

2016 Alaska Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Bob Sivertsen, House District 36
Submitted September 15th

Alaska PTA aka Alaska Congress of Parents and Teachers, Inc. represents approximately 7,000 members from 116 schools around the state. The Alaska PTA Advocacy Committee would deeply appreciate your taking the time to answer our questions about your perspective on public education in Alaska. Providing quality public education is one of the most important sectors that we can invest in, when one considers the impact it has on the future of our children and thus the competitiveness of our state.

The questionnaire will be used to provide a synopsis of candidate positions to our members, in order to better inform them of candidate positions prior to the November election. We respectfully ask that you complete and submit the questionnaire prior to September 15th, 2016.

1. Please provide your name and the Alaska Legislative seat you are a candidate for.

Bob Sivertsen candidate for Alaska State House of Representatives District 36

2. What do you see as the three top challenges facing the delivery of public education in Alaska today?

I believe the top three challenges facing the delivery of public education in Alaska are:

- constricted local budgets
- state budget deficits
- geography/logistics

3. What is your understanding of the “Every Student Succeeds Act”, and what potential effects it can have on public education in Alaska?

ESSA is a good replacement for the NCLB Act because it provides for more local input and control. It will take time to complete the requirements set out for implementing ESSA. There are a number of steps required to assess the different schools and measure their successes and failures in providing adequate education, and then schools will have to go through a process created to address any deficiencies and design a way to measure the desired improvements. I see ESSA as an improvement to the education system if managed properly and for the benefit of students.

For each of the last six years, school districts across Alaska have cut their budgets and eliminated programs and positions due to local, state and federal funding levels that have remained flat. Thus we have the following questions:

4. Do you think Alaska public schools are adequately funded?

That is a great question and it relates directly to the question of whether or not our education system running efficiently. I am not convinced that funding correlates with educational competency, but I do support funding to meet the standards we’ve set.

5. Would you support an alternate revenue stream for public education in Alaska (one example would be an education head tax similar to that which was in place in 1980)?

I believed that the school tax once assessed on an individual’s first paycheck was a good idea. With inflation I am not sure what that number should be today. I do think that the state has to get creative moving forward, but as with any tax, implementation needs to be preceded by an assessment of the need, a plan for its use, and consideration of the effect the tax would have on Alaskans in the larger state tax scenario.

6. Do you support the continued minimum enrollment of 10 students to keep rural Alaska schools open to serve our rural communities and students? AND Do you support increasing graduation rates among Alaska Native students since according the National Center for Education Statistics they have one of the lowest graduation rates in the country and are residing in many of these rural small school locations?

I have seen abuse of the 10 student enrollment (i.e. when students are bussed from a larger community to fulfill the 10 student requirement). That is simply wrong. To do so expends funds that could potentially be better used elsewhere in our education system. It is a concern and I believe that the minimum student number should be increased slightly and that the state's distant learning program should be improved to fill the gap. I don't believe we should just abandon students in rural areas, but I do believe we need to find a path forward for alternatives in those areas where traditional school are not feasible.

To answer part two of the question: I am part Alaskan Native and a member of Sealaska and Ketchikan Indian Corporation. I support increasing graduation rates for Alaska Natives, and I believe the native corporations should be paying into the process of raising those graduation rates. A lot of graduation issues stem from cultural or environmental consequences; the corporations should be promoting school attendance and parental involvement. They have land, resources, and are closer to the issue. I believe the tribes and corporations can best address motivating students to graduate.

7. Would you support a comprehensive fiscal plan that includes new revenue streams, in order to preserve funding for public education?

I will support a comprehensive fiscal plan for the State of Alaska that includes a component to address funding our public education.

There is a large body of research that documents the benefits of early childhood education on overall student outcome, and graduation rates. In addition, this research suggests that pre-kindergarten programs can reduce the possibility of a student becoming incarcerated later in life.

8. Do you support funding universal pre-kindergarten as part of a complete education system in Alaska?

As parents we paid for our children to attend pre-school and both of us worked fulltime jobs so we could do so. I believe that there needs to be a commitment from families to help fund enrollment and pre-kindergarten programs. I understand that the state's mandate is core K – 12. In a lot of cases, this system is used as child care rather than respected as an educational institution. However, even then it serves the child well. With a lack of state revenue and the shadow of long-term debt looming before us, I believe future funding will be a continued topic of discussion and that the state will need to define their core focus for funding. I will be willing to participate in future debate.

The Alaska Legislature has considered legislation that proposed a constitutional amendment to allow public money to be spent on private schools, especially. Private schools can pick and choose students and are not held to the same standards as public schools for the quality and content of education. Public schools serve all students, regardless of race, religion, disability, or socioeconomic status.

9. Do you support changing the Alaska Constitution to allow public money to be spent on private or religious schools?

I do not support that change.

Research suggests parental involvement in a child's education contributes to improved academic performance, better social skills, greater attendance rate, and a higher likelihood of completing a post-secondary education.

10. Do you support the federal government funding a statewide family engagement center for Alaska?

I don't believe we need more federal funding (which would probably lead to the state contributing matching funds) to teach parents to be parents. The PTA and schools still need to find creative ways to engage parents. As a grandfather I am involved in my grandchildren's education. I know the schools and the teachers and have been involved in the classrooms. These types of funds could be better used to cover some of the unfunded federal mandates placed on Alaska's education system.

As a side note, I'd like to express that I have seven grandchildren in the public school system. Six are here in Ketchikan attending grade school, middle school, and high school. The oldest just started at the University of Alaska, Anchorage.