

2016 Alaska Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Ivy Spohnholz, House District 16
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.

Ivy Spohnholz, House District 16

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

1) The struggle for sustainable and predictable funding.

2) The focus on testing over learning.

3) The challenge of delivering quality education in rural Alaska where students are not able to experience the same range and quality of quality of education as urban kids.

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

ESSA returns much of the control in defining what is educational success back to the states. It also removes from the more punitive measures for low performing schools that existed on No Child Left Behind which allowed for divesting in low performing schools which simply increased the challenges faced by them. It is certainly an improvement over No Child Left Behind but its efficacy is yet to be measured as it has only just begun to be implemented.

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, I don't think that Alaska's schools are adequately funded. Flat funding for education is not acceptable given that our education dollars don't stretch as far from year to year given inflation. Additionally, the challenges that school districts continue to face in terms of knowing what their funding levels will be from year to year continue to challenge us.

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 would absolutely be willing to consider an alternative revenue stream. However, my support depends on its fairness.

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?

It is important that we continue to support families that live in small rural communities that in many ways define Alaska. Additionally, I think that it should be the right of Alaska Natives to continue to live in their traditional homelands and have high quality education for their children. I also believe that we should do everything that we can to increase graduation rates among Alaska Native students. We must engage in discussion with small communities and Alaska Native leaders about ways to ensure that their kids can get higher quality education creatively since a small school with just one teacher simply cannot offer the same quality of education as a larger one where there are specialists. The tension of respecting traditional lifestyles with high quality education is one that must be addressed with involvement of affected communities without a preconceived outcome. I believe that is how we will come up with the creative solutions that are needed to solve this challenge.

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

Absolutely!

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! No only does it improve outcomes but it is also the single most cost effective investment in educational and health outcomes we can make in education.

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!

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.