

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 12, 2025

3:32 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 18

"An Act relating to wireless telecommunications devices in public schools; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 6

"An Act requiring education in the history and contributions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders."

- MOVED CSSB 6(EDC) OUT OF COMMITTEE

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)

Professional Teaching Practices Commission

Heidi Barnes - Wasilla
Kimberly Bergey - Palmer

- CONFIRMATIONS ADVANCED

Board of Education and Early Development

Kimberly Bergey - Palmer
Kathryn McCollum - Wasilla

- CONFIRMATION ADVANCED

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE FOR HOUSE BILL NO. 69(RLS) AM

"An Act relating to education; relating to open enrollment in public schools; relating to school and student performance reports; relating to school and district accountability; relating to charter schools; relating to an annual report for correspondence study programs; relating to the base student allocation; relating to reading proficiency incentive grants; relating to wireless telecommunications devices in public schools; relating to the duty of the legislature to pass a public education appropriation bill; relating to the duty of the governor to prepare a public education appropriation bill; establishing the Task Force on Education Funding; relating to a report on regulation of school districts; and providing for an effective date."

- PENDING REFERRAL

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 18

SHORT TITLE: COMMUNICATION DEVICES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) WIELECHOWSKI

01/10/25	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/25
01/22/25	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/25	(S)	EDC
03/12/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 6

SHORT TITLE: ASIAN AMERICAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER PROGRAM

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) GRAY-JACKSON

01/10/25	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/25
01/22/25	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/25	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/17/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/17/25	(S)	Heard & Held
02/17/25	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/12/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR BILL WIELECHOWSKI, District K
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of SB 18.

DERSU SEATER, Mentee

Senator Bill Wielechowski
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced SB 18.

DEBORAH RIDDLE, Division Operations Manager
Innovation and Education Excellence Division
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided a review of the fiscal note for SB 18.

MATTHEW WITTHOEFT, Principle
Begich Middle School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 18.

DORA WILSON, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 18.

SALLY DONALDSON, School Counselor
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 18.

MOREAN HALL, representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 18.

ALLISON CURRY, representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 18.

MICHAEL MASON, Staff
Senator Löki Tobin
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced the summary of changes for SB 6, version A to version N.

HEIDI BARNES, Appointee
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as the governor's appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

KIMBERLY BERGEY, Appointee
Board of Education and Early Development

Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as the governor's appointee to the Board of Education and Early Development.

KATHRYN MCCOLLUM, Appointee
Board of Education and Early Development
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as the governor's appointee to the Board of Education and Early Development.

KIMBERLY BERGEY, Appointee
Professional Teaching Practices Commission
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as the governor's appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:32:02 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:32 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Cronk, Stevens, Bjorkman, and Chair Tobin. Senator Kiehl arrived thereafter.

SB 18-COMMUNICATION DEVICES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

[3:33:04 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 18 "An Act relating to wireless telecommunications devices in public schools; and providing for an effective date."

[3:33:23 PM](#)

SENATOR BILL WIELECHOWSKI, District K, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor of SB 18, introduced Mr. Seater his mentee, and briefly shared how he came to sponsor SB 18. He admitted to initial hesitation but was persuaded after hearing positive reports of improved student discipline from a principal who initiated a no cell phone policy.

[3:35:22 PM](#)

DERSU SEATER, Mentee, Senator Bill Wielechowski, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, introduced SB 18 and explained that SB 18 requires the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development to create a model policy prohibiting non-school-issued wireless devices in schools. School districts must adopt either this model or a comparable policy, and must have emergency exemptions. He described cell phone misuse as a

growing epidemic harming students' mental health and academic outcomes. Referring to studies and personal experiences, he said unrestricted phone use leads to distraction, reduced engagement, and diminished learning, contrasting environments at East High and Winterberry Charter School.

[3:39:00 PM](#)

MS. SEATER argued that loose cell phone policies normalize disengagement, while structured restrictions promote accountability and improved performance. He addressed school safety concerns, citing expert opinion that phones create risks during emergencies. He concluded by urging the committee to support SB 18, emphasizing its flexibility, community control, and broad teacher support.

[3:41:01 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said there is strong support in Alaska for local control of school districts. He asked whether SB 18 offers options for districts or if the bill eliminates cell phone use in schools entirely.

[3:41:34 PM](#)

MR. SEATER replied that SB 18 allows some flexibility for school districts. He stated that districts must prohibit the use or possession of cell phones during class hours, lunch, and passing periods. He clarified that the method of enforcement is left to each district's discretion.

[3:42:23 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted that SB 18, page 2, includes exemptions for wireless communication during emergencies but does not mention medical use. She asked for clarification on why the bill does not provide an exemption for individuals using a cellular device for medical purposes.

[3:42:42 PM](#)

MR. SEATER stated that under the current version of the SB 18, "emergency purposes" includes medical emergencies or the prevention of such emergencies, such as using a glucose monitor. He added that if the committee wants to clarify this further, the sponsors are open to amending the bill to explicitly reference medical emergencies or medical needs.

[3:43:32 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked how SB 18 might affect students in specialized programs who need to use personal devices during school hours. She expressed concern that the policy could hinder students in

academic programs who rely on unrestricted internet access for learning.

[3:44:13 PM](#)

MR. SEATER replied that since SB 18 leaves many details to local school districts, students could bring concerns to their local school boards. He stated that districts might choose to create exemptions or adjust policies to accommodate student needs.

[3:44:47 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI stated that another bill is moving through the legislature that allows more flexibility for local school districts, while SB 18 is more prescriptive. He explained that SB 18 would strictly prohibit the use of non-school-issued wireless telecommunication devices, whereas the other bill would require school districts or the Department of Education to regulate the use of the device. He said the sponsors would not object if the committee decided to revise SB 18 to allow more local control.

CHAIR TOBIN asked whether SB 18 would also prohibit the use of other types of personal wireless telecommunication devices, such as gaming devices like the Nintendo Switch.

[3:46:05 PM](#)

MR. SEATER replied that, as a student, he has not seen anyone bring a Nintendo Switch or similar gaming device to school. He stated that the current definition of wireless telecommunication devices likely does not include those types of gaming devices. He added that the definition could be amended if the committee wishes to address that.

CHAIR TOBIN stated that, according to some students, the issue is not cell phones but unengaging classes and large class sizes that reduce education quality. She said students have expressed a preference for distractions due to these conditions. She noted that students have called for an increase in the Base Student Allocation (BSA) to improve class sizes and instruction quality instead of banning cell phones. She asked for thoughts on that perspective.

[3:47:19 PM](#)

MR. SEATER said that addressing student disengagement requires a two-sided approach. He expressed support for increasing the Base Student Allocation but noted, from personal experience, that even in small classes, such as his AP Spanish class with 10 to 15 students, about half the students are on their phones

throughout the period. He stated that the teacher is exhausted from managing phone use alone. He suggested that this policy would give teachers a clear mandate from the state, reducing the burden on them and avoiding confrontational enforcement.

[3:48:05 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL joined the meeting.

[3:48:27 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI said he supports increasing the Base Student Allocation and reducing class sizes. However, he stated that cell phones remain a widespread issue, even in smaller classes, as noted by Mr. Seater. He emphasized that removing the burden of enforcement from teachers and establishing a clear state policy would be beneficial, adding that teachers could "blame" the legislature for the rule. He said SB 18 aims to keep phones out of classrooms during instructional time, while allowing flexibility for districts to permit use during lunch, breaks, and educational need.

[3:49:25 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS expressed support for SB 18 and acknowledged the classroom disruption caused by cell phone use. He asked to further explore the medical exemption issue. He gave the example of a glucose monitor, which requires immediate attention, and questioned whether there are other medical devices or conditions, such as heart monitors, that should be considered. He clarified that this would not mean allowing unrestricted phone use but asked if there are additional medical needs SB 18 should address.

[3:50:13 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI noted that this was the first Senate hearing on SB 18 and acknowledged that the House conducted several hearings and did good work on the issue. He explained that the House version includes a regulatory approach rather than a strict prohibition and includes model policy language requiring exceptions for medical and translation purposes. He emphasized that translation is particularly important in diverse schools, such as East Anchorage High, where students speak up to 95 different languages. He said the House policy also allows use in emergencies or when a teacher or administrator grants permission for educational purposes. He supported clarifying that medical use, including non-emergency situations like glucose monitoring, should be allowed and stated he supports giving districts more local control.

[3:51:41 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said the committee would now discuss the fiscal note for SB 18.

[3:52:16 PM](#)

DEBORAH RIDDLE, Division Operations Manager, Innovation and Education Excellence Division, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, provided a review of the fiscal note for SB 18, OMB component 2796, dated March 7, 2025. She said SB 18 has a zero fiscal note, and that the department could absorb cost associated with development of regulations, at this time.

CHAIR TOBIN announced invited testimony for SB 18.

[3:53:08 PM](#)

MATTHEW WITTHOEFT, Principle, Begich Middle School, Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation on SB 18. He expressed agreement with Senator Wielechowski's comments and acknowledged the value of cell phones for safety and communication, particularly when students are away from parents, such as during travel. He noted, however, that cell phones are a major impediment to learning and shared personal and professional experiences illustrating the challenges of managing device use among youth. He stated that teachers at his school have repeatedly thanked him for relieving them of that burden and credited early efforts and district-wide policy language for building community and staff support.

MR. WITTHOEFT addressed concerns about blocked educational websites, explaining that his one-to-one Chromebook school allows IT filter adjustments when needed. He emphasized that personal device use with unfiltered internet access and VPNs presents far greater risks than the limited benefit of accessing niche educational content. He concluded by referencing broader issues such as teen mental health and school safety, stating that restricting phone use has been one of the easiest and most effective decisions he has made as a first-year principal.

[3:56:24 PM](#)

DORA WILSON, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation on SB 18 stating that she has lived, worked, and raised her children in Alaska. She has served as a therapeutic foster parent for 21 years, caring for over 50 youth. She also serves on the Anchorage School Board and shared that on March 4, the board unanimously passed a detailed policy on student possession and use of electronic communication devices, including cell phones. She credited Anchorage principals and

educators for initiating the policy, which aims to improve academic outcomes and student mental health.

MS. WILSON expressed support for district-level flexibility in implementing such policies, recognizing that needs vary across Alaska. Drawing from her experience as a parent and foster parent, she emphasized that electronic devices, particularly social media, can be harmful to youth mental health if not properly monitored. She described the development of a school-day phone use policy as a positive step to support educators and students and thanked Senator Wielechowski for his work supporting education and youth in Alaska.

[3:59:44 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked Mr. Witthoeft whether, before implementing a ban on cell phone use, the school had a more flexible policy that allowed teachers to enforce rules individually, and if so, how effective that approach had been.

MR. WITTHOEFT replied that the school previously used a flexible system where classrooms displayed signs—red for no phone use and green for allowed use. However, after the pandemic, the number of students with phones increased significantly, and teachers were frequently forced to address phone distractions. He noted that larger class sizes compounded the issue. Inconsistent enforcement among teachers led to student complaints about varying rules. As a result, the administration determined a schoolwide policy was necessary for consistency and effectiveness.

[4:02:04 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SB 18.

[4:02:28 PM](#)

SALLY DONALDSON, School Counselor, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 18 and said she has worked in schools for 20 years. She shared an experience from 12 years ago when she witnessed a teacher returning a box of cell phones to students following a statewide test, noting one student claimed three phones. She used this to illustrate that cell phones have long been a significant issue in schools. She supported restricting cell phones in Alaska schools for several reasons: cell phones cause distraction even when not in use; managing phones adds unnecessary responsibility to teachers; and students interact more meaningfully with each other when phones are absent. MS. D concluded by urging the committee to consider moving the bill forward.

[4:05:27 PM](#)

MOREAN HALL, representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 18. She said she is a retired school nurse from Juneau and current assembly member. She highlighted bullying as a major concern, noting that students now arrange fights during school hours, record them, and post them online, creating additional trauma and challenges for school staff and families. She stated that students with medical needs or Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) could be exempted through accommodations, including Section 504 plans. On the use of translation apps, she advised consulting English as a Second Language teachers, noting that tools like Google Translate may hinder language learning. She emphasized the growing importance of focus in education, quoting author Cal Newport and warning that many students reach college without having read a full book. She urged support for SB 18, calling it a low-cost but high-impact step, while recommending some flexibility for local control.

[4:07:41 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked whether Ms. Hall was speaking for herself or an elected official.

MS. HALL replied she was representing herself.

[4:08:11 PM](#)

ALLISON CURRY, representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 18. She said she is a middle school teacher at Ryan Middle School in Fairbanks and shared her perspective on the impact of cell phones in schools, particularly with sixth graders. She emphasized that her students, born around 2012, have grown up in a world saturated with constant notifications, filters, and cameras. She noted however, that all students may not own a cell phone. She argued that public schools serve as a great equalizer and should be a refuge from digital pressure—a place where students are free from surveillance, social media, and distractions.

MS. CURRY highlighted the amount of instructional time lost to managing devices and stressed the importance of creating a school environment where students feel safe from being recorded or exposed without consent. She recounted an incident involving a nearby high school lockdown, where misinformation spread via student cell phones caused chaos, leading to a flood of parents surrounding the school and blocking access for emergency services. She urged support for SB 18, stressing the powerful

impact such a policy could have in creating a safer, more focused learning environment.

[4:12:11 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN closed public testimony on SB 18.

[4:12:24 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN held SB 18 in committee.

SB 6-ASIAN AMERICAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER PROGRAM

[4:12:37 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 6 "An Act requiring education in the history and contributions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders."

CHAIR TOBIN stated a committee substitute (CS) was distributed to members of the committee.

[4:13:00 PM](#)

MICHAEL MASON, Staff, Senator Löki Tobin, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, introduced the summary of changes for SB 6, version A to version N.:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**SB 6: ASIAN AMERICAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER PROGRAM
Summary of Changes
Version A to Version N**

Section 1- Version N amends 14.30.430(a)

Page 1, line 7: Delete "approved by the department". This change removes the need for the department to approve the curriculum, leaving it in the hands of Alaska's capable school districts.

MR. MASON stated that Senator Gray-Jackson and her staff collaborated with Legislative Legal to make a simple change to SB 6 intended to alleviate fiscal concerns. He expressed hope that the revision will result in a zero fiscal note and make the bill more acceptable as it advances to the next committee.

[4:14:03 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON thanked the committee for hearing SB 6 and expressed appreciation to President Stevens for his suggestion. She noted that she listened carefully to his suggestion and SB 6

should carry a zero fiscal note. She stated she was pleased with the progress and hoped the bill would move to the Finance Committee, reach the Senate floor for a vote, and then advance to the House.

[4:14:30 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited a motion.

[4:14:32 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to adopt the committee substitute (CS) for SB 6, work order 34-LS0071\N, as the working document.

[4:14:46 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and CSSB 6 was adopted as the working document.

[4:14:57 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited the will of the committee.

[4:15:02 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to report CSSB 6, work order 34-LS0071\N, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[4:15:18 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and CSSB 6(EDC) was reported from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

[4:15:35 PM](#)

At ease.

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)
BOARD OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT
PROFESSIONAL TEACHING PRACTICES COMMISSION

[4:17:27 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced consideration of governor appointees Heidi Barnes and Kimberly Bergey to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission and Kimberly Bergey and Kathryn McCollum to the Board of Education and Early Development.

[4:18:13 PM](#)

HEIDI BARNES, Appointee, Wasilla, Alaska, testified as the governor's appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission. She stated that she is a kindergarten teacher in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District. She has been teaching for about 10 years. She shared that she took time away from the

classroom to raise her son but later returned as a substitute teacher, working across all grade levels and with students who are blind. She emphasized her passion for teaching, highlighting the direct positive impact she has on students and the importance of fostering growth. She expressed a strong commitment to high standards for both herself and other educators and looked forward to the opportunity to serve on the Professional Practices Commission.

[4:19:48 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS acknowledged that serving on the commission is a difficult responsibility, as it involves decisions that may revoke a person's ability to teach. He asked whether the nominee is comfortable making such decisions if an educator is not meeting high professional standards.

[4:20:10 PM](#)

MS. BARNES responded that the decision would not rest with her alone but would involve group discussion and follow an established process. She acknowledged the difficulty of such decisions but emphasized the importance of thoughtful collaboration. She noted that she had reviewed the procedures and felt confident in the structure supporting those determinations.

[4:20:52 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked whether the current professional practice standards are adequate. He questioned if the standards cover everything necessary, if anything is missing, or if they are too broad.

[4:21:15 PM](#)

MS. BARNES stated that she believes the current professional practice standards are sufficient and cover a broad range of necessary areas. She mentioned that she reviewed them briefly and could not identify any gaps. She concluded that the standards do a very good job overall.

[4:21:44 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on the appointment of Ms. Barnes; finding none, she closed public testimony.

[4:22:01 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited a motion.

[4:22:03 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated that in accordance with AS 39.05.080, the Senate Education Standing Committee reviewed the following and recommends the appointments be forwarded to a joint session for consideration:

Professional Teaching Practices Commission
Heidi Barnes - Wasilla

He reminded members that signing the report(s) regarding appointments to boards and commissions in no way reflects individual members' approval or disapproval of the appointees; the nominations are merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.

[4:22:27 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated the committee would forward the appointee's name to a joint session of the legislature.

CHAIR TOBIN introduced Kimberly Bergey as the governor's appointee to the Board of Education and Early Development.

[4:23:02 PM](#)

KIMBERLY BERGEY, Appointee, Board of Education and Early Development, Palmer, Alaska, testified as the governor's appointee to the Board of Education and Early Development. stated that she is a product of Alaska's education system, having completed her education from elementary through graduate school in the state. She emphasized her first-hand experience as both a student and a parent who has utilized nearly every educational option available to ensure her children succeed. She shared that service to the community has been a lifelong value, modeled by her parents, and that she has consistently advocated for children across various roles and industries. She noted her extensive teaching experience across all age levels and throughout urban, rural, and remote areas of Alaska, highlighting her passion for doing what is right for Alaska's children.

[4:24:44 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked whether there is a student representative on the State Board of Education and Early Development.

[4:24:51 PM](#)

MS. BERGEY replied in the affirmative. She stated that the board has an outgoing student advisor who is currently mentoring the incoming student advisor.

[4:25:05 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked Ms. Bergey whether she is supportive of the board having a student representative.

[4:25:10 PM](#)

MS. BERGEY replied that a student on State board is valuable and is one way to stay connected to students.

[4:25:20 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for Ms. Bergey's view on the proper role of the State Board of Education and Early Development, particularly regarding its leadership and regulatory functions. He noted that Alaska's Constitution strongly supports local control through locally elected school boards but acknowledged that the Legislature occasionally imposes directives on districts. He asked how she balances the board's statewide responsibilities with respect for local control when deciding how to vote.

[4:26:07 PM](#)

MS. BERGEY emphasized the importance of engaging in meaningful conversations and ensuring that all stakeholder voices are heard when making decisions on the State Board. She noted the value of the board's diverse makeup and the regular feedback received from local districts. She shared that her broad experience across nearly every type of school in Alaska provides helpful perspective when reviewing issues and preparing for votes. She stressed the need for board members to stay connected to local districts and, as an at-large member, she sees it as her responsibility to represent voices from across the state, recognizing Alaska's geographic and educational diversity.

[4:27:35 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked whether there are areas or levels of management that should remain under the authority of local districts rather than the State Board of Education.

[4:27:58 PM](#)

MS. BERGEY affirmed the importance of local control as a foundational part of Alaska's education system, as outlined in state statute. She stated that the State Board does have an obligation to recommend policy and offer suggestions and ideas. She emphasized that part of the board's responsibility is to ensure a statewide system that provides every child with access to a quality education.

[4:28:40 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked Ms. Bergey to share her thoughts on the Open Meetings Act, specifically regarding transparency in agenda-setting, providing meaningful opportunities for public input, and committing to follow the practices and policies outlined in statute.

[4:29:10 PM](#)

MS. BERGEY stated that public participation is critical to the success of the board's work and emphasized the importance of following established policies. She underscored the need to provide information to parents, school districts, and stakeholders. She asserted that without including public input, the board cannot adequately serve its mission.

CHAIR TOBIN stated that she strongly believes the Open Meetings Act is essential to maintaining public trust. She emphasized that the work of the board cannot be done without that trust and expressed appreciation for the commitment to transparency.

[4:29:49 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked what role the State Board of Education should play in improving educational outcomes for K-12 schools. He also inquired about specific actions the board should take to help drive those improvements.

[4:30:13 PM](#)

MS. BERGEY stated that a critical role of the State Board is to analyze data to identify what is working and what is not, and to ask questions when outcomes fall short. She noted that Alaska's large geographic size can make it difficult to share successful practices across districts. She emphasized the importance of improving communication and suggested that the board serve as a clearinghouse for best practices. She stated her belief that this function is essential for advancing educational outcomes statewide.

[4:31:05 PM](#)

SENATOR CRONK thanked Ms. Bergey for her experience and willingness to serve on the board.

[4:31:24 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on the appointment of Ms. Bergey; finding none, she closed public testimony.

[4:31:37 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited a motion.

[4:31:41 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated that in accordance with AS 39.05.080, the Senate Education Standing Committee reviewed the following and recommends the appointment be forwarded to a joint session for consideration:

Board of Education and Early Development
Kimberly Bergey - Palmer

He reminded members that signing the report(s) regarding appointments to boards and commissions in no way reflects individual members' approval or disapproval of the appointees; the nominations are merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.

[4:32:04 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated the committee would forward the appointee's name to a joint session of the legislature.

[4:32:17 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN introduced appointee Kathrine McCollum to the Board of Education and Early Development.

[4:32:35 PM](#)

KATHRYN MCCOLLUM, Appointee, Board of Education and Early Development, Wasilla, testified as the governor's appointee. She shared that she had always wanted to be a teacher and began organizing educational activities for neighborhood children at a young age. She noted that, in her large extended family of 54 first cousins, college was not an expectation, and she was one of the first to consider attending. Reflecting on this, she became emotional recalling how she once discouraged others from going to college, believing it was only necessary for becoming a teacher. She expressed pride in pursuing her dream and in the successes of her family members in trades and business.

MS. MCCOLLUM said she earned her degree in 1988 in Idaho, taught first grade for a year, and moved to Alaska in 1989 with her husband. She began teaching in Palmer and remained there, working in the public school system until her retirement in 2020. Most of her career was spent teaching first grade, with additional experience in fourth grade, seventh and eighth grade math, and earth science. She was honored to mentor 12 student teachers and several practicum students, which shaped her understanding of what new teachers need.

MS. MCCOLLUM said she currently serves on the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) School Board and clarified that she was speaking today as an individual, not on behalf of the board.

[4:34:53 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked whether Ms. McCollum's term on the Mat-Su School Board had ended, if she would need to resign, or if it was possible to serve on both the local and State Board of Education simultaneously.

MS. MCCOLLUM replied that she can serve on both boards since the district board is an elected position with a different purview.

[4:35:31 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked if the Mat-Su Borough had added party affiliation to its elections and, if so, whether that change applied only to the borough assembly or also to the school board.

MS. MCCOLLUM stated the ordinance allowing a person to put their party affiliation on the ballot was passed last fall; it is a choice not a requirement.

[4:36:12 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated his belief that there is a statute that prohibits serving on the State Board of Education and Early Development, either while being a candidate or possibly while holding a partisan position. He asked if that issue had been reviewed.

[4:36:35 PM](#)

MS. MCCOLLUM said she had not heard of that statute but would investigate the concern further.

[4:36:56 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for Ms. McCollum's perspective on the appropriate boundaries between the authority of the State Board of Education and local school boards. He requested her view on where local control should end and where state involvement should begin.

[4:37:23 PM](#)

MS. MCCOLLUM stated that she supports local control, which is why Alaska operates through a system of school districts. She explained that the State Board of Education functions as an overarching body that works within the statutes established by the Legislature and develops regulations to implement them. She

emphasized that at the district level, the work involves direct engagement with parents and families to build community.

[4:38:05 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted a lack of breadth in experience and diversity among current State Board of Education members. She asked what Ms. McCollum could bring to the board to help ensure that all students have a voice and are represented.

[4:38:26 PM](#)

MS. MCCOLLUM asked Chair Tobin to clarify her question.

[4:38:37 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated that Alaska's education system exists to serve students and must operate in partnership with families, businesses, and communities that reflect the state's diversity. She emphasized the importance of ensuring that everyone has a voice in the process.

[4:38:47 PM](#)

MS. MCCOLLUM stated that representation on the State Board should reflect communities across Alaska, and noted her appointment to the Third Judicial District, a large region that includes Dillingham, the Aleutians, and parts of the Kenai Peninsula. She recognized the responsibility to listen to feedback and actively reach out to those areas. She emphasized the importance of improving communication from the board and celebrating statewide educational successes. After attending her first two board meetings, she expressed enthusiasm about new initiatives, particularly teacher recruitment efforts such as the "Green to Teach" program, which supports military members in transitioning to education careers through a six-month apprenticeship model.

CHAIR TOBIN expressed appreciation for Ms. McCollum's comments and encouraged her, as a representative of the Dillingham area, to visit Sleetmute, a community in need of an advocate.

MS. MCCOLLUM replied she would love that experience.

CHAIR TOBIN remarked she was uncertain if she would love it.

MS. MCCOLLUM replied that she would love it because she enjoys other cultures and resolving issues.

CHAIR TOBIN said Sleetmute has some major issues.

MS. MCCOLLUM agreed.

[4:40:37 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS expressed admiration for Ms. McCollum's 26 years of service as a first-grade teacher. He shared his own experience spending half a day in a first-grade classroom and noted how exhausting it was, even under the guidance of a skilled teacher. He acknowledged the energy required for the role and thanked her for her dedication to Alaska's students.

MS. MCCOLLUM commented that teaching first grade was what she loved to teach and went back after retirement to teach for a year following the COVID pandemic.

[4:41:20 PM](#)

SENATOR CRONK thanked [Ms. McCollum] for her willingness to serve.

[4:41:37 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on the appointment of Ms. McCollum; finding none, she closed public testimony.

[4:41:47 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited a motion.

[4:41:48 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated that in accordance with AS 39.05.080, the Senate Education Standing Committee reviewed the following and recommends the appointments be forwarded to a joint session for consideration:

Board of Education and Early Development
Kathryn McCollum - Wasilla

He reminded members that signing the report(s) regarding appointments to boards and commissions in no way reflects individual members' approval or disapproval of the appointees; the nominations are merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.

[4:42:13 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated the committee would forward the appointee's name to a joint session of the legislature.

[4:42:24 PM](#)

At ease.

[4:43:06 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of Ms. Bergey to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

[4:43:28 PM](#)

KIMBERLY BERGEY, Appointee, Professional Teaching Practices Commission, Wasilla, Alaska, testified as the governor's appointee. She said it is a great honor to serve and she wants to give back to the profession that was kind to her.

[4:43:48 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked whether any areas within the teaching practice standards are either too restrictive or not restrictive enough. He inquired whether there was a need for changes or updates to the standards.

[4:44:06 PM](#)

MS. BERGEY replied that the current Professional Teaching Practices Code of Ethics is relevant, applicable, and consistent with standards in other states. She stated that she does not believe changes are necessary at this time. However, she noted that during her first term, the board has provided supplemental guidance to districts, particularly concerning boundary-setting, including the use of social media.

[4:44:45 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on the appointment of Ms. Bergey; finding none, she closed public testimony.

[4:44:58 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited a motion.

[4:45:00 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated that in accordance with AS 39.05.080, the Senate Education Standing Committee reviewed the following and recommends the appointments be forwarded to a joint session for consideration:

Professional Teaching Practices Commission

Kimberly Bergey - Palmer

He reminded members that signing the report(s) regarding appointments to boards and commissions in no way reflects individual members' approval or disapproval of the appointees; the nominations are merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.

4:45:20 PM

CHAIR TOBIN stated the committee would forward the appointee's name to a joint session of the legislature.

4:46:22 PM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:46 p.m.