

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

May 12, 2025

3:38 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Jesse Kiehl

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Mike Cronk

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 21

Supporting and encouraging the continued recruitment and retention of international educators on J-1 and H-1B visas in the state.

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SJR 21

SHORT TITLE: INTERNATIONAL TEACHER VISAS

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) TOBIN

05/07/25	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
05/07/25	(S)	EDC
05/12/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

LOUIE FLORA, Staff
Senator Löki Tobin
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced SJR 21 on behalf of the sponsor.

LISA PARADY, Executive Director
Alaska Council of School Administrators
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SJR 21.

JENNIFER SCHMITZ, Director
Alaska Educator Retention and Recruitment Center
Alaska Council of School Administrators
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SJR 21.

DALE EBCAS, Special Education Teacher
Kuspuk School District
Aniak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SJR 21.

ADAM WEINERT, Special Assistant to the Commissioner
Department of Labor and Workforce Development
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on SJR 21.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:38:37 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:38 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Kiehl, Bjorkman, and Chair Tobin.

SJR 21-INTERNATIONAL TEACHER VISAS

[3:39:21 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 21 Supporting and encouraging the continued recruitment and retention of international educators on J-1 and H-1B visas in the state.

[3:40:26 PM](#)

LOUIE FLORA, Staff, Senator Löki Tobin, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, introduced SJR 21 on behalf of the sponsor:

[Original punctuation provided.]

SJR 21 supports the recruitment and retention of educators on J-1 and H-1B visas in Alaska schools.

A J-1 visa, also called an exchange visitor visa, is a nonimmigrant visa that allows temporary entry for foreign nationals participating in exchange visitor programs. Categories of exchange visitors include au

pairs, camp counselors, interns, physicians, scholars and other professionals who want to come to the United States to teach or learn.

[3:41:06 PM](#)

MR. FLORA continued introducing SJR 21:

[Original punctuation provided.]

U.S. Senator J. William Fulbright introduced the Exchange Visitor Program, or J-1 visa, under the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961. The program's aim is to promote "the interchange of persons, knowledge, and skills, in the fields of education, arts, and science," Similarly, the H-1B visa program has facilitated the employment of highly skilled professionals in critical subject areas such as science, mathematics, and special education, where there is often a shortage of qualified candidates.

The H-1B visa program was officially established on November 20, 1990, when President George H. W. Bush signed the Immigration Act of 1990 into law. Some school districts are looking at using H-1 B visas as an option to keep foreign teachers beyond five years, which is the maximum stay allowed under the J-1 visa program.

Workers coming to the U.S. on an H-1B visa must meet certain requirements, such as having a bachelor's degree and special training. Employers must also fulfill obligations, including committing to pay foreign workers a fair wage and not displace U.S. employees.

Alaska's educational landscape faces unique challenges, particularly in rural and remote communities where attracting and retaining qualified teachers is a persistent issue. To address this, school districts increasingly rely on the J-1 and H-1B visa programs, which allow qualified international educators to teach in Alaska's schools.

School districts in Alaska that employ J-1 and H-1B educators include the Anchorage School District,

Kuspuk School District, and Kodiak Island School District.

The contributions of J-1 and H-1B educators are invaluable. They help bridge the gap in teacher shortages, particularly in specialized subjects and underserved areas. Their presence enhances the educational experience for all students, fostering a more inclusive and globally aware learning environment.

By supporting J-1 and H-1B visa opportunities for educators, we are investing in the future of Alaska's children and the strength of our communities.

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CHAIR TOBIN mentioned other schools that employ J-1 and H-1B educators are Bering Strait School District, Northwest Arctic School Borough, and Nome Public Schools.

[3:44:51 PM](#)

LISA PARADY, Executive Director, Alaska Council of School Administrators, Juneau, Alaska, testified by invitation on SJR 21 thanking the committee for continuing to focus on one of Alaska's most urgent public education challenges, recruiting and retaining qualified educators. She stated that staffing shortages remain widespread across all districts, especially in rural areas and hard-to-fill positions like special education. She highlighted international hiring through J-1 and H-1B visa programs as a promising development, noting that these educators bring strong instructional skills, deep commitment to students, and valuable cultural perspectives.

MS. PARADY shared that two Alaska Native elders spoke positively about international teachers serving in their villages, saying both they and their students loved them and that the teachers were highly engaged in school and community life. This reflects what other districts have reported.

MS. PARADY explained that the Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) formalized its work into a statewide hub called the Alaska Educator Recruitment and Retention Center (AERRC), in partnership with the Department of Education and Early Development. She stated that AERRC emerged from the Governor's Teacher Retention and Recruitment (TRR) working group, which recommended a central hub, alternative pathways, and international hiring of teachers.

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MS. PARADY that Ms. Schmidt, a retired Anchorage principal, now serves as AERRC's director. AERRC assists districts with every step of international hiring, including logistics, legal navigation through an experienced immigration attorney, and professional development. She emphasized the goal is to take that additional workload off districts and ensure educators feel welcomed and prepared. She recalled a story of a teacher arriving in a northern village with only a sweatshirt as the kind of situation they aim to prevent. AERRC is working hand in hand with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development to ensure international educators get what they need to succeed.

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MS. PARADY stated that states across the country are using a range of strategies to address teacher shortages and rebuild educator pipelines, including grow-your-own programs, financial incentives, teacher residencies, streamlined certification, housing, and mentorship. She emphasized that efforts must focus on both attracting new teachers and retaining experienced ones. She said ACSA, through AERRC, is committed to strengthening Alaska's educator pipeline by investing in long-term strategies, including grow-your-own initiatives to build local capacity.

MS. PARADY noted that international hiring helps meet immediate staffing needs and stabilize schools while long-term solutions develop. She stated that SJR 21 recognizes the critical role international educators already play in Alaska and affirms support for their continued success. She emphasized ACSA's commitment to helping districts recruit and retain highly qualified educators and described international hiring as one key part of a broader effort.

MS. PARADY reported that for FY 24, 20 Alaska school districts employed teachers on H-1B visas, 134 teachers received initial visas, and 63 received visa continuations.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN commented that ATP is the reason he came to Alaska and thanked Ms. Parady for her work.

[3:53:02 PM](#)

JENNIFER SCHMITZ, Director, Alaska Educator Retention and Recruitment Center, Alaska Council of School Administrators, Juneau, Alaska, testified by invitation on SJR 21 by expressing support for the resolution and thanking the committee for its

continued focus on educator retention and recruitment. She acknowledged ongoing staffing challenges, especially in rural and remote areas, but noted that several districts are entering the school year without long lists of unfilled positions. She attributed this progress largely to the hiring of international educators through J-1 and H-1B visa programs.

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MS. SCHMITZ pointed out that J-1 visas are not new in Alaska, citing her experience as a principal at a Chinese immersion school in Anchorage where visa-holding teachers were valuable assets to the program. She explained that AERRC has assumed responsibility for the Alaska Teacher Placement platform, where districts post jobs and applicants apply. She reported that a recent virtual job fair hosted by AERRC saw over 1,600 international teachers register and more than 900 participate, reflecting strong qualifications and interest. She emphasized that these educators bring teaching experience, professionalism, cultural depth, and deep commitment, not just filling vacancies but strengthening school cultures, mentoring colleagues, and ensuring consistent, high-quality education.

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MS. SCHMITZ said ACSA supports both long- and short-term solutions through AERRC, in partnership with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Labor and Workforce Development. She explained that AERRC is becoming an agency to recruit teachers, interview on behalf of districts, and assist with induction and other needs as they arrive in Alaska.

MS. SCHMITZ reported that she has heard weekly from a couple of additional districts seeking support with international hiring due to increasing difficulty filling positions. She said AERRC is also providing targeted professional development, including a classroom management course requested by members, which served over 200 educators last year and is expected to grow this summer.

MS. SCHMITZ affirmed a strong commitment to growing Alaska's own pipeline by expanding in-state and in-country recruitment, supporting paraprofessional pathways, and making education a more attractive profession. She concluded that international hiring helps maintain quality education now, while long-term efforts continue, and that the SJR 21 sends a clear message that Alaska values and supports every educator serving its students.

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DALE EBCAS, Special Education Teacher, Kuspuk School District, Aniak, Alaska, testified by invitation on SJR 21. He stated that he also serves as president of the Federation of Filipino American Educators, a chapter of Unified Inc., and spoke in support of [SJR 21]. He emphasized that international teachers play a vital role in stabilizing education in Alaska's remote communities and shared his experience teaching in the Kuspuk School District for nearly five years, where high turnover had previously disrupted student learning and trust.

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MR. EBCAS described the personal challenges of adjusting to Alaska's climate, culture, and education system but credited his successful transition to strong administrative support and access to professional development, including training in classroom management, reading instruction, and special education. He expressed gratitude to the Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Office of Citizenship Assistance, highlighting Deputy Commissioner San Juan's efforts to support Filipino teachers' integration and success.

MR. EBCAS shared that he was honored in 2024 as Individual of the Year for Inclusive Practices by the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education and has participated in competitive fellowship programs to grow as an educator and advocate. He urged the committee to pass the resolution, which he said affirms the essential contributions of international teachers and supports the continued success of Alaska's schools and students.

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CHAIR TOBIN stated that recent research shows teacher turnover correlates with approximately a 3 percent decline in student outcomes. She emphasized that retaining educators directly improves student academic achievement, which is the primary goal of education services in the state.

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CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SJR 21; finding none, she closed public testimony.

[4:03:30 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked Mr. Weinert to explain the relationship between J-1 and H-1B visas and broader immigration discussions. He inquired whether these visas serve as a path to permanent residency or if they are temporary measures.

[4:04:03 PM](#)

ADAM WEINERT, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Anchorage, Alaska, answered questions on SJR 21. He stated that J-1 visas are for exchange and H-1B visas are for employment, and both are temporary in nature with no direct path to permanency. He noted that many long-serving international teachers in Alaska are interested in staying if they can transition to a visa that offers a path to permanent residency. He said this is something the department strongly encourages and that it supports school districts in pursuing these opportunities on a case-by-case basis.

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SENATOR KIEHL stated that it was important to clarify the temporary nature of the visas to keep the conversation focused on educational impacts and opportunities. He emphasized the need to avoid being distracted by broader national immigration issues that are not relevant to SJR 21.

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CHAIR TOBIN held SJR 21 in committee.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:05 p.m.