

2016 Alaska Legislative Candidate Questionnaire

Pat Higgins, House District 25
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.

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

I believe the top three challenges are inadequate and declining State funding, helping students meet new academic standards, and reducing the academic achievement gap.

The Legislative Majority has targeted public education for cuts without regards to its impacts on student success. Public education funding for general operations, transportation and building maintenance/construction has been reduced over the past several years. Public education needs dependable adequate funding and the State has not defined adequate funding. The possibility of further cuts makes it difficult for school districts to plan and implement changes to improve academic outcomes.

Academic standards are changing, and need to continue to change to prepare students for a rapidly changing world. Public education needs to change to help students meet these new standards and prepare students for success in life. This will require additional resources and staff development.

Alaska's academic achieve gap needs to be a higher priority for all school districts. ASD has one of the largest academic achievement gaps compared to other comparable sized school districts. ASD and other Alaska school districts are making little progress reducing this gap compared to other school districts in the lower 48.

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

This act replaced No Child Left Behind. It will continue to require academic testing and reporting requirements, including reporting graduation rates for different subsets of students broken out. Compared to No Child Left Behind, this acts gives States and local school districts more flexibility on developing and implementing plans to improve low performing schools. The full impact of this act in Alaska is still being evaluated by the State and local school districts.

Based on discussions between the State and ASD, one impact will be on the teacher qualification requirements. Increasing the number of required college credits for teachers to be highly qualified in subject areas will reduce the number of qualified applicants and make it more difficult for all schools to recruit and retain qualified teachers.

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. Last year ASD contracted with Picus Odden and Associates for a study to establish adequate staffing. The Picus Odden study used a model accepted by other states and courts to determine adequate staffing levels based on pupil teacher ratios. That study concluded ASD was understaffed, and the State conducted a study that concluded current teacher compensation needs to be increased to be competitive. This data should be used by the State to establish adequate funding for all school districts in Alaska.

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. I believe all alternatives to adequately fund public education and balance the State budget should be considered.

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 to 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?

I do not support increasing the minimum enrollment for rural schools because it would negatively impact academic outcomes and graduation rates. I support increasing graduation rates for Alaska Native students and all minority students. The challenge is how to achieve this goal. There needs to be a commitment to adopting programs proven to be success in increasing graduation rates and academic outcomes.

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

Yes. Establishing a long term fiscal plan that provides adequate funding for essential government services, including public education, should be the top priority for the State at this time. This cannot be achieved without new revenue streams and I am committed to achieving this goal.

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?

Yes. The impact of the benefits of pre-kindergarten learning is well established. Unfortunately, forty percent of children entering kindergarten are not prepared for kindergarten according to a study reported by the Alaska Association of School Boards. Pre-kindergarten is key to helping all students to succeed.

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. I am strongly opposed to vouchers. I support charter schools that are under the control of local school districts.

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. The impact of increasing family involvement in education has been proven to have a positive effect on academic success for a relatively minor investment.