

Testimony of Chris Simon  
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My name is Chris Simon and I am the Rural Education Coordinator for the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development. I spent my entire career working in rural Alaska and it is something I hold close to my heart. My experience includes working two years as an itinerant school counselor, four years as a teacher, five years as a school principal, and six years as a superintendent of schools.

I am here today to speak specifically to the statewide issues of Alaska Native student successes and challenges and the role the federal government can play in building upon the successes.

The challenges to Alaska Native success are well-known and long-standing. Alaska's rural districts face a high turnover of teachers and principals. Many new teachers are not familiar with Native culture or rural lifestyles. In some cases, small rural schools cannot offer the range of courses that urban schools do. Alaska's villages experience family violence, substance abuse, and suicide. Native families do not always know how to navigate the system of formal education, advocate for their children, or plan for postsecondary education and training.

Yet there are many Native student successes. Schools' extra-curricular activities create a high sense of community pride. In some Alaska schools, rural and urban, 75% or more of the Native students score proficient on state assessments in language arts or math.

Here are a few examples from last school year's results: In Tanana Middle School, 90% of Native students were proficient in language arts. In the James C. Isabell School in the Bering Strait School District, 78% of Native students were proficient in language arts and 75% in math. In the Sand Point School in the Aleutians East Borough, 88% of Native students were proficient in language arts and 70% in math. In the Goldenview Middle School in Anchorage, 74% of Native students were proficient in language arts and 79% in math.

School districts have developed programs and schools to address students' needs. The Nome School District operates a science academy. Galena runs a boarding school with academic and career courses. Advocates in Fairbanks established the Native-oriented Effie Kokrine Charter School. School districts offer 32 distance program, serving home-school students, alternative students, and brick-and-mortar students who need additional courses.

At the Northwest Alaska Career and Technical Center in Nome, a partnership of the Bering Strait and Nome school districts, students outside of Nome live on campus. In intensive sessions throughout the school year, students receive independent living skills as well as the skills they need to acquire jobs or to go on to further training and education. Students have the opportunity to receive dual credit with the University of Alaska. The program motivates students to finish high school, formulate career goals, and develop the skills they need for the world of work.

The School to Apprenticeship Program of the Department of Labor and Workforce Development works cooperatively with employers, unions and school districts. Students choose a career pathway that provides direct entry into a formal apprenticeship program. Apprenticeships provide a reason for students to stay in school, take relevant courses and graduate. Apprentices can earn credits through the University of Alaska System toward a degree.

The Alaska Native Cultural Charter School was named a Title I Distinguished School. Mt. Edgecumbe High School, a predominantly Native state-run boarding school, had a 96% four-year graduation rate last school year. Alaska's student governments instigated a state suicide-prevention program that mandates teacher training.

The Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program supports students from high school through college graduation. The University of Alaska enrolls a thousand more Native students today than five years ago. In the first year of the merit-based Alaska Performance Scholarship, 8.3% of Native high school graduates were eligible for the scholarship, and 36.1% of the eligible Native students used their scholarship.

The federal government could contribute to Native student success by providing Alaska the greatest possible flexibility in using federal funds. In Alaska's Elementary and Secondary Education Act waiver application, the state would assess schools primarily on the academic achievement and growth of students; attendance; and graduation. As needed, the State System of Support would provide schools with teacher mentors, administrator coaches, content coaches, professional development, and an online self-improvement tool.

Alaska is a strongly local-control state. The state government has increased its commitment to districts with funding to build rural schools; working cooperatively with the 40 lowest-achieving schools; funding career and technical education improvements; funding pilot pre-kindergarten programs; providing scholarships for college and technical schools; and funding distance courses by highly qualified Alaska teachers.

Alaska and its districts should be free to focus on curriculum, assessment, instruction, supportive learning environment, professional development, and leadership. Those are the paths to student success.

Alaska and its school districts have demonstrated they can work together:

### **Resolved litigation over funding of rural school construction**

Alaska resolved the long-standing Kasayulie litigation and committed to fund the five highest-priority rural school construction projects over the coming years. Alaska has kept that pledge this year by funding school construction in Emmonak and Koliganek for \$61 million. See <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/sites/default/files/Kasayulie%20settlement.pdf>.

## **Resolved litigation over academic adequacy in rural schools**

The settlement of the Moore lawsuit is funded at \$18 million over three years. It creates a mechanism by which the state and rural school districts cooperate closely and combine their funds to improve student achievement, implement early education, retain teachers, and help students pass the graduation exam.

The settlement maintains the Alaska principle of local control while meeting the state's constitutional responsibility to provide assistance to, and oversight of, struggling schools. It is a step forward in the quality of Alaska's schools. See [http://education.alaska.gov/news/releases/2012/moore\\_settlement\\_signed.pdf](http://education.alaska.gov/news/releases/2012/moore_settlement_signed.pdf).

## **Established merit-based scholarship for technical and college programs**

Another step forward has been the Alaska Performance Scholarship. Students who complete a rigorous high school curriculum and achieve qualifying grade point averages and test scores are eligible for scholarships worth up to \$4,755 a year for college or technical education.

In its first year, the scholarship provided nearly \$3 million to 870 Alaskans from the high school Class of 2011. The state recently established a sustainable fund for this merit-based scholarship and for needs-based postsecondary grants.

The second high school graduating class has now received its Alaska Performance Scholarships. The Class of 2012 faced more rigorous course requirements than did the Class of 2011, but a greater percentage of the 2012 graduates earned the highest levels of scholarship. That tells us that students and schools are rising to accept the scholarship's invitation to excellence. See [www.aps.alaska.gov](http://www.aps.alaska.gov).

## **Established distance courses for high school students**

To help schools offer the required courses for the Alaska Performance Scholarship, especially in rural Alaska, the state and school districts operate Alaska's Learning Network, in which high school courses are taught by distance by highly qualified Alaska teachers. This fall, the learning network is offering 42 courses. See <http://aklearn.net/>. The program also has created Alaska's Digital Sandbox, an online repository of free resources developed by Alaska teachers for K-12 teachers. See <http://www.alaskadigitalsandbox.org>.

Distance education is highly dependent on reliable access to broadband service, yet many rural Alaska communities have only the most basic broadband access. Recent initiatives by the Federal Communication Commission to reform the universal Services Fund appear to lessen federal support for improvements to broadband access in rural Alaska. The State of Alaska continues to monitor these reforms and will highlight threats to distance education as they arise.

## **Continued mentoring of teachers and coaching of principals**

The state is continuing programs that serve rural Alaska with trained mentors for several hundred new teachers a year and coaches for dozens of new principals.

The Alaska Statewide Mentoring Project, funded by Alaska Department of Education & Early Development and the University of Alaska, has flourished for eight school years. It matches veteran teachers who are trained mentors with teachers in the first two years of their career. The goals are to increase teacher retention and improve student achievement. The project encourages beginning teachers to be reflective and responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds and academic needs of all of their students.

Mentors observe and coach the new teacher, serve as trusted listeners and sounding boards, assist with planning, help with classroom management strategies, teach demonstration lessons, provide supplemental resources that support the district's curriculum, and facilitate communication with the school and its community. See <http://alaskamentorproject.org/>.

The Alaska Administrator Coaching Program's purpose is to positively influence student achievement and increase principal retention. It has existed for seven school years, serving approximately 80 principals a year.

Coaches work with new principals for two years, which includes three professional development institutes a year, covering topics such as instructional literacy, teacher observation, supervision and evaluation of staff, organizational literacy, teacher collaboration, assessment literacy, school improvement planning, and classroom assessment practices. See <http://aacp.pbworks.com/>.

## **Emphasized culturally responsive teachers**

The State Board of Education & Early Development now requires beginning teachers to be prepared as culturally responsive teachers, and requires all teachers to know Alaska's standards for culturally responsive schools. The state, working with Native educators, recently completed the first guide to implementing Alaska's cultural standards for educators. See [http://education.alaska.gov/standards/pdf/cultural\\_standards.pdf](http://education.alaska.gov/standards/pdf/cultural_standards.pdf).

## **Raised standards for language arts and mathematics**

In an effort to spur greater student achievement, after two years of collaboration across the state, Alaska has adopted its own new standards in English and mathematics. They are the state's first standards to extend from kindergarten through grade 12, and they are the first to address the need for students to be ready for careers and further education after high school. See <http://education.alaska.gov/tls/assessment/GLEHome.html>.

## **Sought a waiver from aspects of No Child Left Behind**

Alaska has applied to the federal government to be released from the most unproductive and unpopular aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act. In its place, if the state receives a waiver, we will implement a school accountability system by Alaskans and for Alaskans. Our proposed system emphasizes local responsibility and levels of state assistance, depending on the needs of schools. The federal government has set some conditions for states' waivers, but a waiver would be a step forward from No Child Left Behind. See <http://education.alaska.gov/nclb/esea.html>.

## **Strengthened the State System of Support for schools**

The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development created, and is continually strengthening, a system to support struggling schools and districts to improve instructional practices and increase student achievement.

With funding from the legislature and a legislative mandate to help turn around schools and districts that need improvement, the department created the State System of Support (SSOS), housed in the commissioner's office.

The State System of Support helps districts build their capacity to improve student achievement through the domains of curriculum, assessment, instruction, supportive learning environment, professional development, and leadership.

Alaska STEPP is a web-based system that guides districts' improvement teams through a continuous cycle of assessment, planning, implementation, and progress tracking. The tool focuses on an honest assessment of a district's strengths and challenges, and on actions to sustain strengths and address challenges. STEPP stands for "steps toward educational progress and partnership."

See <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/nclb/SchoolImprovement.html>.

## **Proposed regulations to improve teacher quality**

Educators from school districts, the university and the department have developed regulations to improve teacher quality in Alaska, to include: a stronger link between the needs of districts and teacher preparation programs; improving standards for teachers and methods of evaluating teachers; more paths to certification; tying certificate renewals to student achievement; and improving our mentoring program for new teachers. Some of these regulations are now out for public comment. See [http://education.alaska.gov/regs/comment/4\\_AAC\\_04.pdf](http://education.alaska.gov/regs/comment/4_AAC_04.pdf).

## **Developed and fund the Alaska Career and Technical Education Plan**

The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, the University of Alaska, the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and industry have written an action plan to revitalize career and technical education, open the shops in Alaska's high schools, and integrate career and technical education into the regular high schools. EED and DOL&WD are working with the Alaska Workforce Investment Board to coordinate the development of career education and to support a gasline training program.

In its first year of implementation, the state awarded 14 grants to implement portions of the plan. Examples include training in welding in the Bering Strait School District, implementing Personal Learning Career Plans for all 9<sup>th</sup>-graders in the Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District, and increasing rural high school students' access to health education through distance delivery from the University of Alaska.

See <http://labor.state.ak.us/awib/cte.htm>

## **Developed a literacy blueprint from birth to graduation**

The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development worked with educators to create the Alaska Statewide Literacy Blueprint from Birth to Graduation. The blueprint addresses the content and delivery of instruction, interventions, assessments, leadership, family and community engagement, and professional development. The department produced and distributed "I Am Ready" brochures for parents of young children.

See <http://education.alaska.gov/blueprint/>. Additionally, the state established the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council. See <http://www.hss.state.ak.us/ocs/AECCC/default.htm>.

## **Developed a voluntary health and safety framework**

The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development collaborated with the Alaska PTA and Alaska experts on health, domestic violence, safety, nutrition, physical education to write the Alaska School Health and Safety Framework. The document promotes a voluntary system of coordinated school health programs.

Additionally, the state created the multi-agency Alaska State Suicide Prevention Plan, which mandates prevention training for high school teachers. See <http://education.alaska.gov/tls/suicide/>.

In conclusion, Alaska's state agencies and school districts recognize there is much work to be done to improve the success of Native students. These efforts must be owned by families and communities. The closer the decision-making process and implementation are to them, the greater the chances of success. The federal government's most useful role is to support the state and districts in their initiatives and vision.