

Testimony of Commissioner Michael Johnson
Department of Education and Early Development, State of Alaska
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United States Senate
Oversight Field Hearing “Transformative and Innovative Strategies for
Better Educational Outcomes for Alaska Native Students”

The vision of the State of Alaska’s Department of Education and Early Development is set forth in Alaska Statute 14.03.015, stating that, “all students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them.” To realize this vision the Alaska’s Education Challenge convened parents, lawmakers, teachers, and education leaders from across the state who collectively recognized the need for systemic change in Alaska’s public education system. One of the Alaska Education Challenge’s five strategic priorities encourages tribal and community ownership of excellence in education to help close the achievement gap and increase equitable access to an excellent education. To accomplish this outcome, the Alaska State Board of Education adopted the priority to create the option for self-governance compacting for the delivery of education between the state of Alaska and tribes or tribally-empowered Alaska Native organizations.

While some students are able to flourish in our current system, far too many are not. We are not, and must not be satisfied with the current status of education outcomes provided for our students. When we see students not able to realize their full potential, even with the help of hard working educators, we must examine the system that is failing our students. A state tribal education compact provides a pathway for the needed systemic change in Alaska.

For this reason, our character and conscience requires that we press on toward systemic change. Though I have no doubt that there were many good intentions, our public education system started out without the proper understanding, respect, and vision for Alaska's students, particularly our Alaska Native students. Because of that lack of respect and understanding, and in some cases deliberate disrespect, our education system has not had a positive impact on Alaska Native languages and culture. Our character and conscience now requires that we demonstrate our respect and value of Alaska Native culture and language by entering into compacts for education so our students can restore and revitalize what has been diminished by ineffective education outcomes.

A compact is a government to government agreement that forms a partnership that is founded on the idea of shared vision, shared resources, and shared work. It provides the essential legal framework to be dynamically responsive while meeting the need for fiscal stability and accountability. While the Department of Education and Early Development is just starting to explore compacting with tribes, Alaska’s tribes have decades of experience in compacting. The Department of Education and Early Development has spent the last six years to build understanding and research the state tribal compacting legal framework that would be necessary in Alaska. This includes Alaska’s Education Challenge, hiring a project coordinator to

focus specifically on tribal compacting, and the Alaska State Board of Education establishing a State Tribal Education Compacting committee.

The state of Alaska works with the federal government through the Every Student Succeeds Act and various other federal titles and programs to carry out education in Alaska. There is a shared connection between the state and federal government for meeting the need for public education in Alaska. In addition, federally recognized tribes also have a relationship with the federal government. This is a significant consideration for Alaska as there are 229 federally recognized tribes in Alaska, and one out of every four students in Alaska is Alaska Native or American Indian. There are a large number of tribes in Alaska and Alaska is a large state comprising 1/5th of the United States land mass, however our population is small. This necessitates partnership and collaboration with state, federal, and tribal governments in order to meet the educational need in Alaska.

It is important to note that State Tribal Education Compacting is an additional pathway for the delivery of public education in Alaska, it does not force or require tribes to enter into compacts. State Tribal Education Compacting does not terminate the current educational system. Rather, it works to create an additional path to allow tribes to conduct education through a culturally and linguistically authentic delivery system that is not possible unless tribes have the necessary recognized authority. Alaska is prime to implement compacting. The Alaska Cultural Education Standards are renowned and serve as a strong base for determining what success looks like in compacting. Tribes have decades of experience in compacting and many have what is known as mature compacting status with the federal government. Most importantly there are communities, families, and parents that are ready and willing to do this hard work to make this choice to improve the education outcomes for their students.

Compacting recognizes the need for a systemic change that empowers families to help students thrive. It does so by creating an inherent sense of ownership, connection, and investment in the local community's educational system in a way that has not been demonstrated in the current system. Alaska is primed for success in state tribal compacting because of the many years of experience tribes have in compacting and the years of work that have gone into developing the Alaska Native Cultural Education and Educator Standards. However, there are several ways the federal government can work with us to ensure maximum success.

Compacting fundamentally provides a critical mechanism for tribes to teach through their language and culture rather than trying to adapt to English ways of teaching. As a result careful consideration must be made to provide a method for evaluating student success in this cultural educational model. Alaska has already done the critical first step of defining Alaska Native Cultural Education Standards. There must be federal provision for assessments that demonstrate success based on the educational models and these rigorous Alaska Native Education Standards at the federal level. This in no way lowers the educational standards, however it provides a method that accounts for evaluating student success that captures proficiency in the Indigenous and Western education skills simultaneously.

Supporting tribal education compacting recognizes that the growing achievement gap and educational failures are complex and not simply a result of the lack of hard work by educators or students. It sends a clear message that this is a problem with the system of education and as such can be fixed by addressing the need for systemic change. It is our obligation as educational leaders to provide the necessary supports to make this change. It can only come to fruition through a true partnership and honest engagement. Throughout the past six years the Department of Education and Early Development, tribes, and native organizations have had ongoing conversation to determine what is needed for students to be able to be supported to “shape worthwhile and satisfying lives.”

This is what tribal Elders and youth had to say when asked, “If they could design the perfect school what would it look like?”

I would not get rid of math, reading, and writing, or all standardized tests, but I would have them secondary to cultural values. An equal amount of native and non-native teachers. The community would teach every child and there would be good food. Traditional languages and English would both be taught. Place based curriculum.”

This same group of Elders and youth said that their favorite thing about school was learning and learning new things. Our students deserve an educational system that provides for them to learn, belong, and excel at life. Compacting is a critical and necessary endeavor that needs to be supported by both the state of Alaska and the federal government.

And finally, the pandemic has given us proof that this is our pathway forward. When the history of this pandemic is written, tribes will receive credit for how they responded and helped care for all Alaskans. Many schools remained open throughout this year because of compacted Tribal Health. Many of our teachers, students and their families, Alaska Native and non-native, were treated and or vaccinated through Tribal Health. Tribes have proven that when we let go of the restrictive confines of our systems, partner, and coordinate with tribal governments, good things happen for all Alaskans.

Thank you.