

**Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Field Hearing
November 15, 2008
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Written Testimony**

Thank you, Senator Murkowski, for holding this field hearing and for this opportunity to provide written testimony to the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. I appreciate your bringing us together to focus on what we can and must do not only to reduce the number of dropouts, but to ensure that ALL our young people graduate with the skills, knowledge, and opportunity to succeed in the 21st century. There is nothing more important to Alaska's, and the nation's, long-term success. I especially welcome your invitation to discuss AASB's Initiative for Community Engagement.

The Problem

We have all seen the statistics about dropout rates and the staggering costs to society when we fail, not only in dollars, but in human terms. A new study by The Education Trust indicates that today's high school students are less likely than their parents to graduate from high school.¹ The U.S. is the only industrialized nation where that is the case.

Nationally, high school dropouts:

- comprise 75% of state prison inmates²
- comprise an overwhelming proportion of Medicaid recipients and a substantial proportion of welfare recipients³
- are disproportionately minority, poor, come from fatherless homes, and have disabilities⁴
- made significantly less in wages in 2002 than in the early 1970s (in constant 2002 dollars): males \$35,087 (1971) and \$23,903 (2002); females \$19,888 (1972) and \$17,114 (2002)⁵
- commit more crimes than graduates (one economist estimated increasing graduation rates by only one percent would produce 100,000 fewer crimes per year, with an associated cost savings to society of \$1.4 billion per year)⁶

¹The Education Trust, *Counting on Graduation*, 2008. <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/6CA84103-BB12-4754-8675-17B18A8582AC/0/CountingonGraduation1008.pdf>

² Education Commission of the States, "The Progress of Education Reform 2007," July 2007, p. 2 quote from Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006.

³ Ibid., p.2 quote from Center for Benefit-Cost Studies, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2007.

⁴ Alaska Dept. of Education and Early Development, "High School Dropouts: The Silent Epidemic," Dropout Prevention State Guidance Team Meeting, April 18, 2008.

⁵ Nelson, A. *Closing the Gap: Keeping Students in School*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Infobrief, Summer 2006.

In Alaska, in the 2006-07 school year⁷:

- 3,434 (5.5%) 7-12th grade students dropped out
- 1,299 (38%) were Alaska Native (25% of Alaska's school population is Alaska Native)
- 1,274 (37%) were classified as 'economically disadvantaged
- 1,850 (54%) were male
- the graduation rate was 63% (70% nationally)

But those are abstract numbers. In human terms, these are the young people who live in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our communities; they are going to be parents of the next generation of Alaskans. Each child who doesn't reach his or her full potential is a tremendous loss to our state.

What these dropout statistics reflect is that too many young people cannot envision a successful future for themselves when they consider their past experience in school and home environments; they can't see the immediate and future path to success. They fail to see viable options for themselves and get very little encouragement and support to pursue and complete their high school diploma.

I think we can all acknowledge that dropping out is not the root problem. It is simply the end result of a process over time of students disengaging from school and often, but not always, failing academically and floundering socially and emotionally.

In Alaska, we need look no further than the third grade benchmark to identify the young people who are testing at or beyond grade level to determine their ability to cope with an increasingly complex curriculum. Those students who test below grade level are at risk simply because they are not prepared for an accelerating curriculum. Put another way, students at grade level in the third grade will have the benefit of our educational system. Those who test below grade level will experience a remedial system, one that too often devalues their unique qualities and gifts, and replaces them with labels, negative reinforcement and disapproval.

To address the dropout rates, we need to address school readiness and healthy development for the children who are most at risk:

- Before entering kindergarten, the average cognitive scores of pre-school age children in the highest socioeconomic group are 60% above average scores of children in the lowest socioeconomic group.
- At age 4 years, children who live below the poverty line are 18 months below what is normal for their age group; by age 10 that gap is still present. For children living in the poorest families, the gap is even larger.

⁶ Moretti, E. "Does education reduce participation in criminal activities?" Paper presented at symposium on the social costs of an inadequate education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY, Sept. 2005 (See http://devweb.tc.columbia.edu/manager/symposium/Files/74_Moretti_Symp.pdf)

⁷ Alaska Dept. of Education and Early Development, "High School Dropouts: The Silent Epidemic," Dropout Prevention State Guidance Team Meeting, April 18, 2008, Alaska Dropout Numbers and Related Statistics.

- By the time children from middle-income families with well-educated parents are in third grade, they know about 12,000 words. Third grade children from low-income families with undereducated parents who don't talk to them very much have vocabularies of around 4,000 words, one-third as many words as their middle-income peers.⁸
- Thirty-two percent of young children are affected by one risk factor (e.g., low income, low maternal education, or single-parent status), and 16% are in families with two or more socio-demographic risks.⁹

One hears with some frequency that professionals in our schools have stated: "You can identify the kids entering kindergarten who will not make it in school." I do not believe this entirely, however, if there is a shred of truth to it, why would that teacher and the system not intervene with needed supports and assistance at the point of identification? Why would a system wait until the third grade benchmark to verify what we knew was a possibility as many as three years earlier? Why would we, as Alaskan leaders and community members, not take action earlier to ensure that all children enter school ready to learn?

Sadly, by the time young people drop out of school, many have endured years of struggle, disappointment, and disengagement.

The Solutions

The solutions mostly lie way upstream from the final step of leaving school. And they must involve all of us—students, families, educators, schools, school boards, businesses, community organizations, health and social service providers, public policy makers, and everyone of us—each of us has both an individual role and a professional role to play. WE need to take a shared responsibility for the successful development of our community's young people...there is no THEY to whom we can point as being responsible. It has to be WE, and it has to involve changing how our institutions work together, how our communities support young people, and how each of us behaves in our daily lives as community members, parents, and role models.

It will take institutional and individual action to change the environment for our young people into one where they are and feel supported, where they feel valued and respected, where some young children don't start school behind their peers.

I think we know what the solutions are. We know they need to include the continuum from early childhood to post-graduate; families, schools and communities; education, health, social services and workforce development.

⁸ Quoted from other sources in: Klein, L. and Knitzer, J. "Promoting Effective Early Learning: What Every Policymaker and Educator Should Know," National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, January, 2007. (www.nccp.org/publications/pub_695.html)

⁹ Raver, C. and Knitzer, J. "Ready to Enter: What Research Tells Policymakers About Strategies to Promote Social and Emotional School Readiness Among Three- and Four-Year-Old Children," National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, July 2002.

Each of us whom you have invited here today has a responsibility for a particular part of this continuum, and if we align our efforts, we will all see greater impact on the success of our young people.

I believe we need to focus our efforts all along this continuum--not just on preventing problems, but more on providing the skills, knowledge, supports and opportunities that our kids need to succeed. As Karen Pitman of the Forum for Youth Investment says: "Problem-free is not fully prepared, and fully prepared is not fully engaged."

Our goal must be fully engaged and fully prepared youth who can thrive in our fluid 21st century environment. Our goal should be broad and holistic; it goes beyond passing benchmark tests, or avoiding risk behaviors. It must be the healthy development of each and every young person so they have the academic and work force skills, and the healthy life skills needed to succeed and thrive. And this means we must have high expectations for all our young people, and we must enlist entire communities in support of them.

I am heartened to see an increased focus across a growing number of disciplines on a strength-based approach to positive youth development. It is what lies at the foundation of AASB's Initiative for Community Engagement, or Alaska ICE.

Engaging Our Communities

I know you have seen this little book, *Helping Kids Succeed—Alaskan Style*, and you will find it all over Alaska...in schools, in doctors' offices and public health clinics, in parenting classes, in homes, in airport waiting rooms, in businesses. It was literally created in 1998 'by and for Alaskans' through a series of community visits, where everyday Alaskans described what they wanted for their kids, and they very eloquently described what kids need from adults in order to succeed. These can be called 'assets' or protective factors, resiliency, traditional Native values...they have many names but the principles are the same. How are assets built in children and youth? Through positive relationships with caring adults. What kids need is the time, attention, respect, encouragement, support, and high expectations of the adults around them in their families, their schools, and their communities.

Born out of this little book was a far-reaching initiative that set out to change the environment for Alaska's young people, and to enlist all Alaskans in building healthy communities that provide what kids need to succeed. Alaska ICE is a statewide initiative of AASB that encourages and supports youth success through a statewide network of partners and local community initiatives. Federal support of this initiative through the Alaska Native Education Program in No Child Left Behind has enabled us to work with school districts, communities, organizations, and individuals throughout the state to promote the shared responsibility that each and every one of us has to help kids succeed.

Community engagement is the intentional action of groups and individuals working together to create healthy environments that support the growth and education of children and youth.

Our Alaska ICE initiative has many strands and facets; I will provide you with a copy of our 2007 Progress Report that reflects how those many partnerships and collaborations create a web of support for Alaska's young people. Community engagement will look a little different in every community as people and organizations tailor it to their priorities and goals.

A few snapshots from Alaska ICE's community partners, made possible because of our funding support through NCLB's Alaska Native Education Program, show how the simple principles of asset-building, healthy and supportive youth-adult relationships, and intentional community engagement can flourish in every community.

- Parenting classes in Yup'ik and English in Lower Kuskokwim School District, through a partnership with the tribe
- Community-school art projects that build supportive youth-adult and school-community partnerships in Yukon Flats villages
- Weekly asset messages developed by youth and adults and delivered in English and Russian by teens over the community radio station in Delta, and youth-adult community choir and theatre productions
- Student-produced TV shows addressing substance abuse issues in Unalaska, and targeted efforts to improve school and community climate
- Schools that are more welcoming to parents and community members in the Pribilofs, and collaborative school, tribe and community efforts to build culturally responsive social and emotional learning skills and positive peer climate among students

As part of our overall efforts to effectively engage adults in positively supporting young people in Alaska's communities, we also put significant focus on improving the school environment by helping school apply these same principles. Today I want to focus in on creating school environments where all children can succeed.

Student Achievement and Engagement

Over the last five years, AASB has aligned our school improvement initiative (Quality Schools/Quality Students, or QS2) and our community engagement initiative (Alaska ICE). Begun as separate initiatives, it became apparent that to make the greatest impact on academic achievement, we needed to target both efforts towards assisting school districts and communities in improving supports for youth in both environments.

Through QS2, we assist school districts in improving their leadership and governance capacity, aligning their curricula with state standards, and targeting resources effectively towards identified priorities. Through Alaska ICE, we engage individuals, families, schools, organizations, businesses, faith communities, and young people themselves in

building sustainable community networks to support, encourage, and provide meaningful opportunities to our young people that will prepare them to thrive in the 21st century.

When young people feel connected to school and have support from family, teachers, and other caring adults, academic achievement improves and risk behaviors decrease.¹⁰ When students have strong social-emotional learning skills¹¹, they do better in school and life. There is a growing body of national research to support this, and we now have data to show this in Alaska. AASB has developed a student and staff survey to gauge student and staff perceptions of climate and connectedness, and an increasing number of schools are participating, including 242 schools in 33 districts in 2008, comprising over 30,000 students and almost 5000 staff.

Districts that have worked with AASB on community engagement and school improvement have shown:

- greater academic achievement as measured by Standards Based Assessment (SBA) proficiency gains than the statewide average
- even greater proficiency gains by Native students in those districts, and greater gains than Native students statewide
- persistent improvements in student ratings for school climate and student connectedness over the last three years across all aspects of climate and connectedness
- improved overall staff ratings of school climate across most subscales

Other key findings of AASB's School Climate and Connectedness Survey include:

- Key factors of school climate and connectedness are related to student performance on Alaska's SBAs: high expectations, school safety, parent and community involvement, and social-emotional learning were found to have significant positive relationships with scores on reading, writing and mathematics.
- Staff ratings for school climate were consistently and strongly related to student performance in reading, writing and mathematics SBAs.
- There have been significant negative relationships between student risk behaviors and school climate and connectedness ratings each year: the more students reported that there was a positive climate at their school and that they felt connected to school, the lower the number of incidents of delinquent behavior and drug and alcohol use they reported seeing among peers at school or school events.

¹⁰ This national research cuts across various disciplines, including education, psychology, public health, behavioral health, juvenile justice, neuroscience, etc. (Blum, *The Case for School Connectedness*, Educational Leadership, April 2005; Freudenberg & Ruglis, *Reframing School Dropout as a Public Health Issue*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Oct. 2007; Wilkenfeld, Moore and Lippman, *Neighborhood Support and Children's Connectedness*, Child Trends Fact Sheet, Feb. 2008.

¹¹ Wand, Haertel, and Walberg found that social and emotional factors were among the most influential factors on student learning, based on evidence from 561 educational researchers and 91 meta-analyses (1997).

- Students who reported that they had someone available outside of school to help them with homework and students who had an adult who knew what they did with their free time gave consistently higher ratings for connectedness to school and more favorable ratings of their school climate than did students without outside support and supervision.

As more districts participate in the survey and use the results to improve school climate and increase student connectedness, we are seeing growing interest in the area of social and emotional learning, and how schools, after-school programs, and families can work together to promote social and emotional development. A 2008 meta-analysis of over 700 studies of family, school and community interventions found a broad range of benefits for students¹²:

- 9% decrease in conduct problems (e.g., classroom misbehavior, aggression)
- 10% decrease in emotional distress (e.g., anxiety, depression)
- 9% improvement in attitudes about self, others, and school
- 23% improvement in social and emotional skills
- 9% improvement in school and classroom behavior
- 11% improvement in achievement test scores

A growing number of Alaska school districts are focusing on improving students' social and emotional learning as an effective way to improve student success. The Anchorage School District is viewed as being at the leading edge of this national effort, and AASB is assisting a number of other Alaska districts.

Federal Support

It is clear that lowering high school dropout rates is necessary, and that it will only be accomplished if we align our various efforts to support children and families more effectively. We need to actively enlist families, schools and our communities to ensure that some children don't start out behind, and that if they do, we have effective ways to very quickly close that early gap so they can all get the benefit of our education system. We need to ensure our schools offer engaging, rigorous, and relevant curricula, provide safe, caring environments where students feel connected, have high expectations for all students, and provide the appropriate supports that will enable students to meet those expectations. We need to make sure that our communities provide a positive environment where young people feel valued and have meaningful opportunities for involvement.

Through initiatives like Alaska ICE we need to help people understand the important role we each can play in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our schools, in our businesses, in our communities. We need to encourage adults to feel and then act on a shared responsibility for creating the kind of supportive environment that young people

¹² Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning Research Brief: *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Student Benefits: Implications for the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Core Elements*, 2008.

need. Every one of us has opportunities in our daily lives to interact with young people, and what both common sense and research tell us is that the cumulative impact of those small interactions is profound. We can each decide to be intentional in those interactions, and use them to engage positively with kids, to be interested in them and what they think, and to give them opportunities to be a valuable part of our communities.

The federal government can't do these things. But there are many ways that it can support the people who can do these things:

Continue long-term funding for the Alaska Native Education Equity Program in NCLB. AASB's Alaska Initiative for Community Engagement is an example of how federal funding can be used effectively to spark the initiative and capacity in each of our communities to actively work together to better support young people. The Alaska Native Education Equity funding targets Alaska Native student achievement, dropout reduction, and school readiness. There is improvement, but significant disparities persist.

Target early intervention and support towards the children most at risk of starting school behind. This should include intentional, sustained strategies (statewide, districtwide, and communitywide) that start at an early age, include families, and continue into preschool and early elementary school. When we do that in an intentional and coordinated way, we will vastly simplify the other steps we can and should take to improve schools to meet the needs of older students.

Hold steadfastly to the ideal put forward in NCLB that all children should get the best education we can give them. As we go forward with improvements in NCLB, we should retain accountability for all the subgroups that we know are lagging behind. If we focus our attention on supporting these children, and preparing all children for school, we will address the root causes of the dropout problem.

Conclusion

AASB is working with partners across Alaska to change the environment in which children and youth live. Engaging individuals, organizations and communities is long-term work and sometimes requires starting at a basic level of capacity-building. The great thing is that when people understand how their personal, everyday actions, however small, can positively impact a young person, they are very willing to do it over the long term. And those small actions, repeated across the state, will help build healthy communities and in turn healthy young people.

We know a lot about what we need to do. We need to gather the collective will and commitment to do it before another generation of our children drift off to underachieving lives.

Senator Murkowski, thank you for your time. I know I am preaching to the choir here. I want to thank you for your strong and sustained support for Alaska's children, for education, and for our community engagement initiative. I invite you to call on me and the Association of Alaska School Boards to assist in this effort in whatever way would be helpful.

For more information about the Association of Alaska School Boards' Initiative for Community Engagement (Alaska ICE), visit: www.alaskaice.org