

Remarks by Carl Rose
Association of Alaska School Boards for the
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
Field Hearing
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Chairman Harkin, Senator Murkowski, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on an issue of critical importance to my state and nation.

Alaska differs from any other state in many ways, but we share some notable similarities with rural America when it comes to education. Because of changes in our census data and reapportionment, there has been a realignment of representation that has left rural Alaska in a secondary position when it comes to education.

When Alaska became a state in 1959, we inherited a system of schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in rural Alaska. Following a difficult transition to State Operated Schools and the Molly Hootch consent decree, Alaska made a commitment to fund and operate high schools in small rural communities so that students could stay at home and families remain united. And so the Rural Education Attendance Areas were born in 1976.

Alaska invested in the REAAs by building schools and establishing elected regional school boards to make important decisions about curriculum and staff. For some of our smallest communities, the local school board was the first form of local government they had. Naturally, there have been challenges with such a new and Western concept of local control of education.

The Association of Alaska School Boards is a small 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization. AASB represents 333 elected school board members, 53 school districts and the interests of 129,000 public school students. We meet annually to resolve ourselves behind core belief statements and resolutions. AASB is governed by a 15-member board elected from the judicial districts of the state. We are organized under a long-range strategic plan that identifies clear goals, objectives and strategies that guide our efforts. AASB is assisting school boards create the vision and structure for successful K-12 schools. Our Board Standards, our Policy Service, and our Quality Schools initiative are used by nearly all school districts in Alaska. AASB's Board of Directors made the decision years ago to spend less time fighting labor issues and instead focus proactively on being an advocate for Alaska's youth and on success for all of Alaska's students.

As a result, since passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, AASB has been instrumental in implementing a key provision of that law, title seven's Alaska Native Education Program. A small but critical portion of annual funding provided by title seven has helped AASB empower families, communities and parents to take a greater role in their children's education. For the last 11 years, AASB, through our Initiative for Community Engagement (Alaska ICE), has built working partnerships with school districts, non-profit organizations, tribes, faith communities and other groups with an interest in kids to change the environments surrounding youth and increase their chances for success in school and the workplace. Alaska ICE is highly successful, and we have data to prove it.

As you know, America's schools do not exist in isolation. Neither do schools in Alaska. What happens in our homes and on our streets inevitably affects the child as he or she arrives at school each morning.

One of the challenges is the lack of basic infrastructure in some of our most remote communities. Transportation is expensive. Groceries, utilities, heating all cost more, sometimes double. Communication with the outside world is improving, but stubbornly spotty as bandwidth continues to be a barrier. These may be the facts of life in rural America. But it is neither fair nor equitable that the water and sewer systems we take for granted in America are still absent in too many rural Alaska homes. If these conditions existed in our Railbelt communities, they wouldn't be tolerated.

As you may know, the Alaska constitution requires our legislature to establish and maintain an education system for all children. And we have some excellent schools serving rural students. Students graduate and go on to attend Dartmouth, Harvard, and Stanford.

But too many students struggle.

Today, the statewide graduation rate for Alaska high schools stands at just over 70 percent. The Department of Education & Early Development calculates that the graduation rate for Alaska Native students is just over 58 percent.

Why is that? AASB decided to ask students themselves.

Each year, we work with participating school districts to measure the climate of our schools and the degree to which students and staff feel connected. Climate and connectedness are directly correlated with student engagement and achievement (higher school-wide proficiency rates in reading, writing and math and higher graduation rates), and also with fewer student risk behaviors (drugs, alcohol and violence). In the last school year we surveyed more than 31,000 students and 67-hundred staff in 28 school districts across Alaska. This is the School Climate and Connectedness Survey, another innovative service that AASB staff has pioneered in Alaska.

AASB also recently undertook a research project to delve into what matters to students and especially to understand what drives students to stay in school or leave early. With the help of four school districts, we interviewed a broad spectrum of students at 26 schools about why they and their peers stay in school or drop out. Students – engaged and disengaged, Alaska Native and non-Native, rural and urban, middle and high school, and some young people who had already dropped out – had quite similar opinions about why they and their peers leave school; across all groups, they listed personal problems and family pressures as the top reasons. Their answers (by frequency of response) were:

1. Drug or alcohol use
2. Choosing to spend time with peers or a boyfriend or girlfriend who dropped out
3. Lack of family support for education
4. Needing to help support their family (from a financial or practical perspective)
5. Early parenthood
6. Laziness or not wanting to get up in the morning
7. Depression
8. Negative experiences with peers at school (bullying, being picked on, being isolated)
9. Negative experiences with teachers or other authority figures at school
10. Lack of positive connections with or support from teachers and other staff
11. Belief that school will not help them in their future careers, so it would be better to drop out and start earning money.

But these groups also showed some distinct differences in their views on what makes a good school where students want to be:

- Feeling connected to school and adults is viewed as significantly more important by disengaged students than engaged students.
- Alaska Native and disengaged students more often listed academic opportunities, rigor, good pedagogy, structure, academic and extracurricular options and teacher expectations as important.
- And while it appears that schools are not ‘pushing’ students out as much as students are being ‘pulled’ out by personal and family pressures, it may be that adults at school can especially help disengaged students resist that pull by reaching out and teaching well.

Those answers from young Alaskans lead me to the conclusion that we cannot separate family and community issues from school-related problems for students who leave high school early. The two major issues this committee is examining today – health and education – are closely intertwined.

Regardless, we know what the solutions are, and they don't necessarily originate in Washington, D.C. Our experience with NCLB has taught us many lessons, not all positive. Despite its good intentions, NCLB never adequately addressed how we should improve curriculum, instruction, professional development and assessments. Schools were forced to put everything on hold to teach the basics and then measure progress. In the end, the only job left for us to do under NCLB was to deal with the sanctions the law imposes on even our best schools.

Now the latest solution from the federal level asks schools to join in a Race to the Top.

Instead of a competition for education dollars, I would advocate that the federal government provide a level playing field. We know a relatively small investment can pay huge dividends when it helps empower families, parents and communities to take more interest in their kids' education. As citizens we need to take more responsibility on ourselves to make sure our schools and communities serve the needs of our children.

One significant investment that would provide educational opportunity for more students is digital learning. This can be the great equalizer for rural and urban Americans. Not every family can afford the Encyclopedia Britannica, but today that 100 pounds of knowledge is available on a computer near you.

Does rural Alaska have enough bandwidth to enter the age of digital learning? Not yet. Are America's teachers getting the professional development they need to make digital learning successful? Not yet. Are our students worth the investment to bring the world and all it has to offer to them digitally? You bet. Perhaps Congress can lend a hand to Alaska and other states.

AASB members also believe that Alaska must continue to improve early childhood development through community-based programs and pre-kindergarten to prepare our youngest citizens to be ready for school. We know that children who are proficient in the basics by the third grade are much more likely to be successful in school and in the workforce upon graduation.

In conclusion, the challenges to provide equity and fairness are immense but not insurmountable. AASB and its elected membership accept this challenge and encourage all of our citizens, communities, public and private entities to assist us in "Helping Kids Succeed Alaska Style."

Mr. Chairman, once again, thank you for allowing me to testify today.