

MUST READ ALASKA

Decades later, education reform in Alaska has gotten nowhere

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Part 1: A look back at the Alaska 2000 education task force findings

“Let’s stop blaming each other. The problems in public education are not primarily problems with teachers, parents, administrators. or students. The problems grow out of a system. If we all work together to restructure that system, if we add standards, accountability and competition- kids win!”

Today, Alaska schools have some of the lowest student performance outcomes and some of the highest costs per student of any state in the nation.

It is easy to condemn the school boards, the school administrations, the unions, the teachers and even the parents and students, but the fact is when your job is to nail down tarpaper on a roof in a windstorm, look forward to frustration, anger, and failure.

It is time to reform the cause of all of this, Alaska Statutes Title 14, Education Code.

The opening quote of this column is from the Alaska 2000 task force on education, which began in 1991. It was led by former Alaska Education Commissioner Jerry Covey, under the leadership of then Gov. Walter Hickel.

It was a profound, event since it clearly saw the problem Alaska faced in education. The members of Alaska 2000 were from a multitude of disciplines in Alaska, all sharing a common concern. The Alaska education system was broken and required immediate attention.

With their acronym for the new century, “AK2K,” they approached their mission as a plan for action. Their goal was to address and correct the declining scores on standardized tests, high

school dropout rates as high as 25% statewide and as high as 45% for Natives in urban schools, poor student performance relative to other industrialized nations, public alienation and dissatisfaction, and the failure of school reform to turn things around fast enough and far enough.

AK2K was a plan to restructure the Alaska public education system from an apolitical foundation and create a new model for education which would be the “best in the world”.

The members of AK2K earnestly approached the challenge by identifying the issues that the public and stakeholders saw as a collapse in Alaska’s social fabric. They were intrinsically devoted to mapping a system of recommendations which would turn Alaska’s education around in the next century. They worked diligently from October 1991 through July 1992.

On July 15, 1992, AK2K submitted its recommendations to the Alaska State Board of Education.

These recommendations included improving education standards by adopting a new vision, performance standards, student testing and “a state-issued warranty that a student has met state standards, guaranteeing that schools will reteach students who are lacking these skills.”

They urged provisions for charter schools, school choice, allowing choice and vocational programs that would have created educational competition in the state for the first time in its history.

When it came to paying for education, AK2K opened the discussion up to local cost sharing, per capita funding, a school price index to maintain funding equity for rural schools, adoption of financial standards, reporting student contact time in hours instead of days, addressing transportation costs, include rental provisions in the foundation program and levying a school tax.

AK2K asked for regulation review, withholding funds as a penalty to school districts in violation of regulations and statutes, subjecting all education statutes to a five-year sunset review, establishing a fast track for regulatory change, and allowing regulatory waivers for innovative approaches that improved student achievement.

They proposed capital funding priorities, new schools and classrooms, shared capital costs, two-phased funding for capital construction to include planning and site development and then construction, statewide school construction standards, major maintenance prioritization, preventive maintenance, independent audits, statewide education facility inventory, construction oversight, construction standards and assessing the need for residential high schools with dormitories.

AK2K saw technology becoming an important tool in education by recommending technology training, developing a telecommunications network, and creating a telecommunication reporting

system. It also addressed the need for workforce development in the education system to include teacher training standards, additional certification requirements, knowledge of technology, staff evaluation and amending teacher tenure and a teacher certificate endorsement.

AK2K had new program ideas such as student incentive grants, a 13-year education funding cycle to include tuition reimbursement for college credits, increased student contact time, research and development, a school conservation corps focused on at risk students, advisory board establishment and encouraging parental responsibility.

AK2K also saw the challenges the state faced in the 1990s.

After school infrastructure construction statewide from 1976 through 1991, Alaska faced two problems:

First, huge school infrastructure operation and maintenance costs were headed into a future (1990's) of what many believed was to be a difficult and uncomfortable situation of declining oil revenues. History shows undeniably that the '90's were a tough decade on Alaska, especially after the late 1980's recession, which saw the sharpest revenue declines since the beginning of oil revenue in 1977.

Second, and the more urgent of the two, was the disparities of outcome in a state needing a ready, willing, and available workforce. This growing fact became increasingly dominant—the school system wasn't producing trained and educated workers. The central effort for education changes that were very apparent to Commissioner Covey and all on the AK2K team. This was best stated by Commissioner Covey at the time:

“In the late '80s and early '90s, school system growth slowed, school funding decreased, and school districts turned their attention to operating their expanded systems. Around that time, state leaders, employers, in-state colleges and universities, and parents began raising concerns about education quality. Those stakeholders felt frustrated by the fact that some high school graduates were well prepared for entry into the workforce or higher education, whereas others with the same fresh diplomas were not. Employers and higher education institutions often found themselves having to teach skills that were expected of high school graduates. They asked, ‘What exactly does a high school diploma signify? And how are we to know what skills graduates possess?’”

These problems were addressed by the AK2K task force. But the Alaska Legislature, the constitutional arbiter of education policy, was nowhere to be found. The needed and necessary changes to improve education institutional behavior were not addressed sufficiently, if at all. The problems continue into this decade.

Moreover, AK2K realized increased funding for education did not necessarily lead to better education performance. In that task force's findings, it noted Eric Hanushek of the University of

Rochester reviewed studies that examined relationships between money and performance. and he concluded: “Expenditures are unrelated to school performance as schools are currently operated.” John Chubb of the Brookings Institution and Terry Moe of Stanford University concluded similarly, “There is no connection between school funding and school performance.”

At the time of AK2K, education in the 1991 state operating budget commanded \$800 million, compared to the 2021 state education operating budget of \$1.66 billion. District enrollment totals for all Alaskan public-school districts in 1991-92 totaled 116,766 students. District enrollment totals for all Alaskan public school districts in 2021-2022 were 130,442 students. This translates into roughly an 11.7% district enrollment increase. The 2021 state operating budget more than doubled at a 107.5% increase over 30 years. Interestingly, this 30 year process almost equaled inflation.

What was more startling was this statement from AK2K: “Accountability to standards and competition force us all to improve. They create dynamism. As David Boaz of the Cato Institute said: ‘The people in the public school system aren’t necessarily bad people, they are people who face bad incentives. In fact. they have good incentives not to change anything.’”

“Look at the different consequences of failure in the public and private sectors. If you fail in the private sector, you may lose your job or business. In the public sector, if students don’t learn or drop out of school-well, what happens? The agency or school gets more money,” AK2K wrote. “Now what kind of incentive structure is that?”

Has Alaska education changed for the better or the worse since Alaska 2000? Perhaps more importantly, where has all that money gone?