

# 2016 Alaska Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Joe Hackenmueller, House District 14  
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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 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

1. Please provide your name and the Alaska Legislative seat you are a candidate for.

Joe Hackenmueller, House District 14 (Eagle River Valley)

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

1) Predictable, sustainable funding: Regardless of what is considered "appropriate" funding, it is imperative districts and schools are have the ability to plan ahead.

2) Recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers: Increasing workload, stagnant salaries and benefits, and the lack of a defined benefit retirement plan is making it increasingly difficult for districts throughout the state to attract and retain the best possible teaching staff.

3) Providing equal opportunities for all students: This includes access to quality teachers, current curriculum and instructional materials, reasonable class size, access to technology, access to optional / specialized programs, and extra curricular activities.

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

The ESSA act is a replacement of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. In effect, it narrows the federal governments authority with respect to elementary and secondary education, and gives each state more autonomy with respect to curriculum, testing, and staff development.

Key points for Alaska include:

- States have more autonomy with respect to setting goals, accountability, intervention.
- Annual testing still required or students in grades 3-8 (and one time for HS students), but the state has more autonomy in deciding which tests and setting the parameters.
- ELL programs move from Title III to Title I
- Highly Qualified Teacher requirements have been eliminated
- \$1.6 Billion block grant program consolidates numerous other previous grant.
- Enshrines pre-school programs into law.

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?

In general, no. However, there will always be some debate around the definition of "adequate". Much of the angst on both sides of this argument is rooted in the uncertainty of that funding from year to year.

Every organization should be continuously evaluating the return on investment for various programs, and we should be constantly looking for ways to optimize efficiency and minimize costs. If we could establish a forward funding mechanism which allows both the legislature and the schools to predict their costs on a 3 to 5 year horizon, all parties would be more likely to make decisions that would result in more efficient operations and more effective instruction.

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. A "head tax" is a very simple solution that would be palatable to most voters. I would also favor an educational endowment that would generate a predictable, secure, revenue stream.

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?

1) Every year two or three school around the state are forced to close. This year two schools in SE Alaska (Tenakee Springs and Port Protection) had to shut down due to low enrollment.

Unfortunately, there has to be some minimum. But the 10 student threshold seems somewhat arbitrary. We're not just closing the school, we are eliminating a community center. Rather than completely shutting down, I would favor reduced funding on a pro-rated basis when the enrollment drops below a preset number.

2) Increasing graduation rates among Alaska Natives is an important goal. (As is increasing graduation rates for all students.) The challenge is; how can we more effectively engage this population. We need to explore more "place based" curriculum opportunities that are relevant to the AK Native culture. We need to provide all students with a positive vision of the future along with an achievable pathway to get there.

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

Absolutely. In fact, I would sponsor legislation to this effect. As mentioned earlier in this survey, the predictability of funding is almost as important as the amount of funding. Our current process forces districts to build budgets in the January/February timeframe without really knowing what their revenue will be until the end of the legislative session (May?.....June?.....July?) This invariably results in last minute staffing and program decisions. And rushed decisions often result in less than optimal use of limited resources.

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. The evidence is clear that pre-k programs are one of the most effective investments we can make.

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. One of the strengths of the public school system is that it provides equal opportunities for all students. (Or at least tries to....) Diverting funds to private or religious institutions would weaken the public school system.

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?

Possibly. Under the ESSA act, every district is required to set aside 1% of it's Title I funding to support family engagement activities.

However, this doesn't necessarily need to be in the form of a "statewide family engagement center". It could take the form of local engagement centers or various engagement activities. In fact, the law requires that parents of low income students "must" be included in the discussions of how these funds are spent in their community.