

2016 Alaska Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Jennifer Johnston, House District 28
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.

Jennifer Johnston, House District 28

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

The top challenge facing public education in Alaska today is credibility – especially with respect to making sure that state and local resources are focused on teachers in the classroom and on supporting those things that are demonstrated to be highly efficient and effective for our students.

Evidence suggests that Alaska has increased per pupil expenditures by \$10,000 over the past twelve years while performance has remained essentially flat – even after taking into account key demographic variables. Meanwhile, other states, including many with both high rural and urban poverty and challenging subpopulations to serve, have achieved significant improvements in performance with much more modest spending levels – even after taking into account differences in the local cost of living.

We need to refocus on building on clear consistent sustainable success; not “we need more spending”

In state to state comparisons over the past decade, Alaska has increased funding for K-12 by over \$10,000 per student while lagging behind all other states and was tied with Hawaii for last place on national assessment of education performance. And Hawaii increased spending by half as much.

We simply cannot continue to ask the public for more money and new taxes based on our collective good intentions and happy talk of high aspirations without having some evidence that the investments are making a difference.

We are fortunate in Anchorage in that we have several local examples where school performance has been significantly improved and sustained when strong local principals have gathered and supported strong teaching teams – even after taking into account the demographics of the school’s students.

- Alaska Native Cultural Charter School under Dianne Hoffbauer
- Williwaw Elementary under Bonnie Goen
- Bayshore Elementary under Heidi Packard
- Clark Middle School under State of Alaska Principal of the Year, Cessilye Williams
- Polaris K-12 under Denise Greene-Wilkinson

Unfortunately, it does not appear as if the Anchorage School District or the State of Alaska has been able to clone these success stories and generate consistent positive results across the State.

Many legislators who supported the increase in state funding of K-12 over the past decade have shared their concern that they have substantial increases in funding but have very little to show for it – especially when they look at the superior results that have been achieved from smaller increases in funding in other states.

We need to focus our limited resources on well trained and well supported teachers who are successful at providing direct classroom instruction to our K-12 students.

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

Unfortunately, while the ESSA has the potential to help provide a vehicle for financial support for Alaska’s school children, it appears that the federal Department of Education is continuing to develop new regulations that raise serious concerns about excessive federal micromanagement which could lead to counterproductive results [see “New ESSA Spending Regulations Proposed”, Education Week, September 6, 2016.]

AFT President, Randi Weingarten, has offered that the ESSA draft rules represent an “unfunded mandate from Washington” that pushes district to increase spending without showing them how to do so, or compelling any additional resources to help districts.

Executive Director Council of Chief State School Officers, Chris Minnich, has said “in the department’s effort to ensure resources go to the students who need it the most, they have created a situation where the reverse is likely to occur in many places.”

We need to make sure that the federal support of public education stemming from ESSA is not fraught with federal micromanagement that fails to provide our teachers and students with highly valuable support without reams of unnecessary and counterproductive requirements.

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.

The Anchorage School District engaged Picus Odden and Associates to assess whether ASD was adequately funded. The results of that study, released in April 2016, indicated that the teaching and support staff levels for FY1415 were adequate.

The authors of that report indicated that increasing funding for more teachers in order to achieve smaller class sizes could be considered “if funding were available”, but that, all other things being equal, smaller class sizes do not appear to have a significant impact on student achievement compared to making sure that students were taught by well trained, well supported successful teachers with the reasonable class sizes currently in place.

The results of the Picus Odden and Associates report were extended across the state in a presentation to the Anchorage School Board Finance Committee. In that presentation over 90% of the districts in Alaska had more than adequate teaching and support staff compared to the baselines that came out of that study – six teachers per 100 students and six support staff per 100 students.

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)?

Not until we have a compelling story to share with the public related to how the school districts are able to demonstrate that they have focused their resources on well trained and well supported teachers who are successfully providing direct classroom instruction.

Anchorage School District conducted an on-line survey of the public last year. The survey responses from the teachers who work directly in our schools with students every day were revealing. One of the most highly rated concerns raised by the faculty at Bayshore Elementary was excessive micromanagement and seemingly arbitrary requirements imposed on teachers and administrators by the central office that kept teachers from being able to focus their limited time and energy on providing quality instruction to their students.

These comments were especially concerning because the principal and teachers at Bayshore have repeatedly demonstrated they are able to achieve excellent results with their students – even after taking into account the demographics of their student body.

Until school boards and central office administrators demonstrate sustained focus on well trained, well supported and successful teachers and not excessive micromanagement of teachers and principals pandering to the political fashion of the day, it seems unlikely that there will be broad public support from Legislative constituents, including school faculty and staff, for a public tax to help pay for schools.

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?

Rather than engage in a contentious and counterproductive argument over the state minimum enrollment threshold of ten students, it may be timely to ask representatives from across rural Alaska to consider how best to organize and sustain K-12 education for all students and not turn the K-12 debate into a tortuous defense of past funding practices that has left our students falling behind students from other states.

I have worked with Cook Inlet Tribal Council's Partners Program and have been very active in their ARISE efforts. I strongly support their efforts to not only increase the graduation rates among Alaska Native Students, but their additional efforts to promote and encourage graduates to actively engage in challenging and advance academics.

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

The public school advocates have not made the case that the money that has been invested in K-12 in Alaska over the past decade has made a serious and substantial difference in basic proficiency of our students. Until districts are able to show that they are truly focused on students and sustaining measurable improvements in student success, it seems likely that the public will remain skeptical of new taxes for school districts.

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?

As stated in the ARISE materials, Pre -K can be a game changer. The question what is the most effective and cost efficient way to deliver the services.

ASD's recent expansion of pre-k using a district template appeared to be relatively expensive. When faced with cuts, the local school board appears to have significantly cut back their pilot pre-k program suggesting that basic K-12 was a higher priority.

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. No change in the Alaska Constitution regarding education appears necessary at this time.

Parents are currently able to make investments in private or religious school developed *secular curriculum* through their correspondence/home school allotments. Examples of this exist across the correspondence/home schools in Alaska – including charter schools in Anchorage and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

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 would have three questions:

1. If there is a high value social service niche that can be efficiently served that is not duplicative of the many current school district, United Way and other non-profit efforts to support school age children and their families?
2. If the federal program could be structured to avoid excessive micromanagement that may impact other programs and potentially undermine direct classroom instruction by successful teachers?
3. What are the terms of the funding and what would happen when the funding went away?