

Senator Murkowski and members of the S. 1905 Hearing Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on S. 1905, the Rural Teacher Housing Act of 2003.

My comments are predicated on the assumption that while the immediate issue before us is habitable living quarters for teachers, administrators, and other school staff, the larger goal is increasing the academic achievement of the students in the eligible communities. Certainly any measures that enhance rural Alaska school districts' ability to recruit and retain skilled teachers would be helpful toward that larger goal. However, I believe that improving teacher housing would be most helpful in the context of a broader initiative.

When Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1867, schooling for Alaska Native students fell under the prevailing assimilationist paradigm exemplified in the 1819 Civilization Fund Act, established specifically to "civilize" Native American students in the lower 48. This paradigm was extended to Alaska through practices such as delegating responsibility for schools for Native students to missionary societies, and through policies such as the Nelson Act of 1905, which distinguished between students of mixed blood leading "civilized" lives and white students, on one hand, and students of mixed blood not leading "civilized" lives and Native students, on the other.

In thirty years working with rural communities, I have rarely heard anyone suggest that teachers from outside those communities are not necessary and helpful components of strong, well-rounded academic programs. But if our goal is *only* to make teachers from outside rural communities somewhat more physically comfortable so that we can extend their tenure by a couple of years, we run the risk of being perceived as doing little more than perpetuating the assimilationist paradigm to another generation of rural students, which I am sure is not the intent of this bill. In contrast, linking such an initiative to the larger issues would support rural communities' efforts to develop the kinds of schools that reflect their values and aspirations. There are several ways to approach this task.

First, while providing funds and a funding mechanism to improve housing for rural teachers would be a constructive step, it should be implemented within a context of improving housing and public facilities in rural communities, in general, to the extent those communities so desire. Absent this broader context, long-term residents of rural communities might reasonably ask why teacher housing should be any better, or any more of a priority, than housing for those who live there full-time.

Second, in order to improve the overall quality of students' school experiences and their academic achievement, I would suggest directing a portion of the available funds toward improving teacher housing, to respond to immediate needs, and a larger portion toward assisting long-term residents to become fully certificated, highly qualified, teachers in their home communities, to address the larger goal. Long-term residents have deep understanding of their communities, their schools, and their students, and many of them have years of experience in teaching and teaching assistance roles. Not incidentally, residents of rural communities also have their own housing. As my colleague Dean Norris-Tull observed in a conversation about

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this topic, supporting rural residents' aspirations to become educators in their home communities simultaneously addresses, in a very real way, both the housing issues and the larger successful school experiences issues.

Such assistance might take several forms. The most direct approach would be to make academic scholarships available directly to long-term residents, contingent only upon satisfactory progress through a teacher preparation program. A second, and perhaps companion, form of support would be to fund release-time from work so that students who already serve in teaching assistance roles could remain close to their classrooms while completing their preparation programs. Third, I would urge you to pursue the improvement of teacher housing, but to consider doing so within the context of improving rural housing, in general.

The funding mechanisms to support teachers in training and rural housing improvement are already contemplated in S. 1905: tribally designated entities and village corporations for the scholarships and housing initiatives, and school districts for release time funding.

S. 1905's intent to provide habitable living quarters for rural teachers is a constructive step. Teachers play critical roles in the lives of students, and teachers who stay in rural communities long enough to become participants in community life and to better understand and appreciate their students are much more likely to fulfill their roles effectively. They deserve, and doubtless would appreciate, safe, comfortable, functional housing.

That said, long-term residents of rural communities also deserve and would appreciate safe, comfortable, functional housing. Perhaps more to the point, rural students deserve teachers who have deep understanding of, and long-term commitment to, their communities. Certainly this includes the large number of teachers who grew up and trained elsewhere, but have found rural communities to be personally satisfying and professionally rewarding places to live, work, and raise their families. There are many of them, and their personal contributions to rural villages and their professional contributions to rural schools are significant and must be appreciated.

Nevertheless, the roughly one-hundred year history of public schooling in Alaska suggests that it is most frequently the residents of rural communities who provide both the continuity in those schools, and also the orientation and the nurturing that helps new teachers from outside become long-term, contributing participants in those settings.

I encourage you, Senator Murkowski, to pursue the initiative in S. 1905, but to consider doing so within the context of improving housing for all of the residents of the eligible communities and assisting long-term residents to assume professional roles as teachers and administrators in their home communities and regions.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on S. 1905.

Question:

Would loans with a forgiveness feature be a viable alternative to, or option in addition to, scholarships?

Answer:

In my opinion, no. There have been several programs over the years, and at least one currently operating, that included payback or forgiveness clauses. Experience indicates that students are extremely reluctant to participate. I believe that their reluctance is rooted in the very problem this hearing is designed to address: under-preparation for post-secondary academic work. There are many university students who graduated from rural schools who do well in university level academic programs, including those typically considered highly demanding. But rural high school graduates are also well aware that too many of their peers--some of whom graduated at the tops of their classes, often with honors--found themselves woefully under-prepared for university level work. Given this ambiguity, our experience has been that many rural students are reluctant to assume large school-related debts until they have had a chance to test their skills in the post-secondary academic environment.

Please allow me to add that I do not intend this response as a criticism of the current cadre of students, educators, administrators, parents, or board members in our rural schools. It is a sad consequence of the legacy that all of us, as participants in the rural public schooling, have built up over the years. That is why I encourage us now to pay due attention to immediate needs, such as improved housing, but also to more sustainable solutions, such as developing a teaching force with both academic expertise and deep understanding and long-term commitment to the communities under discussion.