

Christopher Simon, Superintendent
Written Testimony for the Senate Indian Affairs Committee
Anchorage, AK
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Dear Members of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee:

Thank you for your interest and involvement in education issues in rural Alaska and for working to address our concerns related to teacher housing. I welcome the opportunity to provide support for Senate Bill 1905 and share experiences of providing teacher housing with you.

The Yukon-Koyukuk School District covers the Western interior of Alaska, an area of 65,000 square miles. Geographically, the district is larger than the state of Washington. Our schools serve nine villages of about 1,650 people with 430 school-aged children in grades K-12. More than 90 percent of the students are Koyukon or Tanana Athabaskan Indians. Except for Minto and Manley Hot Springs, travel to and from our schools is by scheduled commuter or charter air service. Raven Correspondence School is a state-wide correspondence program, which embraces 1,399 students and their families.

Y-KSD is a Rural Educational Attendance Area (REAA) whose schools are governed by the Regional School Board elected by voters of the communities under the laws of the State of Alaska. Y-KSD employs 64 certified teachers, administrators and specialists, most of whom are endorsed in their field of placement.

Y-KSD is an equal opportunity agency whose programs and employment are available to all qualified individuals regardless of race, creed, gender, disability or country of origin. Y-KSD, as per federal law, is a gun-free and drug-free place for learning and working.

According to standardized test scores over the last thirteen years, the students at our village sites performed between the 18th and 40th percentile. Over the last 5 years there has been an increase in the scores, which are currently sitting between the 30th and 40th percentile. Under the federal law of No Child Left Behind, each school is to meet Adequate Yearly Progress or eventually face sanctions. At this point, four of our five village sites meet AYP, four schools are at AYP Level I, and one is at AYP Level II.

In order to provide a sound education, attain better test results to meet AYP and increase students' test scores, all rural schools need outstanding teachers and principals.

One of our biggest obstacles in providing a sound education is teacher and principal turnover. Between this year and last year, Y-KSD had a 29% turnover in teachers and a 44% turnover in principals. Three teachers and one school counselor left one or more of our communities since school started in August. Studies have shown that hiring teachers with three to five years of experience pays the biggest dividends in the classroom. What we have now is rural districts hiring young teachers who stay two to four years then leave

to find employment in an urban district or one that is connected by the road system. We are, in fact, training teachers. We are the ones who need experienced, dedicated teachers for the children under our care.

One of the first questions an interested teacher or principal asks is “Is housing provided? And if so, what is the rent? Not long afterward is the question: “Do I have to share housing?” Adequate teacher housing is vital to the success of our students.

Unfortunately, the choice of spending scarce resources for classroom equipment and supplies or for teacher housing is something we face every year. Y-KSD would rather not be in the business of teacher housing because it is being operated at a loss. Ten years ago, Y-KSD gave half of its teacher housing to a village corporation free of charge. Last summer, this same corporation gave the last housing unit back to the district. Providing housing is a time-consuming and financial burden to any organization. However, Y-KSD provides this service at a loss so quality teachers may be hired to teach the children of this district.

The issue of substandard teacher housing is raised in this bill. Yes, this is an issue this district faces. Two years ago, Y-KSD provided a rental free-of-charge to a couple and their two young children. This district did not want to be held responsible if any harm came to this young family due to the condition of the building. Currently, two teachers are renting a duplex that is 29 years old and very inefficient. The estimated operational cost is \$247,000 over the next six years. Four years ago, in another village, Y-KSD purchased a house which included a storage shed. This same shed had been converted to a housing unit. Three years ago, a young man and his daughter lived in the school for two months before finding a local house to rent.

This district has been trying to meet the housing needs of its teachers. But in doing so, it takes funds and maintenance time away from the schools. Since 2000, Y-KSD spent \$702,138 on housing instead of the classroom.

The cost of constructing a two bedroom, one bathroom house in 2002 was \$169,000. Included in this cost is the purchase price of \$99,677, and 69,992 for freight, construction, and utility hook-ups. An estimated 17 rental units in six communities are required to meet our teacher housing needs in the next few years. YKSD simply does not have the amount of funds necessary to build housing.

In closing, teacher housing is a necessity for rural districts, usually operated at a loss and takes scarce resources away from the school. Thank you again for your interest and concern.