

2016 Alaska Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Gretchen Wehmhoff, House District 12
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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.

Gretchen Wehmhoff HD 12

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

- Teacher Retention in Rural and Urban schools
- Class sizes are increasingly large, reducing student/adult contact
- Forward and consistent funding so Districts can plan for the future

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

Having taught under both ESSA and NCLB, I was happy to see the return of ESSA in a more modern and realistic form. ESSA will be more flexible when dealing with the unique and challenging educational issues we have in Alaska. It removes some of the heavy limitations that were difficult for our rural schools and lessens the restrictive additional documentation required for accommodations. While no plan is perfect, the flexibility it provides will benefit Alaska and allow Alaskans to observe cultural and educational differences that occur in the many communities of our state. This will also open doors for teachers to instruct more curriculum. This is important as a financial issue in rural communities. I am always cautious of national plans that impact Alaska, so we will need to stay involved in this Act's evolution.

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?

Absolutely not. We have continued to make it more difficult to educate our children around the state by cutting funding and not recognizing normal expense growth. I also believe our legislative priorities should have education at the forefront. We know that an educated society is a safer society. We know that schools may sometimes be the one place to safety and routines to children at risk.

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)?

Yes, I believe we need to consider, discuss, explore and initiate new revenue sources for education. We can't keep doing the same thing and expecting different results. The entire state budget must be stabilized. We MUST look forward to consistent funding for education and possible revenue sources to meet that goal.

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 always support anything we can do to assist students in their educational journey, whether it be technical school, a good high school diploma or college. This, of course, means all students. Many Alaska Native students rely on village schools and adult interactions. We need to continue to find ways to meet their needs for their success and the success of their community.

I support NOT INCREASING the minimum enrollment as has been suggested by different legislatures. Small schools require flexible teaching staff. We are obligated both legally and morally to provide education to our children. We should NOT raise the minimum number of students required.

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

Yes. As I mentioned earlier, we need to provide consistent and adequate funding to our schools in order to more efficiently serve our kids. We MUST come up with a comprehensive fiscal plan. It won't be easy. Nothing this important is, but I believe we can do it if we send the right people to Juneau who plan to work together.

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?

Yes. I believe that funding pre-K at some level is the most important start for our children. This also assists families in learning how to become more involved in their child's education. I believe, backed by statistics, that we will save money, lives and our society if we spent more money teaching citizens than incarcerating them later.

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?

No. I do not support this.

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?

Yes, if we are able to accept funding for our families and children to help them through these educational years, I am in.

Again, the more we assist families in becoming involved with their child's education, the more we assist society. In addition, the parents will benefit from the social, instructional and positive interactions at centers such as these.