Other Board Actions
- State Board of Education: Subcommittees, Boards, and Commission Assignments
- Correspondence School Report: House Bill (HB) 202

Alaska's Education Challenge 2024

- Priority 1 Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade
- Priority 2 Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs
- Priority 3 Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources
- Priority 4 Prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals
- Priority 5 Improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes

- Other Department Functions and Services

MR. FIELDS said this year, the report aligns with the report within the five shared priorities of Alaska's Education Challenge, emphasizing targeted efforts and accomplishments. He reminded the committees that in September 2016, the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development established five strategic priorities aimed at improving public education for all students in Alaska.

[8:35:35 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 5, Alaska State Constitution Education Clause, showing a copy of Section 7.1 Public Education and AS 14.07.168 Report to the Legislature. He said public education, and this report, are grounded in law. AS 14.07.168 requires the State Board of Education to prepare and present an annual report in person to the legislative committees overseeing education. This report ensures transparency and accountability in board member efforts to develop, maintain, and continuously improve Alaska's public education system. By fulfilling this statutory requirement, it reinforces commitment to providing an excellent education for every student, every day.

[8:36:33 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 6 and shared the mission, vision, and purpose of the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED):

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mission - An excellent education for every student every day.

Vision - All students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them. - Alaska Statute 14.03.015

Purpose - DEED exists to provide information, resources, and leadership to support an excellent education for every student every day.

[8:37:10 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 7, SBOE Subcommittee Structure:

[Original punctuation provided.]

SBOE Subcommittee Structure

The Board has five committees aligned to the Alaska Education's Challenge:

- Reading
- Career and Technical and Culturally Relevant Education
- Tribal Compacting
- Effective Educators

- Safety and Well Being

MR. FIELDS said to support the alignment of the Department's work with the five shared priorities of Alaska's Education Challenge, the State Board of Education established five subcommittees. These subcommittees meet quarterly to:

- Develop goals that align with the education priorities,
- Review progress on key initiatives and policy changes, and
- Provide guidance on future actions to ensure continuous improvement.

MR. FIELDS said that focusing on these areas, the Board ensures that its decisions and policies directly support student success across Alaska's diverse educational landscape.

[8:37:43 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 8, Regulations, Resolutions, and Other Board Actions. He said the State Board of Education approved key regulation changes to strengthen assessment guidelines and educational standards across the state. The approved regulations included:

- Assessment Participation Guidelines - Updates to statewide assessments for students with disabilities (4 AAC 06.775).
- Assessment Cut Scores for the Alaska System of Academic Readiness (AK STAR) - Establishing new achievement levels for English Language Arts, Mathematics, and accountability sub scores (4 AAC 06.739 & 4 AAC 06.822).

Additional approved regulations included:

- Social Studies Standards - Revisions that include Civics and Inquiry standards along with updates to Geography, History, and Economics (4 AAC 04.140).
- Student Advisor Elect to the State Board of Education - Expanding the nomination process to all students, rather than limiting it to those associated with the Alaska Association of Student Governments (4 AAC 03.025).
- Broadband Assistance Grant (BAG) Program - Regulations approved in response to HB 193, Internet for Schools, which expands funding to improve school internet access (4 AAC 33.605-4 AAC 33.690).

[8:38:48 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 9, Regulations, Resolutions, and Other Board Actions, and said in addition to regulatory updates, the State Board of Education took action on several key resolutions and board decisions to support educational priorities across the state. Among the approved board actions:

- The board approved the State Tribal Education Compact Schools report, an essential step in supporting tribal self-determination in education.
- State Board of Education and Early Development Report to the Legislature - This annual report provides a comprehensive overview of board actions and progress on statewide education initiatives.
- The board reviewed and approved the final lists for the School Construction Grant Fund and the Major Maintenance Grant Fund, ensuring critical infrastructure improvements for schools.
- The board recognized outstanding Culturally Relevant Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs that demonstrate innovation and student success in career pathways.
- The board adopted a resolution encouraging local school districts to implement policies limiting cell phone use during school hours to improve student focus and engagement.
- The board approved new appointments for various committees, including members for the Mt. Edgecumbe High School Advisory Board.

[8:40:04 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 10, Correspondence School Report, and said as required by House Bill 202, correspondence programs must submit an annual report to the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), which is then included in the State Board's annual report to the legislature. The Correspondence Allotment Report provides data on:

- Student enrollment and demographics
- Allotment fund disbursement and expenditure tracking
- Assessment proficiency scores
- Curriculum reviews, including district policies & procedures related to curriculum approval

MR. FIELDS said to ensure complete and accurate data, the FY2024 enrollment and allotment information was used. DEED worked with districts to streamline data collection and ensure alignment with existing reporting structures. This reporting requirement is set to expire on July 1, 2025. The Correspondence Allotment Report was submitted to the legislature alongside this SBOE Report to the Legislature on February 6, 2025.

[8:41:06 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 11, Alaska's Education Challenge - Priority 1. He said the first priority is to ensure that all students read at grade level by the end of third grade. The Alaska Reads Act, signed into law in 2022 by Governor Mike Dunleavy and co-sponsored by former Senator Tom Begich, was designed to transform early literacy education statewide. By focusing on high-quality reading instruction, professional development for teachers, and data-driven decision-making, the Alaska Reads Act is a critical step in improving student literacy outcomes across the state:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Alaska's Education Challenge

Priority 1 - Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade

Strong Policy Makes a Difference in Early Literacy

The Alaska Reads Act, signed into law in 2022 by Governor Mike Dunleavy and co-sponsored by former Senator Tom Begich, is designed to ensure all students can read at grade level by the end of third grade. This landmark legislation seeks to transform early literacy education by incorporating systematic, evidence-based instructional practices rooted in the Science of Reading and rigorous educational and professional teaching standards.

[8:41:42 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 12 Alaska's Education Challenge - Priority 1, a bar graph on Alaska grade level skill achievement for 2023-2024 and another graph comparing Alaska and the national in reduction of at-risk students. He said the first-year results of Alaska's K-3 Literacy Screener (mCLASS DIBELS 8) show promising improvements, particularly in the primary grades—Kindergarten and First Grade.

Key highlights include:

- Kindergarten students increased grade-level reading skills from 24 percent at the start of the year to 60 percent by year-end.
- First-grade students improved significantly, with 61 percent meeting grade-level benchmarks by the end of the year, up from 42 percent at the start of the year.
- Alaska is outpacing the national average in reducing the number of at-risk students in early grades.

[8:42:18 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 13, Alaska's Education Challenge - Priority 1, and said the 2023-24 school year marked the first full implementation of many of these initiatives, and early results show significant progress in improving literacy outcomes. The full report provides updates on the department's efforts to support the Alaska Reads Act, including key initiatives that advance early literacy instruction, intervention services, and educator training:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Alaska's Education Challenge Priority 1 - Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade

- Alaska Reads Act District Reading Improvement Plan (DRIP)
- Department Reading Program
- Early Education
- Virtual Learning Consortium
- New Data Collection Requirements
- Title II, Part A: Supporting Effective Educators Funds used to Support Science of Reading Training
- School Accountability and Designations Alyeska Reading Academy and Institute (ARAI)
- Alaska's Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant (CLSD)

MR. FIELDS said efforts will continue to be refined and expanded to ensure every student in Alaska has the foundational reading skills necessary for academic success. He noted that the Alyeska Reading Academy and Institute was discontinued as of June 30, 2024, due to a lack of continued funding.

[8:43:04 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 14, Alaska Education Challenge Priority 2. He said to ensure students are career-ready and equipped with technical and culturally relevant skills, DEED has advanced several key initiatives that expand career pathways, workforce training, and tribal education partnerships.

Efforts include:

- Advancing State-Tribal Public Education Compacting to increase tribal involvement in education governance and workforce development.
- Expanding Computer Coding Credential Pathways, providing students with industry-recognized certifications.
- Career and Technical Education (CTE) Grants to help districts develop programs aligned with regional workforce needs.
- Support for Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs), which provide students with leadership, skill-building, and networking opportunities.
- Career Guidance Initiatives in partnership with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) to assist students in navigating career pathways.

[8:43:58 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 15, Alaska's Education Challenge, Priority 3, and said to close the achievement gap, DEED has focused on ensuring equitable access to high-quality education, rigorous academic standards, and targeted student support.

Key initiatives include:

- Updating the Alaska Balanced Assessment System to align summative assessments with Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Growth interim assessments, ensuring accurate measurement of student learning.
- Expanding early learning opportunities through Head Start, Pre-Kindergarten Grants, and Early Learning Coordination Grants, improving school readiness for young learners.
- Enhancing school improvement efforts through statewide cross-team collaboration, ensuring targeted support for schools in need.
- Implementing revised Alaska Social Studies Standards to provide students with modern, comprehensive learning experiences, reflecting state and national frameworks.
- Strengthening support for vulnerable student populations, including targeted assistance for homeless youth through

the American Rescue Plan - Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY).

- Expanding the Purple Star Schools Program, ensuring military-connected students receive academic and social-emotional support in a stable learning environment.
- Developing the Data Warehouse and Dashboard Project to provide real-time educational insights, improving district decision-making and transparency.

[8:45:19 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 16, Alaska's Education Challenge - Priority 4, and said to strengthen Alaska's educator workforce, DEED has focused on innovative recruitment strategies, streamlined certification processes, and professional support systems to attract and retain high-quality teachers.

Key initiatives include:

- Expanding the Teacher Retention and Recruitment (TRR) Initiative, implementing evidence-based strategies from the TRR Playbook to address teacher shortages across the state.
- Launching the Teacher Registered Apprenticeship Program (T-RAP) to create an "earn while you learn" model, providing career pathways for school employees to become certified teachers without leaving their communities.
- Modernizing the Teacher Certification System, transitioning to a fully integrated online platform to simplify applications, renewals, and reporting for both educators and districts.
- Establishing the Alaska Educator Retention and Recruitment Center (AERRC) to coordinate statewide retention and recruitment efforts, facilitate international hiring support, and host annual professional development events.

[8:46:32 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 17, Alaska's Education Challenge - Priority 5, and said to ensure safe, supportive learning environments, DEED has implemented evidence-based strategies, school safety initiatives, and mental health supports that foster student well-being and success.

Key initiatives include:

- Expanding Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to promote positive school culture and address student behavior proactively, with an increasing number of districts adopting the framework.

- Hosting the Safety and Well-Being Summit, bringing together education leaders, school staff, and stakeholders to collaborate on best practices for student wellness, school safety, and mental health support.
- Enhancing suicide awareness and prevention efforts, including statewide training programs, targeted grants, and trauma-informed initiatives to support at-risk students and staff.
- Collecting and analyzing district and student data, improving the use of demographic, achievement, and safety data to inform policies and interventions.
- Supporting alternate literacy screener participation, ensuring that students with disabilities and those needing additional assessment accommodations receive the appropriate tools to measure and track progress.

MR. FIELDS said strengthening partnerships with families, communities, and tribes, DEED is working to create safe, inclusive, and healthy learning environments for all Alaska students.

[8:48:01 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 18, Other Department Functions and Services. He said while much of DEED's work is focused on educational initiatives, the department also oversees several critical functions and services that contribute to the broader success of Alaska's education system.

Key functions include:

- Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) - Expanding access to financial aid, student loans, and scholarship programs to support college, career, and technical training.
- Alaska State Council on the Arts - Providing grants, arts education programs, and cultural initiatives that enrich student learning and community engagement.
- Division of Libraries, Archives, and Museums (LAM) - Preserving Alaska's historical records and cultural resources, supporting library services and digital education tools.
- Information Technology Services - Advancing secure data management, digital learning platforms, and technology infrastructure for Alaska's schools and education stakeholders.

- Mt. Edgecumbe High School - Operating Alaska's state-run boarding school, offering unique academic and career-readiness opportunities for students across the state.
- Professional Teaching Practices Commission (PTPC) - Ensuring educator ethics and accountability, upholding statewide professional teaching standards.

[8:49:25 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS moved to slide 19, containing contact information. He concluded his presentation by thanking members for supporting Alaska's students, educators, and communities. He expressed appreciation for their partnership in shaping the future of education.

[8:49:50 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked how the state is working to increase the number of Alaskans entering the teaching profession. He asked what efforts are underway to encourage Alaska's youth to pursue careers in education.

[8:50:09 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) is partnering with universities and school districts to grow the teacher workforce. High schools offer pre-teaching courses to engage students early. DEED supports the Teacher Recruitment and Education Preparation (TREP) program and an apprenticeship model focused on Alaska residents, especially paraprofessionals already working in schools. Universities provide the education, districts sponsor the apprenticeships, and DEED coordinates the structure and process.

[8:51:41 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS said he has long supported pathways that allow students to stay in their communities while progressing from teacher's aide to paraprofessional to certified teacher. He emphasized the importance of community ties in education, particularly in small towns where students benefit from familiar educators. He expressed hope that momentum is building to support this model more effectively. He commended the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) for making teacher preparation more accessible, especially through summer courses that balance workload and credit requirements.

[8:53:01 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP added that the name of the CTE course offered in many high schools is Educators Rising.

[8:53:16 AM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL said Alaska has not yet met its goals for growing the teacher workforce and asked for specific expectations and targets. The speaker acknowledged that new programs take time to show results but requested projections for how many additional Alaska teachers could enter classrooms in the coming years.

[8:53:44 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP The speaker said several apprenticeship-based teacher preparation programs are active statewide, including Bristol Bay Career and Technical Education (CTE), which was a forerunner of the initiative. She reported there are approximately 15 participants in the program and estimated 45 to 60 individuals statewide are moving through the apprenticeship model, which is outside of traditional teacher preparation pathways.

[8:54:20 AM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked if the program is at capacity at 60 or if more apprenticeships are expected.

[8:54:27 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said this is the first year of coordinating the apprenticeship model and its future growth depends on continued interest. The model relies on school districts sponsoring paraprofessionals already in positions. Legislative funding will support districts by helping cover education costs for the employees that participate.

[8:55:07 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY said Alaska has approximately 600 teacher vacancies while the university system graduates only 160 teachers annually. She noted that even with 60 additional teachers from the apprenticeship model, a significant gap remains. She emphasized the ongoing need to recruit from outside the state and the importance of making Alaska attractive for teacher retention. She expressed concern about the shortage of special education teachers and asked how many of the 600 vacancies fall into that category.

[8:56:04 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the department has data on special education teacher vacancies and will provide specific numbers later.

[8:56:13 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY raised concerns about deferred maintenance challenges, especially in rural school districts. She asked what actions the State Board is taking beyond adopting a project list. She requested information on how the Board is advocating for deferred maintenance needs across all schools, with a focus on rural Alaska.

[8:56:43 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) supplies information to the State Board to prioritize school facility needs across Alaska. The process involves a larger advisory board with statewide representation. DEED supports districts in preparing competitive applications for priority funding and provides feedback to improve resubmissions. Staff also travel to rural communities to document conditions and advocate for both major maintenance and full school construction where needed.

[8:58:08 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked how the State Board of Education is advocating to end the moratorium on school bond debt reimbursement.

[8:58:17 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said that at this time DEED has not taken an advocacy role regarding major maintenance funding or the school bond debt reimbursement moratorium.

[8:58:31 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked if Mr. Fields had visited schools in his district to assess maintenance needs, observe class sizes, and speak with teachers about morale. She requested an update on current conditions in those schools.

[8:58:48 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS said he regularly visits his local schools and has spent more time there this year while helping coach basketball. He reported that teacher morale is good and class sizes are manageable. He identified capital improvement project (CIP) costs as a major challenge, especially the high expense of required professional assessments. He has discussed with the Commissioner the need to restructure the process to make it more affordable for small districts to maintain infrastructure and access funding.

[9:00:14 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked if Mr. Fields' school district is facing a fiscal cliff and whether the district is operating in a deficit this year.

[9:00:21 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS said he does not believe the district is in an overall budget deficit but noted issues within specific funds, particularly due to the unexpected cost of replacing a heating system. He said the district plans to apply for the CIP list to recover from that expense. He added that the cost significantly impacted the district's building funds and deferred to Representative Schwank for additional details.

[9:00:48 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN commented that some schools have remained on the CIP list for over 20 years and cautioned him against "holding his breathe."

[9:00:56 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked where career and technical student organizations (CTSOs) are located and expressed concern that they may not be reaching rural areas. She asked if there is a parallel investment in career guides and whether the two efforts are connected.

[9:01:29 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the goal of both career and technical student organizations (CTSOs) and career advisors is to encourage young Alaskans to join the state's workforce across all fields. While the programs operate separately, they are interconnected in purpose. Career advisors and CTE (Career and Technical Education) professionals recommended starting with CTOSs to boost student interest in future jobs. In response, the department partnered with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development to place career guides in rural areas, with additional support through curriculum like rootED and collaboration with districts such as Bristol Bay

[9:04:48 AM](#)

CHAIR HIMSCOOT said she has heard positive feedback about the career guides and asked how their role differs from that of school-embedded guidance counselors.

[9:04:59 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said school counselors focus primarily on high school guidance with limited capacity for workforce development. Career guides were created to provide industry-

specific expertise, maintain job market connections, and support school staff. Counselors themselves recommended adding external specialists to fill this gap. Career guides work with schools to build the capacity of counselors and teachers in directly supporting students.

[9:06:10 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE UNDERWOOD said she has heard positive feedback about teachers on J-1 visas and asked if there is a limit on how many can be placed. She inquired whether there is a waitlist or if all applicants have already been placed. She noted the relevance of this program in addressing teacher vacancies, particularly in rural Alaska.

[9:06:37 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said she would follow up with specific information about J-1 visa limits but noted the hiring process is costly. The department is working with the Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) under a new statewide contract to support international teacher recruitment. She said the department plans to shift focus toward H-1B visas, which offer a pathway to long-term employment and possible citizenship. She acknowledged the value of J-1 teachers but emphasized their short-term role and the need for more sustainable staffing solutions.

[9:07:42 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked for a definition of ACSA.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP replied it is an acronym for Alaska Council on School Administrators. She said DEED had put out a contract to support international teacher recruitment and ACSA, led by Lisa Parady, won the bid.

[9:08:11 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT recognized Catherine "Cat" Walker as Alaska's Teacher of the Year and noted that, for the second consecutive year, Alaska's representative was a top four national finalist—an outstanding achievement. She asked if assistance could be provided to collect and post photos of past Teachers of the Year.

[9:08:32 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP replied in the affirmative.

[9:08:42 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked Mr. Fields about staffing reductions at Mount Edgecumbe High School. She said an advisory board member reported that 15 of the 32 certified teachers may be let go. She requested comments, possible solutions, or additional context.

[9:09:14 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS deferred the question.

[9:09:27 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said staffing at Mount Edgecumbe High School is being adjusted to pre-pandemic levels, with a planned reduction of about six staff members added during the pandemic for classroom separation. She clarified that although the superintendent previously reported a potential cut of 15 out of 32 teachers, that figure reflected a scenario without reductions in other areas. She noted teacher contracts increased by nearly 40 percent over five years—about \$1 million—and the department is reviewing those contracts. She emphasized that dormitory staff are included in teacher counts and that prior communication on the issue was unclear and inaccurate.

[9:11:44 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked for clarification on the number of certified educators at Mount Edgecumbe High School before the pandemic compared to current staffing. She said the current count of 32 educators seems accurate and hopes the reported reduction of 15 does not refer solely to certificated staff. She requested clear targets to understand past, present, and future staffing levels.

[9:12:15 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said that in 2012, Mount Edgecumbe High School had 22 educators for about 430 students. For the current year, 32 educator positions were approved, though only 29 were filled, serving 412 students. The department is now considering a staffing level of 24 to 26 educators based on school needs. She clarified that while all positions are labeled as “teacher positions,” many are not held by certificated staff due to state employment classifications. She noted that many of the pandemic-era additions were support roles, not certified educators, and that future enrollment growth could include more local Sitka students.

[9:14:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE referred to the correspondence report submitted in 2025 and noted the significant time required to

compile it. She asked whether it is worthwhile to require the report on an annual basis, as currently proposed.

[9:14:45 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the department aimed to reduce the burden on districts by pre-populating the correspondence report with existing student learning and enrollment data. She explained that two key reporting items—related to the uniform chart of accounts—must come from districts, as the department does not hold that financial data directly. She noted some legislators found the report unhelpful, as it did not answer specific questions, particularly around curriculum approval, which varies by district policy. She said the department can continue producing the report if the information proves useful to legislative decision-making, but emphasized it requires substantial district input.

[9:16:46 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked why there is a significant difference in correspondence program allotment amounts across districts. She noted that one district offers an allotment of around \$4,000, while others provide \$1,600 to \$2,000, and requested clarification on the reason for this variation.

[9:17:13 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the variation in correspondence allotment amounts is determined at the local district level by each school board. She noted some districts offer higher allotments—up to \$4,000—based on conditions such as student performance, assessment participation, or course completion. Allotments can also vary by grade level, with high school students often receiving more to support broader course options, including career and technical education or dual enrollment. She emphasized that each of the 32 districts operating correspondence programs sets its own policies for allotments and curriculum approval.

[9:18:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY said she had heard that some high school students are allowed to carry over unused correspondence allotment funds for post-secondary use and asked if that policy is set at the district level.

[9:18:56 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said that correspondence allotment funds cannot be used after graduation, as they revert back to the district. However, unspent funds can carry forward from year to

year while the student is enrolled, starting as early as kindergarten. Families often accumulate funds for high school expenses, especially for dual enrollment. She added she would verify if funds can be used through June 30 of the graduation year if a student took an early semester of secondary education.

[9:19:55 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked for an update on tribal compacting, including current progress, how the process is functioning, and when results can be expected.

[9:20:07 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said progress on tribal compacting was delayed a few weeks due to Representative Dibert's illness. DEED will present to the House Tribal Affairs Committee this Thursday, with Mr. Isaak leading the presentation; although he has taken a position with the Kenaitze Tribe, he will remain involved through a contract with DEED. A bill is currently being heard and is expected to move quickly to Senate Education. She noted that 5 tribes (6 when including a partnership with Nome), are participating and confirmed that tribal compacting remains on track. She added that the effort is structured as uncodified law to allow future legislative review.

[9:21:42 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY expressed concern about the early education program grants, noting that the FY24 allocation was approximately \$3 million with no increase for FY25. She said this amount is split among nine districts, suggesting limited resources, and highlighted that some preschools in her district—specifically in Klukwan, Gustavus, and Haines—are struggling to continue due to funding shortfalls. She recalled the original vision to expand the program, including support for an additional 0.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) position, and questioned why fewer districts are now receiving early learning grants. She asked for clarification on the vision and what could be done.

[9:23:26 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said DEED shares the urgency to expand access to high-quality pre-K and noted that a current bill proposes increasing the funding from 0.5 to 1.0 average daily membership (ADM) for qualifying districts. She explained that pre-K funding comes from two sources and supports three types of programs: Pre-Elementary Grants (PEG), Early Education Programs (EEP), and ADM-based funding. The \$3 million referenced supports 21 districts through PEG, helping them build effective pre-K

programs that can later transition to ADM-based funding. She emphasized that the READS Act intended for this system to grow over time and confirmed updates to regulations are underway to remove barriers reported by districts.

[9:26:02 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked whether a district receiving an early education grant, which lasts three years, could fail to transition into the 0.5 FTE funding and lose the grant entirely.

[9:26:21 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said it is possible for a district to lose its early education grant without transitioning to the 0.5 ADM funding, as participation requires an application and qualification. However, she emphasized that DEED's goal is to help all districts reach the standard for high-quality pre-K. She added that the department is currently updating regulations to provide support.

[9:26:54 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY said increasing funding for early education grants may be necessary to help more districts prepare for and access the FTE-based funding. She noted the pace of progress appears slow.

[9:27:16 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked whether the computer science specialist position, which was posted in January, has been filled.

[9:27:38 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP replied the Department is going through the state hiring process and will interview soon.

[9:27:53 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked about a position listed as an AI agent specializing in Alaska education law, referencing page 43 of the report. She said she was unclear on what the role entails, how it would function, or what its purpose would be, and asked for clarification.

[9:28:25 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the AI education law specialist position was created in response to school districts requesting guidance on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in classrooms. The role will focus on developing best practices—not mandates—for how students and teachers use AI tools, particularly in areas like writing. Once hired, the specialist

will collaborate with districts to create a rubric or guide to support responsible and effective AI integration in schools.

[9:29:32 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT said she still did not understand the reference and read the sentence, "additional achievements include developing AI best practices and testing AI agents, such as one trained on Alaskan education law." She asked what an "agent" is in this context.

[9:29:51 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP explained that the department is developing an internal AI tool, or "bot", trained specifically on Alaska education law, particularly Title XIV statutes. The goal is to allow staff and districts to search state-specific legal information without querying the broader internet, improving accuracy and efficiency. This AI agent is part of DEED's IT efforts to streamline legal research and ensure responses are based solely on Alaska law. She noted it is similar to the State of Alaska's Outlook pilot project and aims to support faster, more reliable access to legal guidance.

[9:31:21 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted that those interested in the topic of AI should attend the Budget Subcommittee for the Department of Administration, where discussions are ongoing about the state's exploration and use of AI applications.

[9:31:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked whether the approximately \$900,000 allocated for the dashboard is part of an annual budget commitment over multiple years.

[9:32:16 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP confirmed that the \$900,000 is included in the base budget and supports the development of both the dashboard and a centralized data reservoir. She said the goal is to provide school districts with real-time, standardized data that is consistently updated and accessible.

[9:32:39 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY referred to the report's mention of offering coding for Minecraft and CTE opportunities in 422 schools and asked whether those schools are in urban or rural areas. She requested more detailed breakdowns in future reports to ensure equitable access. She also asked if juvenile detention facilities, such as local juvenile services centers, are being

considered in efforts to provide students with relevant skills like coding, which can support second chances after leaving the system.

[9:33:43 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the department works directly with districts, many of which operate educational programs in juvenile facilities. She committed to reaching out to confirm whether those programs are using the Minecraft coding resources. She also said future reports will include more detailed data, including usage by students in such settings. She noted that rural districts appear to use the program more than urban ones and will provide data to support that.

[9:34:35 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked whether the department has identified opportunities to streamline or reduce the number of reporting requirements placed on school districts. She referenced previous discussions on the topic and requested examples of reports that are no longer used or could be eliminated to ease district workload.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the department contacted both rural and urban districts for input on reporting burdens and received substantial feedback, particularly about detailed staffing reports. She noted that many of these reports are tied to federal requirements. To reduce duplication, DEED is exploring a unified reporting system where districts submit data once, and the department funnels it to various programs. One example of a potentially burdensome state-level report is the Quality Schools Grant, which has significant reporting requirements for a relatively small amount of funding. She said the department is reviewing such reports and will provide a list, including those tied to federal or statutory obligations like READS Act certification reporting.

[9:36:39 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated he has worked for about 10 years to pass a civics education bill and expressed appreciation that civics is included in social studies standards. He emphasized the importance of young people understanding the responsibilities of citizenship. He requested an update on the state's efforts to promote civics education among students.

[9:37:06 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP replied that during her time as a teacher and administrator, she observed strong statewide interest in

providing students with a broader education in civics. She explained that previously, civics comprised only a small portion of the social studies standards. The new standards expanded civics content to be more intentional and aligned with the priorities Senator Stevens identified. She offered to compile a detailed report or have the Deputy Director provide further information on the updated civics standards, noting that the changes resulted in longer and more detailed units.

[9:38:31 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said she would like the information on changes to the civics curriculum in writing.

[9:38:52 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked for a update from the State Board of Education and Early Development on its collaboration with the university system to support student success.

[9:39:43 AM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN joined the meeting.

[9:39:45 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS replied that when he first joined the board, communication with the university system was minimal. He noted that a joint committee of two Board of Regents members and two State Board of Education members was later formed to meet quarterly and address shared issues. Due to leadership changes, those meetings stopped, but he has been working to reestablish them this year. He emphasized the need for consistent collaboration on topics such as the science of reading and acknowledged ongoing efforts by commissioners to reengage with the Board of Regents, with the goal of resuming regular meetings.

[9:40:49 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated she reviewed the sections on the Alaska Reads Act and noticed the absence of data under the reporting requirement for the annual convening. She asked for more information on stakeholder engagement, specifically how the department consults with Indigenous language experts and early learning professionals. She inquired whether the missing data will be included in a future amendment or addendum to the report.

[9:41:19 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that the department will finalize the annual report within a few weeks, covering the first full

implementation year of the Alaska Reads Act and addressing all reporting requirements. She explained that initial convenings were conducted in partnership with Region 16, and although Region 11 now holds the contract, those convening contracts are currently on hold. The department is seeking alternative methods to gather input, including surveys and in-person meetings, which were a key part of the original stakeholder engagement for the Act. She added that the department is awaiting a re-bid for the comprehensive centers, with the goal of continuing these convenings, and noted that Ms. Kari Shaginoff is leading efforts to pilot Native language screeners through a project awarded to the University of Oregon. The department is also working to fill Mr. Joel Isaak's former position and will include convening details, partner information, and stakeholder feedback in the upcoming report.

[9:43:02 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated that the Colorado READS Act underwent five iterations and anticipated that Alaska's legislation will also require adjustments over time. She emphasized the importance of a ground-up approach, highlighting the value of hearing directly from frontline practitioners about their experiences and identifying what is effective and what needs improvement.

[9:43:25 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY expressed appreciation for the work of the State Board and stated that both she and the House Education Committee are committed to collaborating on the issues discussed. She emphasized their intent to advance shared goals and deepen understanding. She added that the Commissioner would likely return for future discussions and suggested that a representative from a related committee might also participate in upcoming meetings, possibly via livestream.

[9:44:07 AM](#)

At ease.

[9:44:23 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting.

[9:44:26 AM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked for an update on the implementation of additional pay for National Board-Certified Teachers, referencing legislation passed the previous year that provided incentives for certification. He noted that a structure already exists to support teachers pursuing national certification. He inquired how DEED and the State Board have worked together to

implement those pay increases as part of broader teacher recruitment and retention efforts.

[9:45:19 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP explained that the National Board Certification bill was paired with legislation extending substitute teaching certification, and related regulations have been released for public comment. She noted that much of the feedback focused on the certification component, with the State Board scheduled to review it at their meeting the following day. She stated that the implementation system has not yet been established, as the department is still finalizing regulations. Although the bill became law, funding for the certification incentive was not included in the budget, and the department is waiting for the legislature to allocate those funds before proceeding with teacher payments.

[9:46:25 AM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN stated that it is common for bills to pass without corresponding fiscal notes being adopted and noted that the Governor's budget typically includes fiscal note requests in the following year. He asked for clarification, based on prior comments, whether the Governor's budget did not include the fiscal note for HB 230 moving into the current year.

[9:46:51 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP confirmed that the fiscal note for HB 230 was not included in the current fiscal year's omnibus budget. She explained that the bill passed through a non-traditional process, it was neither pulled nor rejected but allowed to move forward. She stated her understanding that the Governor was waiting for the legislature, which proposed the bill, to allocate funding for its implementation.

[9:47:26 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY stated that many districts have expressed significant challenges in providing a well-rounded education to students. She noted the volume of testimony received and highlighted productive joint meetings with the Alaska Municipal League, the Alaska Council of School Administrators, and school board members. She encouraged board members to engage with these groups for firsthand insight into current school conditions, emphasizing the need for adequate tools and resources to retain teachers and meet educational goals. She then asked how the board and department typically communicates with school districts.

[9:48:26 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS stated that his communication with districts typically occurs through informal, in-person conversations during visits. He explained that interactions often happen by chance, such as when he recently spoke with the Cordova superintendent during a regional tournament. He emphasized that his relationships with superintendents facilitate these discussions, as they usually have the most detailed knowledge about district-level issues.

[9:49:22 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY stated that during her four terms, she has never seen schools struggle as much as they are now to provide a well-rounded education and meet the goals outlined in the state plan, particularly regarding achievement gaps. She stressed the importance of listening to districts and showing appreciation to educators. She noted that teacher morale is often low and emphasized that expressing gratitude is one meaningful way to show support.

[9:50:16 AM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated that concerns about teachers and schools struggling have been raised for many years. She emphasized that the board and department are looked to for leadership as the legislature delegates authority to them.

[9:51:07 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee and House Education Standing Committee joint meeting at 9:51 a.m.