

2016 Alaska Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

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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.

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

The rural nature of most of Alaska results in expensive education costs; finding and retaining quality teachers; and the requirement for teachers to document the teaching more than actually teach.

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

I have the impression that this federal program is a vast improvement over “No Child Left Behind”, but it is still a federal program mandating how teaching should occur. I appreciate that it is a sincere effort to improve education in schools, especially in low income districts. I know a few teachers who are hoping that it will allow more local control. We’ll see.

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. And, then, local and state government(s) quarrel over who is actually responsible for the funding.

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, that idea appears to have wide support.

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?

Yes, keep this minimum enrollment (certainly don’t increase it) unless a community requests that their children attend a different school in order for them to have a better education. It would be nice to improve the graduation rate among Native students, but that is a complex issue involving changing the beliefs about the need for a degree, and providing meaningful topics to engage the rural children. I think perhaps finding some role models who have an education and are well respected state wide and locally would help significantly. I

would also think that there should be a maximum enrollment (aka class size) with some system to allow for waivers under certain circumstances.

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

Actually, one of the main reasons that I am running for state house is because there is no comprehensive fiscal plan! Goodness, any small business owner knows and appreciates that you must have a business plan. So, of course, I support this and it should include a prioritization of funding allocations, in which education and public safety are at the top of the list.

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?

There is more to this than prekindergarten programs, but that is certainly part of the solution. There are more and more parents sending their kids to prekindergarten classes, although I think many of them find it to be a convenient babysitter option. My parents taught us the alphabet and how to read before we went to kindergarten. I think that, nowadays, my parents are the exception. There are other factors including the medical concerns (ACES), access to school activities, and financial issues that are part of the early education issue. Overall, yes, I support funding of universal prekindergarten, but I would not make it mandatory to attend.

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?

While the process to change our Constitution is something that should be respected for any issue, I do not support allowing public money to be spent on private or religious schools. As a State Representative, I would not vote to place it on the ballot, and as a Citizen, I would not sign a Citizen Initiative nor vote for it on the ballot. The most striking response to this question came from my nephew, who said "How would proponents feel if one of those religious schools was of the Muslim faith?"

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 worry about federal government funding and the strings attached, and I am unsure what this concept involves. A family engagement center sounds good. Is this something big in one location? Is this a statewide department providing outreach? I do know that many parents simply don't know how to be parents. They aren't actively engaged in their kids' studies or activities. And, kids aren't engaged with the parents. Do kids get grade cards and take them home for their parents to sign? What is the rate of attendance at parent:teacher conferences?