

2016 Alaska Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Chris Birch, House District 26
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.

Chris Birch - Republican Candidate for House District 26 - South Anchorage

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

1. inefficiencies preventing more education spending from moving to the classroom.
2. moving toward a pay for performance/results program.
3. institutionalized resistance to improved governance and cost reductions through competition.

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

I look forward to learning more about ESSA - to the extent that it reduces federal overreach into our state and community education programs it may be helpful.

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?

Yes - by most any measure. We have a duty and a responsibility to taxpayer's to spend our increasingly limited public resources in a manner that generates measurably positive achievement.

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)?

In view of the broad range of vital public services provided Alaska residents in addition to education such as public safety, transportation, health/welfare and our court system - our education system and all other state obligations should have equal access to state resources. As I recall, the education head tax was \$10 per year per working Alaskan. The Anchorage School District budget is some \$830 million, or about \$3,000 per Anchorage resident. Even with a ten fold increase in the prior head tax this would not significantly offset these costs.

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 support increased graduation rates for rural Alaskans but have concerns about the effectiveness of these programs and the associated overhead - i.e. fifty plus school districts statewide. ANSEP is a program that has been very successful in advancing our rural students into and through a challenging and competitive post secondary education. Where our rural communities are experiencing a declining student population we need to consider alternative means of education delivery. Ten students may be an unrealistic threshold for achieving successful outcomes.

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

Our schools, through their respective boards and administrations, need to do a better job pushing resources into the classroom. Competitively bidding non-core services, critically reviewing space requirements and improving governance by electing school board members by smaller geographic areas/districts would all serve to reduce costs and overhead and permit more spending in the classroom. The Anchorage School District budget is approximately \$830 million in support of 48,000 students or \$17.3K per student.

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?

No.

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?

Perhaps - only if the quality of education can be improved and/or maintained in both public and private sectors and depending on potential cost savings and efficiencies.

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 am not familiar with this program. Most federal programs have grant conditions and requirements that should full understood before accepting the funding/ obligation.