

2016 Alaska Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Harriet Drummond, House District 18
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.

Harriet Drummond, House District 18

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

1. Stable, fair and adequate funding
2. Attraction and retention of highly qualified teachers
3. Reduced capital budget and elimination of school bond debt reimbursement

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

The new federal education law, known as the “Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA),” returns to the state some of the control over our schools that was lost in the previous education law, “No Child Left Behind.” The state of Alaska will work with stakeholders to build a school accountability system that meets the needs of parents, students, educators, and the public.

ESSA allows the state more flexibility in the type of assessment, more freedom in creating a school accountability system, and more local control over corrective measures for low-performing schools.

States are required to adopt “challenging” academic standards, which could be the Common Core State Standards, but doesn’t have to be. The Alaska Legislature has passed laws forbidding the State Department of Education and early Learning to spend any money on adoption or implementation of the Common Core standards. I don’t agree with this and have voted against it. In addition, a number of Alaska school districts have already adopted their own versions of the Common Core standards.

Development of the ESSA state plan requires consultation specifically with the Governor, the Legislature, the State Board of Education, school districts, representatives of Indian tribes, teachers, principals, other school leaders, charter school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, and of course parents. Local buy-in will make a huge difference in how ESSA impacts Alaska’s students and families.

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?

No, and they have not been adequately for quite a few years. Schools are losing critical staff, such as counselors, that help students prepare for post-secondary education. Class sizes are growing to an unacceptable point. And

now with the elimination of school bond debt support from the state, simply maintaining schools to safe standards will be much more difficult and require significantly more local support.

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 might support such a head tax. I am one of those long-time Alaskans who paid that tax, along with an income tax, until 1980. However, once again, there were no proposals for such a tax that had a hearing in the last legislative session, and we must explore the options available to Alaska, with consideration to the wide variety of communities and economies in our state.

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?

Schools are critical to the life of communities and I absolutely support the continued minimum enrollment of 10 students to keep small schools open. Some rural districts are providing intensive-type, short-term, boarding-included programs in hub communities in order to provide the more specialized education that very small schools cannot do. I think this is absolutely a good move in order to be sure all students have similar opportunities to learn and to increase graduation rates. Providing classes relevant to a student's lifestyle is also a good way to prepare them for jobs in their communities rather than losing them to the bigger towns.

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

I support a fair, balanced, and comprehensive fiscal plan. Alaska's fiscal plan must include new revenue streams and the legislature must give these proposals a fair hearing with public input and soon. All of Alaska's children deserve the opportunities that our public education system provides them.

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?

Absolutely. Alaska is moving in the wrong direction when some legislators believe that pilot programs should be moved from one community to another instead of expanding pre-school to new communities. Alaska is already in the fourth lowest quintile of the states, i.e., Alaska has the fewest pre-school programs and serves the smallest proportion of pre-schools. We need to expand preschool to as many communities as possible, and make it voluntary, of course. I worked to expand full-day kindergarten to every school in the Anchorage School District when I served on the Anchorage School Board from 1994 to 2003. Relying only on Federal Head Start programs is not the direction Alaska should be moving in. There are a lot of other proven benefits of pre-school besides reduced prison populations. Those children that have had high-quality pre-school more often go on to college, own homes, have good jobs, and yes, stay out of prison. I would much prefer to close Alaska's prisons and grow Alaska's preschools.

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 changing Alaska's constitution. Public money should not be spent on private or religious schools. I have fought against this proposal every time it has come up.

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 in principle, but I do need more details. We must be sure that this is a sustainable project as federal funding often tends to disappear after the first few years.