

**TRANSFORMATIVE AND INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES
FOR BETTER EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR
ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS**

FIELD HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

FEBRUARY 24, 2022

Printed for the use of the Committee on Indian Affairs



U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

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TRANSFORMATIVE AND INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR BETTER EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2022

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS,
Anchorage, AK.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:00 p.m. AKST in the CH2M Hill Board Room, Alaska Pacific University, the Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Vice Chairman of the Committee, presiding.*

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. LISA MURKOWSKI, U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA

Senator MURKOWSKI. Wherever you are, thank you for the opportunity to be here together.

[Phrase in Native tongue], hoping that I am giving justice to the pronunciation, in Dena'ina, that means "you came to us." So I call this hearing to order.

As we begin, we recognize the eyes of Alaska are not entirely upon us in this room today. They are on Ukraine and the war that Vladimir Putin has decided to wage on innocent people.

I am a few minutes late here, and I apologize for my tardy arrival. I have been on a call with our Secretary of Defense, our Secretary of State. As members of the Senate, we are provided a little bit more detail about the situation and the latest developments. I wish that I could share that news was good, and it is not.

The events of the past day were not unexpected, but that does not make them any less devastating. We pray for the good people of Ukraine; we will support them and our NATO allies. We must make those who are perpetrating these horrific acts of war, Vladimir Putin, his cronies and the entities that support them, we must make them pay through uncompromising sanctions and penalties.

As we are watching events on the ground in Ukraine, we are more thankful than ever for the blessings of our democracy and all that it affords us, including the ability to hold Congressional hearings on topics of our choosing at the time of our choosing and the place of our choosing, with the ability to speak freely without the threat of harm as we seek to shape the decisions of our constitutional government.

So, to turn to our hearing, greetings to our witnesses, our staff that are in attendance, everyone who is participating online. I am

*Due to poor audio reception; there are several indiscernible text throughout this hearing.

Aanshawátk'i, which means in Tlingit, lady of the land. I am honored to be an adopted member of the Deisheetan clan.

As your senior Senator, as Alaska's senior Senator, I serve as the Vice Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. This is the only Committee in Congress that exists specifically to address the unique problems faced by American Indian and Alaska Native and Native peoples.

It is through this position that I work to ensure Alaska Native voices are heard and reflected in the decisions being made across the Federal level. I am proud of the work that comes out of our Committee and what we have done thus far in this Congress.

We have been talking a lot about the infrastructure bill that was just passed into law. This is going to bring sustained benefits to our Native communities, whether it is water and sanitation infrastructure, broadband, basic necessities that far too many of our Native villages have gone without.

We are focusing now on the public safety crisis facing Native women and children in our State. We have been engaged and are proud to have advanced a bipartisan bill to address violence against women.

The fact that we haven't reauthorized that VAWA Act since 2013 is something that needs to be remedied. We focus not only on that, but the important tribal title that includes a pilot program for a limited number of tribes to exercise special domestic violence jurisdiction, concurrent jurisdiction with the States.

So we are working to advance that this year. I share that because I think it is important for us to remember that there is much work that is coming out of the Congress right now that will help our Native peoples.

But today we are here to talk about education, and how we can achieve better education outcomes for Alaska Native students. I want to first begin by thanking Alaska Pacific University for hosting the hearing.

As many of you probably know, Peter Gordon Gould, an Alaska Native from Unga, and APU's founder, saw the importance of education for Alaska Native students. He made it his mission to ensure that indigenous leadership is reared, educated, and trained in Alaska for Alaska. So it is very fitting that we are here on the APU campus.

I am, we are, pleased and honored to have Mr. Aaron Leggett to provide an acknowledgement regarding the indigenous lands here in Anchorage. He is of Dena'ina Athabascan heritage. He serves as the president of the Native village of Eklutna.

He is also a senior curator of the Alaska History and Indigenous Cultures at the Rasmuson Center, Anchorage Museum. Many accomplishments to Mr. Leggett's account, and we certainly appreciate him and we are very thankful, sir, for your determination to preserve, perpetuate and elevate the Dena'ina language and culture for future generations.

I turn to you, Mr. Leggett. Please proceed.

**STATEMENT OF HON. AARON LEGGETT, PRESIDENT, NATIVE
VILLAGE OF EKLUTNA**

Mr. LEGGETT. Thank you, Senator.

[Phrase in Native tongue] Aaron Leggett [speaking in Native tongue].

Hello, everybody. Again, my name is Aaron Leggett. I am currently president of the Native village of Eklutna, and the senior curator of Alaska History and Indigenous Cultures at the Anchorage Museum. As the president of the Native village of Eklutna, and the only federally recognized tribe here within the municipality of Anchorage, it is my honor to provide a welcome here on the Dena'ina homeland.

As the Senator said, I think it is fitting that we are here talking about education at Alaska Pacific University. A little over two months ago, on this very campus, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, a monumental piece of legislation.

One of the things that I was struck by was, as I was sitting commemorating this event, my involvement goes back about 20 years. I am not that old, but I started when I was pretty young. I knew, I had an understanding of tribal sovereignty and Alaska Native Corporations and how they are economic drivers for our State. They are incredibly important.

The one thing that was interesting was during that presentation, as I was sitting there, they interviewed about a half dozen APU students who were about the same age I was 20 years ago, so, about 20. I was really struck by the fact that the things they were saying were the exact same things I said 20 years ago.

So it told me that a whole lot really hasn't changed. One of the fundamental problems, I believe, is with the lack of education around tribes in Alaska and the important role that Alaska Native Corporations play in our State economy.

It is my hope that through this Senate Committee field hearing, working in partnership with Alaska Native entities, we can transform education in our State the same way that we have transformed health care that it is viewed around the world as a shining model. But we can only do that when we tell the history of Alaska from all perspectives and we have a true and complete understanding of what it means for the State to have Alaska Native Corporations and 220 something federally recognized tribes.

I want to thank everybody who is here today. I am really looking forward to seeing the outcome from this. This is really important to me, not only to the Native Village of Eklutna, but also to my role at the Anchorage Museum. We are committed to telling the story of Alaska.

I am honored to be here. [Phrase in Native tongue]. Thank you to all who came here today.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Leggett.

Let's proceed with the hearing. I am so pleased that we are able to be here in Alaska for this field hearing in person. Field hearings are an opportunity to bring the Senate and the Committee to you, the Alaska Native communities that we represent.

This is the first field hearing we have had following the pandemic. Before the pandemic hit us all, I know education certainly

was front of mind to many of us. What we have all gone through over these past couple of years has made it even more of an imperative.

Many States are trying new strategies and ideas, employing tools in innovative ways to enhance education opportunities and outcomes for Native students. We are seeing that first-hand here in Alaska, too. One of those ideas I want to examine at this hearing is State-tribal collaboration on education compacts.

It is important to remind ourselves that this idea of compacting is not entirely new. In 2013, Washington State set up the first state-tribal education compacting program in the Country. To date, there are seven State compacted schools in operation with tribes in Washington State. Each of these schools previously were administered and managed by public K–12 schools, run solely by local school districts with oversight by the State.

So this idea of compacting education programs and services comes after decades of experience by tribes and tribal organizations utilizing the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act authorities for the betterment of their peoples. So ISDEA has proven successful when tribes assume control of Federal programs and services that uphold Federal trust responsibility. Mr. Leggett has spoken exactly to that.

For example, here in Alaska, the Indian Health Service contracts or compacts 99 percent of its programs are under ISDEA. The Alaska Tribal Health Compact is one of the most successful tribal compacts in the Nation. It served as a model for resolving issues arising out of tribal self-governance compacts.

On the State level, we also have the Alaska Tribal Welfare Compact. It serves as another model. It is these types of agreements between tribes and the Federal or State government that allow decisions to be made at the local level, which reduces bureaucracy, helps tailor programs and services to better assist our communities.

Building on self-determination and self-governance policies, Alaska has an opportunity to improve the educational outcomes of Native students. I am looking forward to hearing from the Alaska Department of Education Early Development Commissioner, Dr. Michael Johnson. We are pleased that you are with us here this afternoon.

Julie Kitka, President of the Alaska Federation of Natives, I am looking forward to this discussion and understanding more about the current efforts to use State-tribal compacting to address educational barriers that exist for Alaska Natives and American Indians.

I am also looking forward to hearing about other innovations, such as tribal charter schools. Mr. William Naneng, from Sea Lion Corporation, is going to be participating virtually to tell us about the tribal charter school in Hooper Bay that he helped start.

We will also hear from long-time educator, Sandra Salaktuna Kowalski of NANA, about her experiences in a variety of venues and how that has worked and what barriers still exist to helping Alaska Native students succeed.

I think we know statistics about education outcomes, and many of them are not so good. The dropout rates for Alaska Natives and

American Indians are considerably higher than other ethnicities and races in Alaska. For the 2020–2021 school year, Alaska Natives and American Indians had the highest dropout rates in the State, 4.6 percent compared to 3.1 percent statewide. These rates are consistently higher overall for Alaska Natives compared to non-Native students.

Ayyu Qassataq of First Alaskans Institute shared in a recent dialogue hosted by UAA said, if a plant is failing, you don't ask why it isn't good enough. You check its soil. Is it getting enough water? Is it getting enough sun? You investigate its environment.

It was these disparities that led the State and tribal organizations like AFN and First Alaskans Institute to take actions to try and find solutions. We have seen home-grown solutions that are working. We see positive outcomes from the SeaAlaska Heritage Institute and their award-winning Baby Raven Reads program.

Here in Anchorage, we can look to the Cook Inlet Tribal Council with their Super Fab Lab. I have had an opportunity to visit and I know that many of my staff were able to tour yesterday.

The Indian Affairs Committee has also held hearings on restoring and perpetuating Native languages and cultures. Native languages are more than just words. They are a vital part of indigenous cultures, identities, and an important tool to understand indigenous histories.

Language is integral to the continuity of culture for future generations. Native language immersion is becoming an effective tool in many States. We are seeing that certainly here in Alaska. Research demonstrates that when Native youth learn in culturally relevant classrooms, with culturally relevant place-based curriculum, they succeed.

I was in Juneau these past couple days and had an opportunity to go over to the program there at Harbor View, with the Tlingit language program and listen to the kids as they shared with me their Tik Tok videos that they are learning, not just to say the words, but they are learning how to share with one another.

These are some of the reasons why I have worked so hard, and I think it is so important that we continue the focus on Native language revitalization programs. So we will continue to work to advance that.

Dr. Rosita Worl of the SeaAlaska Heritage Institute stated in her written testimony that we had before the Committee, she said, "Quality and equitable education for all students and the integration of Native arts, culture, history, language and culture in schools, are critical to the survival of Alaskan cultures, to the attainment of education success of Native students, and to the well-being of students, tribes and communities. We also believe that cultural diversity contributes to the richness of our State and our Nation."

I include that statement because I absolutely concur with Dr. Worl. I think it is very appropriate in terms of why we are here today.

With that rather lengthy, I was going to say it was an introduction, but I am now turning to the introductions. Again, I want to thank you all for being here, and committing to work to ensure that our Native students receive quality and equitable education.

So we will begin our testimony by coming around the table here. We will begin with Julie Kitka. I have introduced her as President of the Alaska Federation of Natives. Sandra Salaktuna Kowalski is the Vice President of Shareholder Relations for the NANA Regional Corporation. She is the second vice chair of the Alaska State Board of Education.

Dr. Michael Johnson is the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Education and Early development. And Mr. Willian Naneng is the General Manager of Sea Lion Corporation.

I don't really feel this is fair to tell you that you only have five minutes to provide your summary and your testimony, because I have taken so much time already. But I do think we want to have an opportunity to have discussion and dialogue. Know that your full written statement is incorporated as part of the official hearing record. So if you don't get to all of it, it will be certainly incorporated as part of that official record.

With that, we will proceed to Julie Kitka. Thank you, not only thank you for being here, Julie, but thank you for your continued focus on prioritizing education and working to address what we all know to be the real disparities when it comes to Alaska Native students.

Thank you.

STATEMENT OF JULIE KITKA, PRESIDENT, ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES

Ms. KITKA. Thank you, Senator. It is an honor to testify today. [indiscernible] Chairman Schatz [indiscernible] General Counsel and Executive Vice President for [indiscernible] and then [indiscernible] Vice President. So I recognize that there are many questions that they struggle to answer particularly about compacting [indiscernible] that facilitates the negotiation of State compact negotiations with tribes and social service and child welfare. It is a pretty [indiscernible].

First of all, I wanted to just ask that the testimony and the attachments that are attached to it be included for the record.

Senator MURKOWSKI. It will all be included.

Ms. KITKA. I draw your attention to the piece on Transformational Education Post-Pandemic: A Path Forward. We have been working with the State legislature [indiscernible] education compacting, primarily working with the foundation [indiscernible] as it attempts to do that. The [indiscernible] foundation [indiscernible] State [indiscernible], taking into account the special trust relationship that we have with the Federal Government, taking into account the regulations on the Federal side, taking into account the State of Alaska's constitution, laws and regulations.

We are delighted to tell you that this is an absolutely wonderful partnership between our community and the State of Alaska. I can report that the Governor of Alaska supports this, Mr. Johnson supports this, the State Board of Education supports this legislation, and the legislature on the Senate side and House side. Legislative hearings have been held on the State's Senate side, and new legislation has been introduced on the House side. I am struck by this bipartisan support and this idea of the demonstration.

So I am thrilled at this progress because we think at this point in time, as we are all coming out of this pandemic, as we are dealing with the situation and all its confusion [indiscernible] resources into our State. Everything [indiscernible] expansion [indiscernible] broadens [indiscernible] in education. We can collaborate with [indiscernible] State [indiscernible] and facilitate that [indiscernible]. So this is a great example [indiscernible].

I wanted to shout out to the chairman of the State Senate Education Committee [indiscernible] president [indiscernible] Senator Stevens out of Kodiak still a couple of years ago has been working with us and updating it, trying to get a more simplified approach in the legislature [indiscernible] about [indiscernible] education to laser focus on how we can have transformational education is in compact [indiscernible].

On just transformative education [indiscernible] accelerate it [indiscernible] and look at the rate of change that we are building in our minds, [indiscernible] computers to [indiscernible], to [indiscernible], to artificial intelligence, great changes happen so quickly. In education we cannot just rely on [indiscernible] of the past. The very strong way the transformational education that we are seeking is not teaching about our culture, teaching about our language, it is teaching through our language.

That is what is transformational about compacting. The emphasis, innovation, the emphasis on culture-based education which supports the needs of the child, the context in which the child fits in, content that they are being taught, but dynamically interrelated into the whole school system. And the [indiscernible] value of parents, their whole education, but just not satisfied that schools have [indiscernible] and our comments are not negative to anybody. It is just the rate of change is happening so fast that we need to accelerate to overcome the barriers for our children for learning, for them to achieve their full potential.

We think that culturally based education and language is important for the family and the community. Cultural context, the cultural content that the school [indiscernible] rigorous assessment [indiscernible] we work with the [indiscernible] demonstration [indiscernible] of asking people to take an interest.

Also we know that essential emotional development of children is critically important to their self [indiscernible], their cultural identity, their sense of belonging and sense of connectedness. That all leads to greater education outcomes, student engagement, student achievement, and student behavior in schools.

We also believe that we need to, besides authorize the demonstration project on compacting, target more resources for teacher preparation and development. Our teachers are so important to us and their development should be viewed as an investment in our children, not as a requirement or something else.

We also view that we need to ensure that the broadband is expanded to our communities and seamlessly integrated into the school experience, including in our compact.

So our testimony today and the comments we put in is not only for support for the demonstration of compacting, but it is to ask for additional support for all the innovations going on right now. Compacting is not going to be for every community and every tribe. But

let's go test it out, let's do several demonstration projects, let's prove the value and the worth. We have seen during this pandemic how strong our tribal health system has been, how durable and innovative it is. We want the same thing in our educational system.

I want to also note for the record that tribal compacting is not just limited to the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the Indian Health Service. The United States Government, the Congress, has authorized and engages in compacts with the island nations through the Compact of Free Association. We use national security, national interests and policy in our arrangement with those island nations. The compacting is a very effective mechanism.

Also a number of years ago we moved some of the foreign aid out of Foreign Aid into the Millennium Challenge Corporation, in which those are five-year compacts that are for mostly low and middle income countries. They fund things such as railroads in Mongolia, or transportation systems.

What is so unique about the compact is you are able to set up the goals at the beginning, you set up the accountability, you pledge the resources for doing it and let people accomplish what they are doing.

So this asking for the compacting on education is not new. U.S. Federal policy has already shown it is for Native policy, for national interest policy, as well as our programs that go around the world to all these countries. It has really proved out.

Mongolia, for example, had their first five-year compact. They did so well they had it renewed for another five-year compact. We are seeing a lot of progress on that. So we view that with a lot of encouragement that this demonstration will prove the success and hold us accountable to make sure it is.

Again, this is about systemic change. It is not about a band-aid. It is about how do you drive systemic change, how do you do it through our culture, how do you engage the Native people in the education of their own children. But we do not expect or want any lesser education, we want more, that is what we are about.

Again, I probably could go on about other things, but it is in the written testimony. We wholeheartedly support it, we wholeheartedly support efforts to increase innovation, incentivize.

I do have one request I would ask you to do, is that rider that was put in in 1994 prohibiting resources coming into Alaskan schools, we ask that that rider be withdrawn. That has the potential to continue a period of harming our schools and our educational system.

I want to give a little background on why we are making that request. When that rider was put in, and Senator Stevens put that in there, it was at the tail-end of the BIA schools and the transfer of those BIA schools to the State. It was also at the time in which the Federal Government was transferring the railroad to the State, and transferring a lot of things.

What was at the heart of what was going on at that time was the resources coming into the State from Prudhoe Bay. It was the buildup of the permanent fund. And it was the recognition that the State of Alaska could not keep doing all these things on the Federal level when you had such incredible wealth being created in the State in the permanent fund. It wasn't that the Federal role in

education should be diminished or eliminated. We certainly think that that rider should disappear.

Do we want to turn education upside down on the national level? No. We do not. So we want that cautiously done and carefully done. But we don't want that rider anymore. We want the opportunity to engage with the Department of Interior and the Department of Education for improving education.

We have sent a letter to the Solicitor of Interior, Bob Anderson, detailing a lot of this information to them, asking for a legal opinion on use of the compacting authority within the Department of Interior. They currently have broad compacting authority which they push out to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We want to be able to use that compacting authority in this as well as whether or not they are able to use the authority to transfer some funding from other agencies, such as the Department of Education.

The reason why we asked for that, and we don't have the answer yet on that, is we didn't want to wait for you and the Committee to get us the official language that says the Department of Education can compact directly, or the Department of Justice can compact. At this point, just so we can speed it up and move faster, we want the ability to use Interior's compact authority.

We think it would be beneficial on multiple fronts in the Department, especially with the load of resources on infrastructure and everything, if other agencies and departments are able to run, target money through those funds to get them out to where they need to be.

But on this education one in particular, we want to not only look at what Interior has that would pertain, but more importantly, the Department of Education and their efforts for innovation.

Again, we are not seeking to overturn everything and cause chaos. But we do want that provision removed, and for us to move down a path to have full implementation of the Federal trust responsibility. It is something that when we took on this project working with the Commissioner, that was one of our fundamental things we agreed on, is that we were going to do everything we could to strengthen that Federal trust responsibility. We weren't going to do anything to weaken it.

With that, Madam Chairman, I will conclude my testimony.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Kitka follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JULIE KITKA, PRESIDENT, ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES

I. Introduction

Vice Chair Murkowski and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon. My name is Julie Kitka, and I serve as the President of the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN). AFN is the largest statewide Alaska Native membership organization in Alaska. Our membership includes over 130,000 Alaska Natives and their institutions set up to serve our people. AFN's membership includes federally recognized tribes, regional tribal consortiums, regional non-profit organizations, and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) villages and regional corporations representing every corner of the state.

Thank you for convening this hearing today. Senator Murkowski, we commend you for your long-standing and continued interest in legislation and legislative oversight of programs that are designed to meet the distinct social, cultural, and economic needs of Alaska Native communities and individuals. You have supported new initiatives in this area and sought ideas for improvements in existing programs, and we thank you for your support and leadership.

AFN requested this hearing today to urge the Committee to take action to help us to strengthen the federal trust responsibility in education for Alaska Natives, acknowledge the sometimes contradictory actions of the federal government over the years, and direct the Departments of Interior and Education to support the growing partnership with the State of Alaska in evaluating and demonstrating the potential of tribal compact schools as well as scale up other innovative efforts which are going on right now all over our state.

I want to report that we have been working closely with the Alaska Commissioner of Education, Dr. Michael Johnson, on a new type of public school in Alaska—a tribally compacted school. AFN has been working on the legal foundation of such a project, evaluating the relevant laws, regulations, and policies at both the federal and state levels. AFN desires to pilot a range of compact schools with the full weight of the federal trust responsibility for education, as well as the full weight of the State of Alaska constitutional mandate to provide education.

The worldwide pandemic of the past two years has created an unprecedented disruption in the delivery of education to Alaska's students and has demonstrated a far greater demand for innovation in education methods, service delivery, and awareness of community needs. From the COVID-19 pandemic, we learned that we need to make sure the institutions around us have flexibility to adapt and meet the true needs of the people. Within the Alaska Native community there is a growing awareness that teaching about our culture or language is not enough. Our parents are our children's first teachers. They need support. Critical resources need to go into relevant teacher preparation, professional development, curriculum development as well as leadership training. We need to scale up the resources available and broaden the opportunities. We need critical resources to evaluate financial infrastructure, systems patterns and governance patterns that work for us. In our efforts we are putting our children first. Our parents are the frontline. Our children and their future, demands that the Alaska Native people take greater ownership of the system of education and ensure not only language and culture are at the heart of the educational experience, but that our social and economic well-being and aspirations for our future. We are ready to take on more responsibility and accountability. We want to have a greater role in decisionmaking and ensure our children can be all they want to be. In short, we want to expand the imagination of our people and create a path where we can put all our best efforts to create a better educational system.

This is not wishful thinking. It is critical if we are going to survive the rapid change which destabilizes our traditional communities and devalues our people. This change has been accelerating. Some have put the rate of rapid change to be 1000X the change that occurred in our parents' generation. And it continues to accelerate all around us and with leaps in technology.

The State Board of Education and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development have identified compacting as the mechanism that will allow for the transformation of Alaska Native education, and the Alaska State legislature is currently considering legislation that would authorize a demonstration project for compacting of education services for Alaska Native students. Through tribal compacting of education, we will improve outcomes for students, schools, and communities.

Compacting has long been one of the federal government's most effective tools for the promotion of innovative and cost-effective tribal programs, such as those under the Indian Health Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs. We have great and long-lasting experience in compacting in these areas.

We believe there is room in Alaska's educational system to create a transformational educational system. We have the commitment and drive to do our best to accomplish something better for our children.

The following written testimony attachments have been retained in the Committee files:

- Attachment A: *Transformational Education Post Pandemic: A Path Forward*, dated December 2, 2021.
- Attachment B: *AFN White Paper: The Origins, Meaning and Future of Indian Self-Determination*, dated December 2021.
- Attachment C: A link to three special webinars which were held to support this effort by First Alaskans Institute on transformative education and a discussion on what is possible in Alaska as we move to tribal compacting over education. Professor Graham Smith and Professor Linda Tuiwai Smith (Maori) discussed lessons learned in their 40 years of experience in New Zealand. (Webinar dates: February 11, 15, and 18th 2022. A video link and written transcript are available.)

II. The Need for a New Approach

The indigenous population in Alaska is large and diverse. There are 229 federally recognized Indian tribes and at least twenty distinct indigenous languages, some of which are now spoken by only a few people.¹ Over the years, you have heard a lot about the disastrous history of education of Native children in this State—including government policy to eliminate our traditional cultures, traditions, and language and assimilate our children to be something they are not. This has had tragic impacts on generations of Alaska Native people. I am not going to dwell on that history, except to note its role in creating the current educational crisis for Native students in our state, where only about 68 percent of Native students in Alaska graduate from high school—compared to 80 percent percent of all students—and more than 5 percent drop out—compared to 3 percent of non-Native students.² It is also of note that, despite the fact that 22 percent of students in our state are Alaska Native, only 5 percent of our teachers are Alaska Native or American Indian—a number that has not changed for decades.³

Alaska's vast size (land mass $\frac{1}{5}$ the size of the entire United States) and the isolated nature of most of its Native villages also present special challenges to traditional approaches to education.⁴ More than 300 communities in Alaska, the vast majority of which are predominantly indigenous, are accessible only by plane or boat.⁵ The pandemic only exacerbated the challenges to providing quality education to Alaska's Native students, who struggled to adapt to remote learning due to the lack of reliable Internet access in Alaska's rural areas. The true impacts of the pandemic on Native education are yet to be determined, as we are still in the pandemic.

These historical, geographic, and practical complexities—and just common sense—call for creative and flexible solutions that expand access to and leverage modern technology and innovations. We have those solutions at hand now if we exercise the right authorities and access the tremendous value in teaching through culture.

The Alaska State Board of Education and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development recognized this need for innovation even before the pandemic, and, in 2016, changed the Department's mission and vision statements to include five strategic priorities designed to ensure an excellent public education for all of Alaska's students. One of those priorities was to “inspire tribal and community ownership of educational excellence.” The recommendation based on that priority, which the State Board later adopted, was 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.” As part of this effort, AFN has partnered with the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development to advance a demonstration project that would establish the first tribal compact schools in the state.

There has been important progress made in the education of Native students in Alaskan schools that have adopted the teaching recommendations of Alaska Native leaders, tribes, and tribal organizations, educators, and academic experts. For example, Native language education is now part of the curriculum, and many schools have found ways to present other aspects of Native culture to students. But it is clear that just teaching Native students about their culture in a classroom is not enough to change educational outcomes. To influence those outcomes and improve our children's future, we need our schools to implement pedagogies based on and provided through Alaska Native cultural perspectives.

Schools help shape the way students think about the world and prepare them to live in that world. Academic research has established the benefits of Alaska Native children remaining linguistically and culturally connected to their tribes and communities. It is time to go beyond theory and implement change that will transform the education of Alaska Native students and improve their futures.

AFN has been working to support the State Board of Education's priority of identifying a legal and practical pathway for a state-tribal compact in which Alaska Natives could administer K–12 public education with support from the local school board and community. Legislation currently pending before the State legislature would authorize the Commissioner of Education to test innovative ideas through real-world experience, and then use that experience to evolve programs to make them more effective. Aligning vision, goals, and resources through demonstration projects to prove the value is an important first step.

¹ Diane Hirshberg, Ph.D., *Educational Challenges in Alaska*, University of Alaska Anchorage Institute of Social and Economic Research, February 2022, at 5.

²*Id.* at 14.

³*Id.* at 11.

⁴*Id.* at 22.

⁵*Id.* at 4.

III. Benefits of Tribal Compacting of Education

Tribal compacting of education offers significant benefits to all parties. A compact is a negotiated agreement between tribes and a state and/or the federal government that sets forth the terms and conditions of the relationship. Unlike contracts, compacts may set political policies for the state and tribes “and therefore have inherent value even beyond their stated goals,”⁶ and practices under the compact may be changed without requiring new approvals for the change. Compacting for the delivery of education means that Alaska tribes, or tribally empowered Alaska Native organizations, will be able to partner with the State to assume the responsibility (and receive the associated funding) to carry out educational programs, functions, services, and activities the State otherwise would be obligated to provide.

Because only one other state—Washington—has implemented a program for the tribal compacting of education services, and because the circumstances in Alaska differ in several important ways from Washington, including the logistical challenges Alaska faces described above and a lack of pre-existing BIA schools, the Department of Education is committed to starting this endeavor into tribal compacting of education with a demonstration project. Those of us who have studied the needs here believe a test project will put Alaska in the best position to ensure that, when a permanent program is eventually implemented, it will best meet the needs of Alaska’s Native students.

The present proposal before the Alaska legislature would authorize a demonstration project for tribal compacting that would formally recognize the tribal entity’s authority to oversee certain functions of K–12 public schools. The current proposal is for a five-year demonstration period. Participation in the program would be voluntary and structured to honor tribal sovereignty through government-to-government negotiations and agreements.

The proposed demonstration project would improve education for Native students in Alaska by:

- Providing local control of schools in tribal communities
- Allowing for improved recruitment and training of Native educators
- Allowing for K–12 teaching through cultural methods
- Encouraging Native parents and community leaders to become and stay involved with the education of Native children
- Providing for Native language, culture, and vocational education
- Providing a reporting mechanism for ongoing review and improvement of the compacting program

The demonstration project would offer tribes and Native communities an opportunity to have a direct role in providing their children an education grounded in and driven by their culture, language, traditions, and values on a demonstration basis with the potential to grow into broader use of state-tribal education compacting. Requiring regular reporting on the program’s implementation will also provide valuable information to guide Native education planning in Alaska and help ensure future success.

We have received great, thoughtful leadership from the Commissioner of Education, and we are hopeful the legislation will pass in this session.

IV. The Federal Role

We want Alaska’s demonstration project for tribal compact schools to be a new hybrid effort utilizing state and federal funding sources. The exercise of tribal control over Native education arises from a foundation of federal laws that have supported education for Native American students based on the federal government’s trust responsibility. Considerable legal authority already exists for the federal funding and operation of education programs for the benefit of Alaska Natives. As just one example, the Johnson-O’Malley Act authorizes the Secretary of the Interior, through the Bureau of Indian Education, to enter contracts with tribes, tribal organizations, states, schools, and private non-sectarian organizations to address the needs of Native students. In addition, the Indian Self-Determination, and Education Assistance Act⁷ authorizes self-governance compacts, which are used primarily for tribes to assume operation of the Indian Health Service and Bureau of Indian Af-

⁶Intergovernmental Compacts in Native American Law: Models for Expanded Usage, 112 Harv. L. Rev. 922, 924 (1999).

⁷P.L. 93–638, as amended.

fairs programs.⁸ ISDEAA also authorizes tribal compacting of programs from other bureaus of the Department of the Interior.⁹

AFN has asked the U.S. Department of the Interior for a legal opinion as to whether it may enter compacts on behalf of other federal departments, such as the United States Department of Education. If the Department of the Interior has that authority, it may act as a conduit for federal Department of Education funds supporting Alaska's tribal compacting demonstration program on a temporary basis until direct Congressional authority is obtained. AFN's initial legal analysis suggests such authority exists under the Johnson-O'Malley Act and its implementing regulations, the JOM Modernization Act of 2018, and the clear compacting authority of ISDEAA.

One legislative fix that AFN urges you to immediately pursue is the repeal of a provision included in the 1994 appropriations legislation for the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies that prohibited the use of funding other than through the Johnson-O'Malley Act to support the operation of elementary and secondary schools in Alaska. This provision was included at the request of Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Dr. Eddie Brown because a few Alaska villages had applied for the BIA to take over education services and the BIA did not have sufficient funds to grant those requests. Dr. Brown asked for language added to the appropriations bill that would prohibit the expenditure of BIA funds to support the operation of elementary and secondary schools in Alaska, and that language was included. Annual appropriations legislation for DOI still regularly includes an administrative provision prohibiting BIA expenditures to support the operation of elementary and secondary schools in Alaska, except through the Johnson-O'Malley program.¹⁰ AFN believes this provision violates the federal government's trust responsibility to Alaska tribes as currently applied to education programs now and looking forward and asks this Committee to repeal that provision.

In a great many ways, our effort to develop a framework for compacting lines up with the interests of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. The most recent amendments to the Johnson O'Malley program, a cornerstone educational program for the education of Native Americans, arose in the Committee in 2017, and were enacted into law in 2018. There could well be a role for the utilization of the JOM program in the compacting of the schools, and curriculum that we are working on. More significantly, the oversight jurisdiction of the Committee could be exercised to review the need for upgrading and improving the delivery of education to Alaska Native students, which lags where it should be. We at AFN believe very strongly that there is a unique and strong role for the federal government to support efforts such as those we want to undertake. It is in fact the federal trust responsibility that underpins all the federal programs, and we cherish this relationship.

Importantly, tribal education compacts in Alaska will be negotiated and created on a voluntary basis in a manner that does not diminish the Alaska Natives' right to self-determination or the federal government's trust responsibility toward Alaska Natives.

V. Conclusion

This is a forward-looking effort, built on the experiences of our history. We cannot rewrite the difficult history of Alaska Native education in our state, but there is precedent—setting value in the idea of tribal, state, and federal collaboration to promote innovative and meaningful ways to support our children. The lessons we learn from the demonstration project in Alaska might have other local, state, or national applications in terms of American Indian/Alaska Native programs or other multi-cultural programs or services. Establishing this demonstration project is critical to the future of Alaska Native children and offers hope in an area where hope has historically been hard to find. We are excited about the possibilities, and we welcome the opportunity to work with you on this issue.

Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Julie. I appreciate that. You have answered several of the questions that I had in front of me.

⁸ See *supra* n.1.

⁹ The Department of the Interior publishes a list annually of all non-BIA programs, services, functions, and activities that are eligible for inclusion in self-governance agreements. There are required programmatic targets. Currently nearly the entire Indian Health Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs is compacted—with Alaska Native tribes, consortiums or statewide compacts running for example the statewide hospital, regional hospitals, subregional and village health clinics.

¹⁰ See, e.g., P.L. 110-161 (121 Stat. 2113).

Sandy, welcome to the Committee, and thank you.

**STATEMENT OF SANDY SALAKTUNA KOWALSKI, VICE
PRESIDENT, SHAREHOLDER RELATIONS, NANA REGIONAL
CORPORATION**

Ms. SALAKTUNA. Thank you. I am recently, being that I am Vice President of Shareholder Relations for the NANA Regional Corporation, I can tell you that I have been an education professional all my life until recently, moving into this new role. I wanted to be here today as a career educator, and let you know that my passion has been creating healthy and engaging and meaningful opportunities that contribute to the health and well-being of my people. I come here to share my perspective on growing up indigenous in an American school system and what I see or what I envision about being an Alaska Native student.

I do want to share my appreciation to AFN for their work with the Commissioner here. I am also a State board member, and I want to share the State Board's appreciation for that level of work and commitment. I think that we can all say that is what has moved the wheel, and things are, there are some gears now. We really appreciate that.

I also appreciate that the focus is on not diminishing any of the Federal trust responsibility and helping us learn more about the legal and regulation pieces that would support this. I want to offer mine and the Board's appreciation to AFN, as I am sure the Commissioner will as well.

But first and foremost, I am coming to you here as a long-time educator. I would have to say that I have been telling people ever since I have become a State Board member, and I have had an ability to move about, that I don't think that Alaskan classrooms are that different from classrooms in the lower 48 yet. I think even though we have classrooms here that use cultural standards to help guide lessons so that they are culturally relevant, it still isn't much different than the lower 48. The system is just built the way it is right now. We have curriculum, textbooks, teaching practices, even our extracurricular activities and our calendar year, they are baked in from hundreds of years of the western education system.

In the decades that I have worked as an educational professional, I really have been, in the past few years I have been able to put some words to some dissonance that I have always experienced as an educational professional. I grew up in the lower 48 and in Alaska. I have also attended one of those tribal schools that you mentioned in Washington State. I attended Chief Leschi Indian School when it was a brand-spanking new school in the basement of a church. I have also helped to start Nikaitchuat Tribal School in Kotzebue, Alaska. And I have been a working member of many efforts to improve outcomes for students through cultural activities and cultural and language revitalization efforts.

We have to do more than change the resources we have in front of our students. We have to get at the gut of what I feel like I experienced as dissonance growing up. There is a point when you are an Alaska Native student or an American Indian student where you realize that you might not have been intended to be there in that moment in that classroom. You are sitting there in a history

class and you are learning about manifest destiny and U.S. assimilation policies and you are accountable for that knowledge and you are answering test questions on that information that you are learning in history.

And no one is addressing it, but it is occurring to you. This has got to be happening, it didn't just happen to other people, there is a point in your life where you are like, I am indigenous, I am Native American, I am Alaska Native. Everything here in this school system feels a little disconnected, or I feel a little disconnected right now.

So the only way that I feel we can truly, for indigenous people, have an education system that doesn't do that to them is to have an education system that is not only by Alaska Natives but it is for Alaska Natives, which benefits all people in our area, and it is of Alaska Natives. We have created the educational system that is most meaningful for our community.

I think I have already made the point, I am looking through this here, that simply tweaking resources that exist won't get at what I am doing. I think we can all acknowledge that when a publishing company realizes that they need to change something in a textbook used in American schools, it really doesn't get at the heart of what is done when you are trying to rewrite portions of textbooks to address American Indian and Alaska Native issues and expect [indiscernible] still doesn't get at it. It is still not of, for, and by the indigenous people in the communities.

So that is a little bit about one of the reasons I have been driven to work in this area as a public educator. I have worked in the system, I was an administrator, one of those gung-ho principals when NCLB came out. I was astonished at what some of the implications would be. But gosh darn it, Alaska Natives were a demographic that we were finally going to hold schools accountable for, and that got me excited for about a year and a half or two, because I started realizing about some of the other mechanisms in it.

So I have been a good soldier as a public educator, in our State system, responding to Federal regulations and other well-intended practices that get put into place in classrooms in Alaska. And all the well-intended practices aren't going to make a deep enough difference unless we as Alaska Natives are creating our own educational system that our students are participating in.

I have this vision that we will have a fourth-grade boy who is not even understanding he is in a science mode, but he is out checking his rabbit snare, and he is understanding the human impact to his environment, because he was taught by elders already about what is respectful practices for harvesting animals in that setting for that type of animal. And he is learning about the human impact through his elders.

He is also able to understand the cultural practices and the deep connections to the land through that activity, and not through English, but through Inupiaq. I believe that is entirely possible.

We are at a point now where there is collective energy and synergy, not just in the Inupiaq region where I am from, but through many areas of the State where we have people of all age. I work with and work near people of all ages through cultural and language revitalization work right now. That synergy is really ready

to bust loose of the systems that are in place and help create the innovation and vision that is ready to be put in place when compacting comes around.

As a side note, the State Board of Education right now, our goal is to make sure we are removing the barriers for regulation for State compacting, we are paying attention to the overarching activity around tribal compacting. But we are also paying attention to what school systems may need once this innovation is allowed to happen, is empowered to happen.

So we are looking at teacher preparation as one of our key pieces to make sure, we could get all kinds of regulations in the way of that. But when we are thinking about an indigenous teacher pathway, our State board is making sure that we are already looking ahead to make sure we are supportive of it, we are not going to get in the way of it, and we are actually going to try to create help to support the pathways that do get developed for teacher pathways and tribal compacting.

I know that Julie touched on this already, but I want to give you a little bit of personal experience around language revitalization and young children and how Inupiaq language revitalization really is an additive piece of their growing up in Alaska. English is always going to be there in Alaska. I do not have to worry about any of my children or grandchildren learning to read, write, or speak English. They are going to get that.

But while they get that, if I don't also help focus on being Inupiaq and their connection to their family and their land, I think I take away something from them. My two youngest sons, I have four sons, my two youngest learned to read and write in Inupiaq first. They went to Nikaitchuat Tribal School in Kotzebue.

But I could say that those two, when I look at all four of my sons, they learned to read first in English, they went to the public school, they learned to focus academically, and they learned to be very respectful in a public-school classroom. They had the grounding at Nikaitchuat Tribal School where they learned to read in an orthography that is pretty recent. Let's face it, our indigenous language orthographies are recent.

So what that means, when you are teaching children how to read, is it is a really clean system for them to make sense, based on what we already know about the science of reading, sound-letter correlations, and picking up how to read words that might be unfamiliar to them. These were kids that went to Nikaitchuat who spoke English first, ended up in an Inupiaq immersion program at three years old, and learned to read Inupiaq. The skills they applied are exactly the types of skills I see happening in really effective reading classrooms. It is applied Inupiaq, and they are both strong readers for it.

The other thing that I want to share is while my kids were at Nikaitchuat, I was a principal in the public school that Nikaitchuat kids fed into. I have to say that those students at Nikaitchuat, I saw them go from first, second, third, fourth, fifth grade, and then they would exit into a middle school setting.

I got to sit there at every quarterly award ceremony at our school. I knew, because I was connected to Nikaitchuat, and the Juneau Elementary, the public school was 500 students large, but

I always knew which ones were Nikaitchuat students, because of my close involvement. At those award ceremonies, there was a lot of academic recognition.

But I think what was most meaningful to our elders who were involved with Nikaitchuat, and who understood what they really wanted out of Nikaitchuat, was that most of those students receiving awards for behavior, respectful behavior, engagement and hard work, helping others, those were always, 20 students came out of Nikaitchuat, 500-student school, I would say always 50 percent of them were Nikaitchuat students, because they had had grounding toward respectful behavior toward elders, respectful behavior toward teachers, ways that they were engaged at the very beginning with their environment around them I think really grounded them.

Knowing that they had that connection to their language and culture that their family had provided for them, I think there is a whole lot that goes into a child's sense of why school is important. When you know that parents choose this for you, there is so much value in what a child puts into it and what they do after that for the rest of their lives.

So I really am excited about this conversation about innovative practices in education. I have lost track of time. But I did want to say that it is important for us not to forget as we really work toward innovative programs that we make a cultural foundation for our students, a language foundation for our students, that we also know that this addresses that otherness that I really believe that a lot of us who have come through American westernized school systems feel as we start to realize what a school, what an American school system does to an indigenous person on their homeland. You are sitting there, and you are indigenous, you are sitting in an Alaska Native classroom and you are learning about things that really, you start to think, was I meant to be here. Gee, I am on my own land.

And I think that these innovative practices that we are talking about can finally erase that kind of dichotomy or dissonance, I don't know what other words to give it, that you experience being Alaska Native in a classroom where it is not of, for, and by your people that you are being educated in.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Kowalski follows:]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thanks, I appreciate that.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SANDY SALAKTUNA KOWALSKI, VICE
PRESIDENT, SHAREHOLDER RELATIONS, NANA REGIONAL CORPORATION

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am an educator by career, but my passion has been creating healthy, engaging and meaningful opportunities that contribute to the health and wellbeing of my people. I come here today to share with you my perspective on growing up Indigenous in an American school system, and what I envision will improve outcomes for Alaska Native students.

First, I want to point out that classrooms in Alaska, in many regards, looks like classrooms in the Lower 48. The system is just built this way—curriculum, textbooks, teaching practices, extracurricular activity, and even school year calendars derive from hundreds of years of Western cultural foundations that are not like the cultural foundations in the communities these classrooms reside in.

I have worked for decades as an educational professional, and have given my best run at improving outcomes while working within a Western system, and I have also been involved with creating a opportunities outside the system. Much of what has

been tried in typical Alaskan classrooms comes from well-intended educators implementing best practices that work in classrooms in places like Texas. And for Texas, this absolutely fits. But I tell you what, I've felt a dissonance at times with this work. This is not only because the cultural underpinnings of our communities are different (I will get to that later), but also because from the outset, the intention of schooling in Alaska Native communities was to "Americanize" Alaska's Indigenous people through schooling.

There is a point in just about every Alaska Native and American Indian student's journey through school when it occurs to us that we weren't necessarily meant to be present in the classroom. In that moment, one is aware that they are wholly intact, yet reading and answering test questions about manifest destiny and US assimilation policies. What's poignant for Alaska Native students is that this realization occurs in classrooms that sit on our lands.

Tweaking the resources that exist doesn't get at the heart of the transformative education that's needed to improve outcomes for Alaska Native youth. Let's face it, even when a textbook publisher works to accurately tell the story of America's Indigenous people, it's not told for full benefit of the Alaskan Native and American Indian. The most powerful way to create educational benefit is for Alaskan Natives to construct our own education system.

Even with the injurious practices that have been implemented in past decades, education for Alaska Native youth is ripe with possibility. There is a resilience that has not been extinguished. Throughout the decades before today, both elders and language and culture experts have been dutifully preparing for a time when education for Alaska Native students is of, for, and by Alaska Natives. In the case of my own home region, there are transcribed and translated interviews and stories collected throughout the 1970s and 1980s that are waiting to be relearned and introduced back into our collective knowledge.

Our students are worth this re-engagement. Imagine a 4th grade boy is investigating habitat and human impact who is doing this while checking a rabbit snare. In his own Indigenous language, he is learning the respectful practices elders have passed on. When he harvests a rabbit, he butchers the rabbit, speaking with his teacher in Iñupiaq, asking questions and responding to directions. Not only will this young boy learn valuable knowledge to sustain our lands and ways of understanding the environment and our place within it, but this boy also feels validated and engaged in school.

I believe this type of experience is important. Alaska Native students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes need transformative change of this nature so that Alaska Native students can thrive. I no longer want students to experience their "otherness" from the classroom that sits on their own homelands. Instead, classroom experiences should build identity, empowerment, and connection. Alaska Native communities have cultural practices, rich histories, and important perspectives on the environment and the treatment of humankind, and this should be taught in school.

Visioning about Indigenous language revitalization often comes up when this type of transformative change is discussed. Inherent in Alaska's Indigenous languages is knowledge about the land, environment and relationships Indigenous people have within families and with each other. Teaching through the language provides the fullest access to traditional knowledge. Through effective revitalization efforts, Alaskan classrooms can be a place where children learn content such as math, reading, science and history through their Native language. One example of where this is happening is in a primary grade classroom in Nome where the teacher has been working with fluent speakers and curriculum developers to create math lessons in Iñupiaq.

Incidentally, my two youngest sons learned to read in Iñupiaq before they learned to read in English at Nikaitchuat, the tribal immersion school in Kotzebue, over twenty years ago. When they moved on to the public school, as with many other Nikaitchuat students, their academic reading skills were strong, not negatively impacted by having learned both how to read in Iñupiaq first.

There has been significant work by Indigenous groups around language revitalization, and what has become clear is that the work needs a new brand of curriculum and teacher preparation. Before we can teach children, we must have the right kind of teachers. For illustration of the kind of teacher needed, one of the effective models used in Salish language revitalization. The approach has produced proficient adult speakers who are equipped to teach through an Indigenous perspective using curriculum they have developed throughout their training. In this program, adult learners' work with elders transcribing stories that they have recorded. This generates advanced literature and documents for curriculum and publication. This process also importantly documents precious elder knowledge.

The scenarios I have shared are just a few examples of Indigenous education that gives Alaska Native youth a sense of place and belonging that is absent in Western education. There are many exciting developments that are converging on this front and there is already synergy, collaboration and innovation amongst Alaskans who are seeking to transform the educational experience for Alaskan Native children. My hope is that you also have this vision and can support efforts to enable innovations like these to occur. Thank you for your time, and I am here to answer questions.

Mr. Johnson, let's turn to you, please. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL JOHNSON, COMMISSIONER, ALASKA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY LEARNING**

MR. JOHNSON. For the record, I am Michael Johnson, and I have the privilege to serve as Alaska's Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development.

Vice Chair Senator Murkowski, thank you for fitting us into your schedule, I know you are very busy visiting the State, and for holding this field hearing. Thank you for all your work on behalf of Alaska students that you do every day in the Senate.

As Member Kowalski said, thank you to AFN, the State Board of Education, members of the legislature, the governor, all who have rallied around this vision.

The vision of the State of Alaska's Department of Education and Early Development is set forth in Alaska State 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 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 with tribally empowered Alaska Native organizations. As you know, 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 our conscience requires that we press on toward systemic change. Though I have no doubt 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 unfortunately 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.

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 true partnership and honest engagement.

Throughout the past six years the Department of Education and Early Development, tribes, native organizations and other partners have had an ongoing conversation to determine what is needed for students to be able to be supported to shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves.

In 2018, at the elders and youth conference, our tribal liaison, Joel Isaac, asked the attendees, if they could design the perfect school, what would it look like? Here is how they replied, as summarized by Joel. They said, we would not get rid of math, reading, and writing, or all standardized tests, but we 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; and there would be 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 a place 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.

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 and partner and coordinate with tribal governments, good things happen for all Alaskans.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Johnson follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHAEL JOHNSON, COMMISSIONER, ALASKA DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION AND EARLY LEARNING

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.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you very much. I appreciate that, Mr. Commissioner.

Now we have Mr. William Naneng, who is with us virtually. He is with the Sea Lion Corporation. We will get him on the screen here.

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM NANENG, GENERAL MANGER, SEA LION CORPORATION

Mr. NANENG. Thank you, Honorable Vice Chairman Lisa Murkowski, and Honorable Chairman Brian Schatz. Good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation to talk today. My name is William Naneng, General Manager of Sea Lion Corporation, an Alaska Native Village Corporation in Hooper Bay, Alaska.

As an advocate for those in my community and for rural Alaska education systems, my message to you is that the rural western education system has long recognized, for many reasons, that it has not successfully worked for our Alaska Native students. Its product has adversely affected many of the predominately Native populated communities.

There is a process of attending to Alaska Native students’ needs, experiences, and feelings, and intervening so that they learn particular things and go beyond the given. The new rural school statistics of the State of Alaska indicate Alaska Natives have the highest dropout and lowest college graduation rates in the Country. We have shown as an example of one possible way of seeing through the outcomes, Hooper Bay Charter School students academic assessments, we can begin to reverse those extremes in Alaska Native students coming out of most of our rural schools, beginning with this national U.S. Senate hearing to address what we all think of as the causes of the present condition. For instance, high

rates of absenteeism among our Yupik students, which comes across as a lack of enthusiasm about learning and achieving to outsiders.

What is perceived as lack may be further from reality. Yupik parents and our students want to succeed in reading, mathematics, and science.

We have a continual problem in retention and high rates of suspension and expulsion among the students in our community. Native cultures have a lot to offer to the society, which can be used as a fulcrum to flip this all around.

I live with these individuals and I have seen them successfully engage in our difficult and complex subsistence way of life. We are not seeking for shortcuts, enabling [indiscernible] get individuals to see how vital education is to us.

In our community, indigenous families embodied change as we formed Hooper Bay Charter School and received final approval to operate by the State Board of Education in the autumn of 2019. Now, Hooper Bay Charter School has improved the lives of the students fourth through eighth grade in the short time we have operated.

Our school must overcome continual challenges. Most notably, rural schools like Hooper Bay Charter School require funding for innovative pathways to train and employ local indigenous educators. Also, the charter school has been forced to lease inadequate space resulting in low enrollment. Our Alaska Native students are truly deserving of their own facility. It is imperative that communities like Hooper Bay have an assurance of equitable resources to pursue adequate education systems.

Multi-age and multidisciplinary student pairing, having different age groups, age and grade groups in the classroom setting seems to facilitate higher learning and knowledge retention among Alaska Natives. This may be more culturally appropriate.

Hooper Bay Charter School has used a multidisciplinary and multi-age approach to students in fourth through eighth grade. This interdisciplinary model has many advantages. It allows the students to learn by making connections between ideas and concepts across different disciplinary boundaries.

Students learning in this way are able to apply the knowledge gained in one discipline to another different area and discipline in a way to deepen the learning experience. In this model, the students will become highly motivated and stay, having a vested interest in pursuing local science and engineering topics that are relevant to them. As a result, the content is often rooted in life experiences, giving authentic purpose for learning and connecting to a real-world context. Consequently, learning becomes meaningful, purposeful and deeper, resulting in a learning experience that stays with a student for a lifetime.

An interdisciplinary model also allows students to cover topics more in-depth, because they are considering the many and varying perspectives from which a topic can be explored. Critical thinking skills are used and developed as students look across disciplinary boundaries to consider other points of view and begin to compare and contrast concepts across subject areas and synthesize ideas.

There are also many advantages to a multi-grade model, namely the opportunity to experience leadership for older students, cooperative learning, and a culturally appropriate family and community inclusive atmosphere.

In summary, as children growing up in rural Alaska and as first-time students, our parents, our elders, as they prepared us for school, they would project to us that the school was a safe environment by saying, be loving to others. Similarly, our charter school principal's model, as the students assemble for class, would say out loud, be kind to others, and have the students repeat the same words. The principal leads by instructions to the staff and to the students. The school encourages the parents and extended family members to be involved. This community involvement extends to the classified staff by allowing them to lead in TREKs.

On the onset of the COVID pandemic and the uncertainty it created, the school put together lesson packets for each student. We had 65 percent pick-up of those instruction materials by parents. The staff delivered the remainder of the packets to their homes.

Our observation through the grade school academic assessments in the first year of the charter school, the fourth through eighth grade students were not ready to be taught in the grade level that they entered, and they will not very achieve proficiency unless the instructors provided remedial lessons to get them near where they should be. The general schools and educational system have been moving Alaska Native students along so they end up graduating with a ninth or so grade level education.

The strength and the success of the University of Alaska Anchorage, Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program is their adurance and insistence that student enrollment is based on their level of knowledge in subjects like reading and math. Otherwise, when many rural school graduates start off with college credit courses, they are set up for failure.

This was the impetus for change in Hooper Bay. Our community took control of our students' academic future. When the charter school idea was proposed to the Alaska Native Village Corporation board of directors, the immediate acceptance did not happen overnight. Rather, it was built through many years of their educational support by providing scholarships and donations to student activities.

When I went before the State Board of Education, the first two questions I was asked was, how would we get the parents involved and improve student attendance. My answer was, many students do not live in traditional family settings. Many of them live in dwellings with extended families and multiple single parents.

Establishing the school with the approval of the State Board of Education, Lower Yukon School District Regional School Board and the Native Village of Hooper Bay, it offered our tribe a means to access Federal funding created to benefit Alaska Native students by developing new school activities based on science, technology, engineering, and offering remedial lessons, we were able to create curriculum which facilitates literacy, mathematics, and science in a manner that is culturally familiar to the students.

More importantly, academic policy committee, the governing board has learned how fragile this is in its infancy, due mainly to

lack of infrastructure like facilities and utilities that the Honorable Senator Murkowski had mentioned earlier. Many rural village political elected representatives also lack the savvy and resources to firmly establish the foundation it and the Sea Lion Board of Directors have built. Another being our disproportionate reliance on Federal funds.

Our recommendations are, other than the need for proper public infrastructure of facilities and utilities, pedagogy is a universal concept. Our Yupik cultural way of knowing should be included by academics of elders participation. Elders guide practice by doing and experiential learning, detailed observation, intuitive analysis, cooperative learning and listening. Native elders understand about early childhood development, children's needs, and that they can succeed. The charter school has begun to develop curriculum that reflects our environment. This should become the Federal Indian education curriculum.

Village science and village math used by Yupik elders should be used to make our youth understand the basic science and math concepts. Honoring our children's cultural lifestyle should be part of the focus of traditional learning of our Yupik way of life. Focusing on weather prediction, flora and fauna management, managing fisheries, learning subsistence fishing and hunting practices. It is about self-esteem. Above all, it means self-esteem.

Just as Hooper Bay structured its charter system within the school district, this should expand, and expand more Indian education funding into this program. This is about local policy control.

What I am recommending is not new. It is the Federal Government that can enact these policies to make innovation happen and make our Native students proud of who they are.

The pedagogy of Alaska Native cultures taught in the school curriculum can only succeed if the State and Federal bureaucracies adopt the local sciences, mathematics, and Native lifestyles and accept it into the norm. Indian education funds should also be about local policy, local control and decision making.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Naneng follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF WILLIAM NANENG, GENERAL MANGER, SEA LION CORPORATION

Good Afternoon. Thank you for the invitation to testify. My Name is Nuyaq William Naneng, General Manager of Sea Lion Corporation, an Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 village corporation of Hooper Bay Alaska. Sea Lion Corporation has 643 shareholders of Yupik descent and seven directors who control investments and policy of our ANCSA corporation.

As an advocate for those in my community and of rural Alaskan education systems, my message to you is that rural western education system has long recognized, for many reasons, that it has not successfully worked for our Alaska Native Students and its product has adversely affected many of the predominately Native populated communities. There is a process of attending to Alaska Native student's needs, experiences, and feelings, and intervening so that they learn particular things and go beyond the given. New rural school statistics of the State of Alaska indicator is showing as an example of one possible way, seen through outcomes of the Hooper Bay Charter School students' academic assessments. We can begin to reverse the extreme spectrums of Native people labeling coming out of most rural schools.

Beginning with this national U.S. Senate hearing to address what we all think of are the causes of present conditions for instance, high rates of absenteeism among our Yupik students, which may come across as a lack of enthusiasm about learning

and achieving to outsiders. What is perceived as a lack, may be farther from the reality. Yupik parents and our students want to succeed in reading, mathematics, and sciences. We have a continual problem in retention, and high rates of suspension and expulsion among the students in our community. Native cultures have a lot to offer to the society, which can be used as a fulcrum to flip this around. I live with these individuals and have seen them successfully engage in our difficult and complex subsistence way of life. We are not seeking for short cuts, enabling, but get individuals to see how vital the education is to us.

In our community, indigenous families embodied change as we formed the Hooper Bay Charter School (HBCS) and received final approval to operate by the Alaska State Board of Education in the autumn of 2019. Now, the Hooper Bay Charter School is improving the lives of up to 60 students, grades 4 through 8, every year. But our school must overcome challenges. Most notably, rural schools like Hooper Bay Charter School require funding for innovative pathways to train and employ local indigenous educators. Also, the charter school has been forced to lease inadequate space resulting in low enrollment. Our Alaska Native students are truly deserving of their own facility. It is imperative that communities like Hooper Bay have an assurance of equitable resources to pursue adequate education systems.

Multi-Age and Multi-Disciplinary

Hooper Bay Charter School will use an interdisciplinary and multi-age approach for students in grades 4 through 8. An interdisciplinary model has many advantages. It allows the student to learn by making connections between ideas and concepts across different disciplinary boundaries. Students learning in this way are able to apply the knowledge gained in one discipline to another different discipline as a way to deepen the learning experience. In this model, students will become highly motivated as they have a vested interest in pursuing local science and engineering topics that are relevant to them. As a result, the content is often rooted in life experiences, giving an authentic purpose for the learning and connecting it to a real-world context. Consequently, the learning becomes meaningful, purposeful and deeper resulting in learning experiences that stay with the student for a lifetime.

An interdisciplinary model also allows students to cover topics in more depth because they are considering the many and varied perspectives from which a topic can be explored. Critical thinking skills are used and developed as students look across disciplinary boundaries to consider other viewpoints and begin to compare and contrast concepts across subject areas, synthesizing ideas.

There are also many advantages to a multi-grade model, namely the opportunities to experience leadership (for older students), cooperative learning, and a culturally appropriate family- and community-inclusive atmosphere.

Summary

As children growing up in rural Alaska and as first-time students, our parents or elders, as they prepared us for school, they'd project to us that the school was a safe environment by saying: "be loving to others". Similarly, our charter school principal's motto, as the students assemble for class would say out loud: "be kind to others" and have the students repeat the same words. The principal leads by instructions to the staff and to the students. The school encourages the parents or extended family members to be involved; this community involvement extends to the classified staff by allowing them to lead in TREKs. On the onset of the COVID pandemic and the uncertainty it created, the school put together lesson packets for each student and we had a 65 percent pick up of those instruction material by parents, and the staff delivered the remainder of the packets to their homes.

Our observation through the grade student academic assessments in the first year of charter school; the 4th–8th grade students were not ready to be taught in the the grade level they enter and will not very well achieve proficiency, unless the instructors provide remedial lessons to get them near where they should be. The general schools and educational system have been moving the Alaska Native students along, so they end up graduating with 9th or so grade level education. The strength and the success of University of Alaska Anchorage, Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program is their adamant and insistent the student enrollment is based on their level of knowledge in subjects like reading and mathematics, otherwise when many rural school graduates start off with college credit courses, they are set up for failure.

This was the impetus change in Hooper Bay, our community took control of our students' academic future. When the charter school idea was proposed to the Alaska Native village corporation board of directors, the immediate acceptance did not happen overnight. Rather, it was built through many years of their educational support

of providing scholarships and donations to student activities. When I went before the Alaska State Board of Education, the first two questions I was asked: how would we get the parents involved and improve student attendance? My answer was many students do not live in traditional family setting, many of them live in dwellings with extended families and multiply single parents. Establishing the school with the approval of the Alaska State Board of Education, Lower Yukon School District Regional School Board and Native Village of Hooper Bay, it offered our Tribe, a means to access federal funds created to benefit Alaska Native students. By developing new school activities based upon Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and offer remedial lessons, we were able to create curriculum which facilitate literacy, mathematics and science in a manner that is culturally familiar to the students.

More importantly, Academic Policy Committee, the governing body has learned how fragile this is in its infancy, due mainly to lack of infrastructures in facilities and utilities and many rural village political elected representatives lacks the savvy, and resources to firmly establish the foundation it and the Sea Lion Corporation Board of Directors have built. Another being our disproportionate reliance on federal funds.

Recommendations

1. Other than the need for proper public infrastructures of facility and utilities, Pedagogy is a universal concept. Our Yupik cultural ways of knowing should be included by Academics of Elders participation. Yupik Elders guide practice by doing/experiential learning, detailed observation, intuitive analysis, cooperative learning and listening. Native Elders understand about early childhood development, children's needs, and that we can succeed. The Charter School has begun to develop curriculum that reflects our environment. This should become part of the federal Indian Education curriculum.
2. Village science and village math used by Yupik Elders should be used to make our youth understand basic science and math concepts.
3. Honoring our children's cultural lifestyles should be part of teaching to focus traditional learning of our Yupik Way of Life. Focusing on weather prediction, flora and fauna management, managing fisheries, leaning subsistence fishing and hunting practices, etc. It's all about self-esteem.
4. Just like Hooper Bay structured its own charter system within the school district, this should expand. Expand more Indian Education funding into this program. This is about local policy control.

What I am recommending is not new. It's the federal government that can enact such policies to make innovation happen to make our Native students proud of who we are.

The pedagogy of Native cultures taught in the school curriculum can only succeed if state and federal bureaucracies adopt local sciences, mathematics, and Native lifestyles are accepted into the norm. Indian Education funds should be about local policy control and responsibility.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, William. I appreciate that.

It has been helpful to hear both from William and Sandy in terms of the reason why we are having this discussion about alternatives and recognizing the role that compacting can play here.

I want to start off my questions, perhaps a little more technical, and I will direct them to you, Julie, and to you, Commissioner. It is kind of along the lines of how we will effectuate this.

We have, as part of the record, we have written testimony that has been provided to us by the U.S. Department of Education. It states that STEC schools in Alaska would be eligible for the department's formula funding if the schools are authorized by the State in a way that meets the Federal definition of a local educational agency or a school district. We know that formula funds, whether Title 1 grants that come, or Title 2, Title 4, Impact Aid, these are all programs that would be eligible through the department.

So we are at a point where we are trying to figure out how we advance this through the State. I guess the question to you, Julie, is whether or not you are satisfied with the Department of Education's testimony that seems to indicate that we don't need legislative authority or a demonstration here in Alaska. Are we in a good place there? We have legislation that is working its way through the process. But I am trying to make sure that here in the State, we are going to be doing something consistent that U.S. Department of Education is going to be good with our approach.

Ms. KITKA. Madam Chair, I think the best way to think of this is we are doing a hybrid. So there will be a Federal role and there is a State role. We want to protect the Federal trust responsibility on education, but we also want to maximize the State of Alaska's responsibility under the constitution of what they are obligated to do. So it is really a hybrid.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Do you think that hybrid, if I can interject, do you think that hybrid does protect the Federal trust responsibility when it comes to —

Ms. KITKA. With regard to the Federal trust responsibility, that is what I would consider a living responsibility. It will always adapt and change. It is kind of like the way I describe ANSCA. It is a living law, intended to meet the real social and economic needs of Native people. So we keep coming back to the Congress, we need this, we need that, as circumstances change.

It is the same way with the Federal trust responsibility in education. It depends on the needs of our people and what we need from the Federal Government and the Federal Department of Education. Nothing will ever "satisfy" it, but do I think that there needs to be legislation introduced today on the Federal level to authorize compact schools? No. Do I think that we need to remove the rider? Yes. I think that will be good, and it would also be a sign that we are moving more to equity in treating Alaska Native education, but it doesn't need to immediately turn anything upside down.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Let me ask you about that, though, on the rider itself. I understand what you shared about why you are making that specific ask here. But I want to make sure that it is clear, you are not suggesting that we have BIE schools here in Alaska.

Ms. KITKA. This is all forward-looking. It is not backwards. We are not asking for BIA schools. We are asking for State schools with the Federal trust responsibility supported. At this time what we think the Federal Government needs to do is remove that barrier.

We also think that the Federal Government should incentivize innovation. We need more funding and resources for incorporating indigenous knowledge into curriculum. I will give as an example, AFN had a National Science Foundation grant together with the Annenberg Foundation that went for 10 years. It was all on incorporating indigenous knowledge into curriculum. We need to multiply that and scale those types of efforts up.

That effort, we had a partnership with the State, we had a partnership with 23 school districts, the University of Alaska. We had Oscar Kowagley, we had a number of distinguished Native educators involved in that. We need to scale up those types of opportu-

nities but particularly incorporating indigenous knowledge into curriculum, also into teacher development and preparation. There just is not enough current resources going into these things. We think those two in particular need to go side by side with the compacting.

Plus, we need to have the Federal Department of Education incentivize innovation. Whether or not you are talking about the XPrize—

Senator MURKOWSKI. Are you talking about incentivizing the innovation? Because I think that is what we are talking about here, we are trying to look at the delivery of education outside of just the math and reading. So share with me what you think that might look like.

Ms. KITKA. I think, to use an adaptation of technology, the e-learning. In our health system, we are moving a lot to the telehealth. How can we incentivize our schools and our systems to develop the best of the best? Really, my standards for the compacting and for our whole education system is, I think we have a race to catch up to keep those standards up really high.

So incentivizing adaptation of technology, incentivize the development of curriculum, incentivize collaboration. One of the things that I think this work with Commissioner Johnson has proved is we can do a lot more working together with the State and Federal Government than just by ourselves. Incentivize collaboration, ways that we work together, not one telling another what to do on that, but work together.

I really do think our future as Native people here depends on our developing our young people to be the best they can be, that they are well-grounded, they are secure, they are healthy, the sky is the limit on what they can do, whether they want to be an astronaut, a scientist, a teacher, if they want to be a fisherman. We cannot lower our aspirations for our children.

But what we have to have is an educational system that values where they come from, their culture and values, and support what their parents want for them on their culture and values, and not have people at odds with each other. That is where I think we can make some systemic change. I know people have said, well, how do you measure some of this? I think we have to let that process go as we are having our tribes negotiate with the State, and go through the negotiation process, where you would build accountability into these compacts. But let some of that unfold, we don't have the answers all today. But we do know what we want, we want better things for our children.

But we also pay attention on the Federal level. There are these massive resources moving around from the infrastructure bill and other things. Some of that will be going into education. We don't want any of that to be prohibited for our rural areas and our communities.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Let me ask you, Dr. Johnson, on this issue of how do we judge success? That is a question I would actually like to ask all of you. What is that metric of success for our Native students around the State? You deal with a system that has assessment standards that you have to meet in order to take advantage of certain Federal resources, that level of accountability. Oftentimes you don't have the level of flexibility that I think we would

like to have as we are trying to allow for a transformative approach to education.

But when you are trying to make this systemic change, that can be a bit of a challenge, too. So I think I neglected to just say thank you for the extraordinary collaboration I think we have had between the State and AFN and so many on this issue. I think it demonstrates a commitment to get to yes, and to try to be innovative in this space.

But you have a situation, again, where STEC schools still have to work in coordination with U.S. Department of Education. They have their requirements in terms of what eligibility for receiving Federal formula grants, what those requirements are for STEC schools. So it is going to be, as I understand it, it is going to be DEED that is going to be responsible for determining whether or not the STEC schools meet the definition that has been set out by the Department of Education. So it is not Department of Education there.

But are you comfortable with where we are right now in ensuring that this pilot that we are talking about and these schools can be authorized in conformance with this definition? It is kind of technical and weedy. But yet, when we are trying to talk about resources that come, we want to make sure that we are going to be setting this up in a way to take full advantage of those resources. Are we in a good space?

Mr. JOHNSON. Thank you for the question. I think so, but first, I will say the department, we are proceeding making assumptions that, because we are in a good space that we will be in a good space tomorrow. But it is a complex system that we are operating here. We certainly want to be respectful of that and respectful of all our partners. So we are trying to proceed carefully and cautiously.

The second thing I would say is, the reason I feel like we are in a good space is because my confidence isn't in the bureaucracy, it is in our partnership with the tribes and AFN. Thank you for the part you played in providing COVID relief funding. We saw that as a great opportunity, so we called AFN and said, would you be willing to partner with us, and we could give them a grant. Because the way it seems like we have always done it before is the bureaucracy has confidence in itself and then presents possibilities. But what we decided is, we can give them a grant and say, will you help us imagine the possibilities, then the bureaucracy reacts to that instead of the other way around.

So I think we are in a good spot, because we are placing our confidence in the partnership with the tribes rather than the bureaucracy. They are helping us navigate our own bureaucracies, because they have expertise, especially with the Federal Government, that we don't have.

Senator MURKOWSKI. We just have to look at it a little bit differently, which is what we are trying to do here, is look at things a little bit differently.

But to the point that Julie made in terms of assessments, we kind of figure that out as we go. You are in a situation here where you are going to be introducing new statewide assessments, I guess a whole assessment system later this year. How do we fit this in

that? Walk me through that. Again, I realize that we may be trying to push something, or the round peg into a square hole type of thing. If we are, tell me that. Because I want us to be in a place where again, we are able to maximize resources, maximize partnerships. But I also know that when you are dealing with Federal funding and opportunity, they are not as flexible a system as we would like them to be.

Mr. JOHNSON. Right. So I guess I will start with the place where I think we all are aligned, the U.S. Department of Education, the Secretary. He was invited and spoke on this at AFN and we appreciated that. The tribes and the State bureaucracy, the Department of Education, the place where I think we all agree is the destination. That is a great education for every kid. And the Federal Government, the Federal bureaucracy, everybody acknowledges that that is where we all want to be.

What we are proposing is not a new destination, but a journey, a new pathway to get to that destination. That is where we have to work through all these rigid requirements, and things like that. So we keep reminding everybody of what we agree on.

The other thing I would say is, the reason I think this is a great time is because after the pandemic, there is a hunger to explore new ways of doing things. What did we learn from the pandemic, and what is it going to look like post-pandemic. That includes the U.S. Department of Education. I know in meetings that I have with my fellow State chiefs, they may not know what that looks like but there is certainly an appetite there to explore.

So I think the time is right, as President Kitka said. We may not have all the answers today, but it seems like the opportune time to be connecting with those partners and say, we have an idea and maybe this is an idea that will satisfy that appetite there seems to be for innovation.

So that doesn't provide you a specific example. I just think the time is opportune.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I appreciate this. Because as I am listening to you, I am thinking, wow, I lead off with all the reasons why it can't be done, all of these barriers that are out there because you have this inflexible system. I am just reminded of the desire to try to do something different, even though you know that you have a system that is just hard. But I think it is also a recognition that the status quo is not helping our kids.

Mr. JOHNSON. Right.

Senator MURKOWSKI. If you just sit back and accept the status quo, we will put more generations of young Alaska Natives behind.

Sandy, I want to ask you, because I had the benefit of having my two sons in a language immersion program here in Anchorage. It was a two-way immersion. The thing that I loved most about it was when your son, who is in kindergarten, first grade, says, I am so smart on the first day of the class, because the teacher is talking in English, and I get it. Then in the afternoon, when it's full-on Spanish, he doesn't know the words, his best buddy who was maybe struggling on the English side of the morning, is now the expert. It empowers the language and the skills, it is so empowering in ways that I think sometimes as adults we forget that.

But I also recognize that we can't do any of this unless we have the teachers. William has mentioned the role of the elders involved, which I know we value and we appreciate. But I am curious to know as to how we build out the teachers that we need in order to do what every one of you is suggesting. Because we just can't take a teacher who has been in the classroom here who is a super-great math teacher, but she may be from Iowa, great teacher, but you can't make that translation to what we are talking about here."

So what do we need to be doing more of? The fact that we are here at APU, the fact that Ilisaġvik has good programs, what more do we need to do? How can Congress help to facilitate the growth of more of our educators?

Ms. KOWALSKI. Let me start off by describing the vision I have for what a teacher program might be like. First of all, that we it look nothing the teacher programs we have now. Because in order to revitalize language and culture in the community, you have to prepare the adults who are going to be teaching in those classrooms how to cycle through and create more of a curriculum. There isn't a lot of curriculum material readily available for an immersion program. Some are farther ahead, but there isn't a lot. It is going to take decades of that kind of forward-moving work to make this the corpus strong for language revitalization.

So a teacher preparation program has to orient a teacher who can work with elders, that is why it looks nothing like the teacher pathway program we have now, who can work with elders, who can work with transcriptions and translation and help create that corpus of material that is being captured with the elder right then, or even from elder recordings from the 1970s and 1980s. In my region, we have tons of valuable environmental knowledge captured in recordings when John Shaffer and other people who were just coming out at the time in ANSCA, they realized those resources were going to be needed. They saw ahead, and they created programs where all of that was captured.

So our teachers, our future teachers in an indigenous school, need to be able to approach all that knowledge. So they have to become adult learners of the language right away. And they have to be able to approach elders in a way that helps capture that knowledge that the elders have, and capture the way that the elders understand learning should be.

I don't think there is an elder I have ever worked with who doesn't understand from their life experience in the rural community how we should treat each other. That is important. So our teachers have to be oriented toward an indigenized way of approaching and creating a classroom environment. That happens by working with the elders, by working with others who working in this effort, and working with the knowledge that it is important for our students who are going to be in that classroom, that knowledge that is going to be totally grounded in history, culture, stories, celebrations, those exist. We are rapidly losing elders who know it.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Is that being done anywhere?

Ms. KOWALSKI. It is, yes. There are language revitalization programs that help, that do capture the elders' knowledge and create teachers while they are capturing the elders' knowledge. The Salish language program in the northwest area is an example of a revital-

ization effort that, it sounds small, right now it is like eight teachers who have graduated as proficient language speakers.

But when you think about gaining eight language speakers, the offside is like my language right now, we don't have that, we are just losing speakers every year. And we are losing the elder ones. The Salish language program and other language revitalization efforts are creating young adult speakers with decades of professional years ahead of them for teaching in classrooms, creating curriculum, helping our government councils bring back the language into governance work. It is ripe right now.

I do have to say, there is a lot of energy out there from young people who are graduating from college with communication degrees, education degrees, engineering degrees, where they are trying to make space in their own personal life, knowing they will be a young parent or aunt or uncle. They are also making space for this type of work and energy while they perform full-time lives. They are also the people who are creating the vision for the future. They see themselves as parents and grandparents. They already know that they are going to be elders who have a responsibility to recapture and move forward things that we have lost in the last 50 years.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So let me ask, on that, William, you mentioned this, that you had a couple of challenges, you wanted to try to do more to involve parents in the schools, but also to get student attendance up. It is this issue of parents in the schools, whether it is just to be an involved parent, or to get that adult who is saying, I want to be that teacher, I want to be that elder, I want to be there to share the cultural values there as part of the classroom. I think we all know that for many that are not in school now, but who went through school, that the education system was not only not built for them, it was something that they have tried to forget. As they have tried to forget, it has been a challenge to not only involve themselves as parents in the school, but even to encourage their children that attending school is meaningful.

So William, I don't know if you can speak to that aspect of it and share if you have seen a level of success in doing that. But I think it is something that we can get the students, get the young people excited about what is going on in the classroom. But I am worried that there is a generation gap in terms of, not enthusiasm for education, but just feeling the value of being in that school.

So William, I would like you to speak to that, then Commissioner, if you can comment on that as well, I thank you. William?

Mr. NANENG. Thank you, Senator Murkowski. We suggest that while we are waiting for things to change externally, we need innovation in instruction, that can help to teach all students where they are in their learning pathways. All too often, we think that learning science and math, also cultural learning, are outside, or they are in the core curriculum of our people. For too long, culture has been a separate class. This does not help Native students learn.

I would like to share one thing. Our people here know when there is going to be a successful berry season by looking at the environment that is happening right now. When there is a crust of ice on top of the snow, we can predict there will be an abundant

berry season. Also, at this time, until the breakup of the Yukon River, if there is a prevailing wind that is going on, we know that there is going to be an abundance of salmon.

This climate change that we are observing right now has caused that prevailing wind that used to go to the Gulf of Alaska to now come up the Bering Sea, and it is blowing that water that is coming onto the Yukon maybe across to the coast of Siberia. So that could be one of the main reasons why there might be salmon crises that are happening. The salmon catches that are happening right now may not be getting reported across the Bering Sea.

Science and math are already in our culture. It is not a western concept. The western concept of science and math is based on Native culture, Native culture. Those are my answers.

I was going to provide an example, maybe I should mention it right now, the Pythagorean theorem is only known now as we know it because it was written then. But it was used by Native people thousands of years before. So that is my answer.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Math and science are what we would classify as the educational attainment, but you are probably learning more in physics and science, and to your point, the Pythagorean theorem.

Commissioner, in terms of the parental involvement aspect, and what that means also for student engagement, would you comment on that?

Mr. JOHNSON. Yes, I think, and maybe I will start broad and comment. You articulated this well. I can go to bed and sleep well at night knowing there are risks in doing something different. It is really hard to sleep well at night knowing that we are going to get up and do the same thing that we did yesterday and get the same outcomes.

So I think that we don't, I think the whole concept of tribal compacting is to do just that, to create more of an engagement, student engagement and parent engagement, and do that through a new journey to that destination of a great education through tribal compacting.

I think that, and you said this well, too, in other places in the Country the public education system is truly viewed as a place of opportunity. So people see that as an economic pathway out of poverty and those sorts of things.

But because of our history, I think Alaska Native people see the public education system, because of what happened, as more of assimilation than opportunity. So by doing tribal compacting, we give them an opportunity, we all can let go of how that has happened, and have a new beginning with a new kind of system that will have risks associated with it, because it is new. But it won't be the same system that created that kind of context.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Let me ask each of you, and I suggested it a few minutes ago, the proposal that we are talking about which would be this education compact between the State and the tribes, I should ask, do you see a role for the ANCs?

Ms. KITKA. Yes. The first part on that is, when we talk about the demonstration, we don't know yet how many projects it will be. It might be 10, it might be 15, it might be 5, it might be 3.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Will it be dependent on capacity?

Ms. KITKA. It will depend a lot on capacity and how quickly the Commissioner and his team can scale up, and skilled we are at facilitating negotiations on key things, as well as, again, I view it as the incentives that you put all around it, that people have the resources that they need to do.

In regard to the role for corporations, you are as familiar as I am that corporations are considered Indian tribes for certain purposes under Federal law. In fact, I think for about 200 different laws that they are considered. I think that is an open question, whether or not that plays into this compacting of schools right now. I don't believe the corporations using their tribal status do any compacting at all. But we are not looking at precluding anybody from anything. At this point, we are just trying to test it out.

One of the areas that we also thought would be a selling point for this compacting is looking at the experience of the Bureau of Indian Affairs when they did compacting for the first time. Congress authorized 10 tribes to embark on that. Tlingit and Haida was the first one from Alaska that participated. They studied it really, really carefully, the budget, so that when they were in negotiations with the State they knew what they were talking about, they knew what they meant to do and what they couldn't do.

The second year they opened it up for 10 more tribes. And Kawerak in Nome was the second tribe and organization that was able to take advantage of it. They built on what Tlingit and Haida did in studying the budget.

I remember when we Loretta Bullard executed that first compact for Kawerak. They were able to squeeze out of the system \$750,000 that went more to the grassroots level and was picked up on by different levels of the government. So I think not only compacting is an efficient mechanism on that, but I think we will see, as we build more flexibility into that, we will be able to stretch the resources.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Then to the question that I was going to ask of each of you, we are able to stand up a project, and again, how many has yet to be defined. Many things still to be defined. What would you describe as success from this education compacting? How do you define success? I will let you start, and we will just go around the table.

Ms. KITKA. I would define success as tribal ownership over education. I look back to when we first started dealing with the sobriety movement in the Native community. We had lots of problems with alcohol.

Then all of a sudden, you had one person stand up at the AFN convention and say, you know what, I quit drinking and it's now been 10 years. Then a little bit later, you would have more. You had a whole shift in attitude and respect in the Native community, where they no longer would tolerate drinking in public Native meetings. In fact, it became a badge of honor when you could talk about what you had done and how you were doing it.

I think success is, at the AFN convention you have communities saying, we have finally taken over this education system, look at what we are accomplishing and doing, and look how well our children are. We have great attendance records and our children are learning about their history, they are learning about their environment.

I think you will see the growing sense of that. It is not something you will be able to tell them the first year or second. It is when the enthusiasm and the energy is harnessed to make that happen. Health compacting could have fallen flat. In fact, the negotiations for the health consortium, that negotiation went on two years, then they hit a roadblock. They couldn't get that last part. Congress had to come in and step in, that expression, divide the baby, solve the last problem for that to go forward.

We may have that same thing in education, where people put in the work, but you have one particular obstacle that is in our way. In that case, go back to the legislature and say, wait, we have a problem here, we need more flexibility here, go to the Congress and say, we need more flexibility. But it is building up that momentum and that enthusiasm where people are really proud.

I think you will just see it over the years, even just at the AFN convention, on helping with education, what [indiscernible] that pride. You give people the ownership and they will take the responsibility, and giving them the flexibility to do it.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Sandra, how would you define success? Maybe in your view, because you have been involved in different approaches, clearly, maybe it is not necessarily the compacting, but what does success look like with regard to education for Alaska Native children?

Ms. KOWALSKI. Long view and short view. So, long view, adults will be professionals, they will have certificates, they will be able to support their families and provide for their families, from the land, from employment. And they will be able to communicate with their elders and their future generation in their indigenous language. Because in that language encapsulates everything that makes us strong.

Short view, how would we know this is working? You will have students who aren't dropping out, they see themselves in their curriculum and their daily activities in school, because they go home to an environment that is right now very different than a lot of classrooms, the way that they are set up. But they will be more engaged in school, will have a higher graduation rate, less absenteeism.

I took notes when William was talking, because I remember that, William, that absenteeism was one of the reasons you guys went the charter school route. That is a real issue. When I was in Northwest Arctic just recently, one of our communities talked about the high absenteeism rate.

The Inupiaq instructor said, that is funny, because on Inupiaq days, all those kids who are never here come back to school that day. They come back to fish with their teachers, they come back to get in a boat, get on the land. But they are not attending school those other days. Which to me says that the real disconnect of that human spirit, and yes, there are other things that happen, including do parents support the education that your child is getting in a school that exists right now.

What I see right now kind of goes back to some of the things Julie said about leveraging technology and the resources that will provide, or an innovative school, it is kind of happening already. We have young parents learning these cultural practices through

social media right now. I am telling you, there is in-depth interest and movement on the part of young parents and young family members. They are already innovating, moving, sharing, connecting already through some of the social media platforms that have broken down barriers for them.

I do think that when these parents see the schools also teaching some of the things for themselves, you are going to see high parent engagement. I don't know if you remember GearUP, the Federal program that used to operate, it was a college preparatory program for middle school. They had GearUp in my district.

We thought what we were doing was providing opportunities for seventh grade students to understand the training and career opportunities that could be provided for them in the region. But we had a challenge with how we were going to chaperone seventh graders to come into one village together to do this.

So the best way out for us was to plan for their parents to travel with them. It turned out the parents were way more engaged than their students about what we were teaching their seventh-grade students, because they hadn't seen those opportunities either, yet. The same thing has the potential to happen in this transformed educational system. Parents will finally have the opportunity to re-engage in learning opportunities they didn't have provided for them. I think that could be a powerful message to the elders who are waiting for this to happen and the children who need for this to happen.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. Commissioner?

Mr. JOHNSON. As I said before, I think success, the destination hasn't changed. That is, and maybe you were in the legislature when this was put in statute, but 14.03.015, that "all students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, their culture, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them." I think that is still success.

I would add, based on your opening comments and the events of the day, that would include treasuring their freedom and being willing to defend it.

Second, I would say that I think success is something that we have already seen and got a taste of, which is why we are here and so passionate about moving this forward. Sandy alluded to it, and that is that Alaska Native people are super-excited about educating their kids in the system that they get to do that in.

We have seen through this conversation a partnership with AFN, so many people, hundreds of people showing up to webinars that President Kitka has hosted, really interested in this topic, and educating their kids. I think that is a taste of success that should motivate all of us to keep going and exploring this pathway.

Senator MURKOWSKI. William, what do you see as success?

Mr. NANENG. Thank you. I would like to let the tribes know that what goes in front of them are theirs, they own it. Also learning helps the students, encourage students that are stewards of their community.

So I would like our students and our instructors to know that all this, science, math, and literacy are ours. I want to say that when we engage in subsistence activity, when we go out, we may not al-

ways succeed or get what we are going out for. We may have to go out maybe multiple times before we even are able to harvest or gather what we go out to do.

So like our Commission stated, it is a process. It is not something that you just learn one time. You have to continually learn it. It is not just a one-time thing. I would like our tribes to know that what goes in front of them are theirs. That is a success.

Senator MURKOWSKI. It is about that ownership.

We are just about to the 4:00 o'clock hour, which means we have to wrap here. But I want to give everybody an opportunity to make any final or concluding remarks that they want to make sure we get on the record.

But before we do that, I am going to ask one last question to you, Commissioner, just in terms of readiness within the department to undertake the kind of demonstration project that we are taking on. In that, do you look at this as different than what the State engages with, for instance, communities that are wanting to establish some type of charter school or other school type? Do you have a model that you can work with to make this easier, or is this entirely different? I am wondering about the readiness on your end.

Mr. JOHNSON. Thank you. We are ready, and part of that is because we have the good fortune of having a State board of education that said, be ready, we think this is a priority. So we are ready. That doesn't mean we have all the answers. But I don't want us to have all the answers and give to them. I want to have this partnership. Because that is what is making it work.

So we have models that I think we can draw upon, but not one that we want to set on the table and say, let's do this. We want to create this new pathway and journey with our partners, and build something new. Instead of, as I said before, us building it and saying, hey, here is a great new idea, letting them say, hey, could we do this, and work with it.

So I think our charter laws in this State require that everything runs through the local school board and tribal compacting would be different in that. So our charter laws in Alaska wouldn't be the perfect model. But there are other States with different kinds of charter laws that can inform the pathway. I know AFN and others are looking at those models. You mentioned the State of Washington.

So we have lots of resources to draw upon. But at the end of the day, I hope this looks very Alaskan, and has lots of fingerprints on it.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I think you said it, Sandra, I wrote it down here somewhere, it is education by Alaska Natives and for Alaska Natives.

So we are at 4 o'clock. I would like to offer each of you an opportunity to share anything to supplement what you have already said, or if something has not been touched upon, we welcome that. I have been going around the table this way, so I think I am going to go to our friend and colleague who is here virtually. William, if you would like to add anything final.

Also know that, I am not meaning to put you on the spot, but this record is going to be held open, so there will be an opportunity to supplement in writing. But I know it is oftentimes just much

easier while we are in the midst of this conversation, to add any final thoughts you might have.

Mr. NANENG. Thank you, Senator Murkowski. We need a system that supports tribes' ability to educate our own students. This includes infrastructure, infrastructure for buildings, culture, and language

Right now, we struggle, how can we do this. Many of our first-time Yupik immersion parents are not Yupik speakers, Yupik is something that they don't know. So somehow, one of the innovation steps might be to do some reverse engineering, or something like that. That is my thought. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. I so appreciate what you provided to the Committee, and your leadership out there in Hooper Bay. Thank you very much.

Commissioner Johnson, final thoughts?

Mr. JOHNSON. Just to thank you, again, for holding the hearing. I thank your staff for all the support they provided leading up to it. Thank you for all the partners.

I am not afraid, I am not worried, I have every confidence that tribes in Alaska are going to help light this pathway forward, and that in the future, I will look back and consider it a great privilege that I got to be part of this conversation. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. We appreciate your leadership at the State level. We know it is not an easy job. But I will tell you, it is very heartening as one who deals with folks who work within, whether it is State administrations or Federal administrations. Oftentimes there is a hesitancy to try to explore new ideas, because it is just harder. So not only your willingness, but the State Board of Education, the administration that is behind this, it is appreciated. Thank you for that.

Ms. KOWALSKI. I will just put this out there, I know you asked the Commissioner if the department was ready. There really is a sense right now of move forward and not to move forward right now. It is because of how carefully this has to be done, so that nothing pulls the breath out of it in the future.

So when we ask the department, are you ready, they are as ready as they should be. Because me as a State board member, I am going to be saying, the department better not get in the way. So you had better be ready to be not ready, so that there is time to understand what negotiation is, and all of that, all of those pieces are key.

So when people say they want us to go, I have State board members who ride in the car with me and are like, Sandy, why aren't we doing anything? It has to be done well enough that it is going to be a successful demonstration project. There is so much that is going to come before that I don't even understand it. People like Julie understand it much better.

I think it is important that we make sure it is done well and done right and it absolutely gets to the heart of what our tribes really want. So there is going to be a lot of local-ness to it as well. I just wanted to say that.

Senator MURKOWSKI. That is good advice. I think there is a desire to make it happen, but we also want to make it happen right. It should not be viewed as, well, that was a nice social experiment.

Ms. KOWALSKI. Right.

Senator MURKOWSKI. This is about kids, children, and their education. So keeping that always top of mind, and ensuring that while we want to move with efficiency, we do want to make sure we have it right. Thank you for that guidance.

Julie?

Ms. KITKA. Thank you so much for your time and attention. I will leave one mental image for you, when you think about this tribal compacting. We need partners on the Federal side to go along with us. We are going to need additional resources in incorporating indigenous knowledge into the curriculum.

I will give you an example. Think of the map of Alaska that we all know, and the map of the United States where Alaska is in a little box. Think how difficult it is to try to convince other Americans how big Alaska is and how important it is, and that we are one-fifth the size of the United States.

Just because the educational system and the culture have put us in a little box, that is what we are going to be trying to overcome in this whole system. In order for this compact and our tribes to be successful, they need additional resources and incentives on the Federal level to support them as they move along, and support the teachers and put resources in some of the other innovations, so everybody is not saying, well, you are just taking money away from me, and you are doing this. It all needs to be forward-looking and supportive.

I offer you that map example as what we are trying to overcome with doing this.

Senator MURKOWSKI. And it is a good reminder, and well said.

As we are focused on how we can do right by Alaska Native children here in this State, I am reminded as someone who has been on the Indian Affairs Committee since I came to the United States Senate, I am reminded that the Federal Government really has not done right by Native children across the Country. We see that in many of the assessments that we see about these gaps in learning.

Sandy, you mentioned No Child Left Behind. While we didn't like NCLB, it really did manage to shine a very directed target on who we were failing. We were failing, we were failing, Native children. In fairness, within that system, within the BIE system, in my view we are still failing. Perhaps it is because we have not been able to get out of the format, the structure that has been in place.

There is an effort to say, well, we just need to put more money towards it. But if the system is broken, if the system is not workable, putting more money towards a broken system isn't going to change it.

So I listened to the level of optimism and the willingness to really bring about systemic change. I think that perhaps as we have done with compacting for health care and demonstrating to the rest of the Country how we can do it differently in Alaska and provide first level quality of care in a place where it is really hard to do, that perhaps we can be the model for how we educate our indigenous populations, and Alaska can once again lead. Because right now, we are doing a disservice to Native children.

So Julie, I hear what you are saying about the resources. I am not naïve to know that there are fights that go on about the alloca-

tion of monies. It happens to be within my Appropriations Subcommittee. So I know very, very well.

But this should not be viewed as a threat to others' budgets. Hopefully, we can shape this so that it is viewed as, there is a new approach to finding solutions to what has been a failed system for our Native children.

We have some work to do. You have given us some important suggestions. Know that this hearing record is going to be kept open for two weeks. So you may see Committee members that will be submitting follow-up questions for the record. We would ask that you continue with providing your insights there. Again, if there is anything you might wish to supplement for the record, know that we welcome that as well.

These are important, important conversations. I am pleased to have been able to bring the conversation back to Alaska. We want to thank everybody who has been involved in organizing this field hearing. Thanks to the APU staff. I want to thank my staff, who have been very helpful and to the Committee staff as well.

A recording of this hearing is going to be posted on the Committee's website, so that is out there. For those who have participated virtually, we thank you for that. For those who have traveled to get here, we wish you safe travels back home.

With that, the meeting stands adjourned. Thank you, everyone.
[Whereupon, at 4:10 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Chair Schatz, Vice Chair Murkowski, distinguished Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on the effort in Alaska to establish State-Tribal Education Compact Schools (STECs). The U.S. Department of Education (Department) applauds Governor Dunleavy, Commissioner Johnson, and Julie Kitka, President of the Alaska Federation of Natives, for their continued leadership to establish a framework for the first STEC to open in Alaska. As this initiative moves forward toward a pilot stage, the Department stands ready to provide support and technical assistance to help ensure that Tribal sovereignty and self-determination, paired with community ownership, are paramount in this effort, and that the establishment of STECs transform educational opportunities and outcomes for Alaska Native students across the state—from cities to regional hubs and the most rural and remote villages. Your collective commitment to high-quality, transformative education will also benefit non-Native students and improve outcomes for all.

As it relates to Federal funding, future STECs will be eligible to receive formula grants as a local educational agency (LEA) provided they meet the definition of an LEA in section 8101(30) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended (ESEA). Essentially, STECs must be a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within Alaska for administrative control or direction, or to perform a service function for, public elementary or secondary schools. The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) is responsible for determining whether STECs meet this definition, not the Department, although we are able to assist with technical legal questions regarding the statutory definition. If STECs are LEAs and therefore receive formula funds, they would carry out educational programs consistent with the statutory and regulatory requirements of all Alaska LEAs. For discretionary grant funding, the authorizing statute and implementing regulations would dictate STECs eligibility. For instance, under the Alaska Native Education (ANE) program, eligibility criteria allow for Alaska Native Organizations (ANOs) to compete for discretionary grant funding, either independently or in partnership with an LEA.

Lessons from the Alaska Native Organizations (ANOs) currently implementing new ANE projects funded through the American Rescue Plan (ARP) should also be central to the effort to establish STECs. The historical increase in ANE funding under the ARP in 2021 allowed ANOs to serve more Alaska Native students and communities. For example, as a result of ARP investments, Alaska Native students and communities are now benefitting from new high-quality early learning and enrichment programs. STECs have the potential to develop innovative and promising pathways for student success by building upon existing strategies from ANE programs while addressing community challenges with solutions that strengthen Tribal self-determination.

The Department is a steadfast ally and advocate for Alaska Natives, Native Americans, and Native Education. The Biden-Harris Administration respects and values the nation-to-nation relationship that the federal government shares with Tribes, and we take our trust responsibilities—including those in education—seriously. We applaud Alaska Native leaders and educators for designing innovative solutions rooted in Alaska Native values and cultures to strengthen education through STECs, working in partnership with your communities and the state. The Department seeks to improve educational opportunities and outcomes, from cradle to career, for all students. For Alaska, we recognize that locally driven solutions can be the most sustainable and transformative for student outcomes. Through STECs, Alaska Native students will have opportunities to: honor their cultures through incorporating Indigenous knowledge into educational programs; learn and speak their languages; engage with Alaska Native teachers, leaders and mentors; and receive an excellent education that prepares them for college, competitive careers, and contributing to their communities.

Please do not hesitate to call on the Department for assistance with the STEC initiative and thank you for bringing attention to this historic opportunity to transform Alaska Native education. The Department learns every day from Native students and leaders how important community is for engaging in traditional cultural practices and fostering resilience in Alaska Native youth, leading to improved outcomes for students and communities.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE COOK INLET TRIBAL COUNCIL (CITC)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide Cook Inlet Tribal Council's (CITC) testimony about transformative and innovative strategies for better educational outcomes for Alaska Native students. My name is Gloria O'Neill, and I serve as the CEO/President of CITC where we provide social services to the 40,000 Alaska Natives in the Anchorage area. This hearing is important because it allows us to share our youths' stories of successful educational achievement and the innovative approaches we use to educate our youth for today's (and tomorrow's) world.

Research and experience across the Indian country has demonstrated that cooperation among tribes, tribal organizations as well as state and federal school systems and integration of community-specific culture and language programs into school curriculum is essential to the educational success of Native students. To accomplish this, CITC emphasizes the need for Native communities to have ownership of and responsibility for the education of their youth. While working in collaboration with regional, state, and federal entities, Native communities have the knowledge to effectively lead the development of innovative and culturally-informed school curricula that strengthen the educational outcomes of our youth.

CITC dedicates significant investment in improving outcomes for Alaska Native Youth and carries this forward in our organization's vision: *"We envision a future in which all Our People—especially Our Youth, the stewards of our future—have access to vast opportunities, and have the ability, confidence, and courage to advance and achieve their goals, infused with an unshakeable belief in our endless potential."* At CITC, educating our youth is an essential component of our commitment to our mission, which is to connect Alaska Native/American Indian people to their endless potential. We accomplish this through an innovative approach to youth education, such as infusing cultural traditions into our FabLab Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programming, developing a digital badging system, and by integrating after-school programs with classroom work in a cohesive wrap-around approach that address the whole student and family.

In 2013 CITC, in partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), installed a Fabrication Lab (Fab Lab) to support STEM-related education for Alaska Native students in Anchorage, Alaska. The Fab Lab houses 21st century technology, such as 3D printers, a laser cutter, sand blaster, vinyl cutter, molding equipment, and ShopBots that require proficiency with design software and 21st century STEM skills to bring ideas into the physical world. Over the past nine years, CITC has had great success using the Fab Lab to develop programs of cultural relevance to Alaska Native students. These programs establish high cultural relevance and low barriers to STEM participation through project-based learning activities that incorporate contemporary youth culture as well as traditional Alaska Native culture and STEM skills, because using the fab lab equipment requires the students to understand and use computer programming. Projects include: Dog Sled building; Eskimo Yo-Yo making; skateboard design, and application of traditional cultural motifs to T-shirts.

Alaska Native students who participate in CITC Youth Empowerment Services (YES) programs graduate from high school at significantly higher rates than their nonparticipating Alaska Native peers. CITC has committed to a fabrication-based approach to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) intervention due to our initial successes. Including the Fab Lab as a core element of program design has enabled CITC to engage elementary and middle school youth in hands-on project-based STEM learning, using state-of-the-art 21st Century technology, as well as supporting high school students' progress through the Anchorage School District (ASD) math and science curriculum. Currently, CITC operates five separate programs that incorporate Fab Lab activities to supplement ASD STEM instruction for Alaska Native students.

In 2017, the Fab Lab logged 2,954 student contact hours, and CITC successfully adapted the Fab Lab service model for in-school use in a remote Alaska setting, installing a full Fab Lab at the high school in Utqiagvik, Alaska, North America's northernmost community. Additionally, CITC also piloted STEM Learning Labs, of-

fering year-round, fabrication-based STEM enrichment programs at multiple Anchorage schools and community venues used by Alaska Native families.

In 2020, the CITC Board of Directors charged the organization to “*Re-define education, based in culture and values, and co-designed with the community, with an openness to radical new learning models that leave four walls behind.*” Over thirty-five years of commitment to learning and education prepared CITC to move forward with its radical new learning models. We identified that “education is not only a path to self-determination,” but actually the path to self-determination. CITC’s long-standing work to combine the benefits of traditional knowledge and innovation, create new career opportunities, and partner with national and local leaders has shown that there are ways to learn and grow outside conventional education pathways.

With funding from the Department of Education Indian Demonstration Program and Alaska Native Education Program, in 2021 CITC implemented Fab Lab/STEM focused Innovation Stations that extend the original Fab Lab model to sites across Alaska by installing Fab Lab equipment packages scaled for in-school use in 17 urban, rural, and remote schools. Innovation Station addresses the persistent educational challenge presented by disparities between the academic preparation of Alaska Native/American Indian students and the rest of the population by (1) strengthening the integration of Native cultures and languages into school climate and classrooms and (2) promoting 21st century technology for Native education. Innovation Station’s focus on STEM instruction, a key project component, builds on research findings confirming that academic achievement gaps persist in science achievement among ethnically diverse students; gaps can be observed in science course enrollments leading to careers in STEM fields and the effective promotion of racial and ethnic minority students’ educational achievement in STEM is of critical importance.

Innovation Stations also build on high quality research suggesting that culturally relevant STEM curricula can improve academic outcomes for Alaska Native/American Indian students. The table below indicates key programs that demonstrated positive results in evaluations.

Table 4: CITC YES: Culturally Based Education Programs

Title	Fab Lab	Schoolyard	Transitions	Journey Ahead	Building Our Future
Age	K–12	7–12	5–6 & 8–9	Middle school	High school
Type	field trip; after-school; day camp, mobile	Afterschool	In-school	In-school and after-school interventions	School within a school
Place	CITC; schools; community	CITC	Title 1 schools	Title 1 schools	High diversity public schools
Goals	Innovation through 21st Century STEM + traditional Alaska Native culture & values	School engagement; graduation/GED attainment; career STEM skills	Support STEM skillbuilding through culturally based science	Support STEM, culture, community youth projects, academic skills and S.E.L.	Increase number of Alaska Native students in higher level STEM through project based learning.

What makes Innovation Station different from former CITC Fab Lab programs is that the program intervenes with students sooner, intervenes in-school, engages the full spectrum of elementary students, and provides professional development for classroom teachers. Innovation Station will leverage the considerable expertise of CITC’s YES department s to (1) adapt for in-school use existing programs that provide culturally relevant out-of-school fabrication-based STEM-enrichment to high need students, who are disproportionately Alaska Native, and (2) scale up existing programming to create a network of urban, rural, and remote Alaskan elementary schools with resources to implement Innovation Station instructional units.

Annual professional development opportunities are a key project component, building on findings by school administrators that confirm improved academic outcomes after instituting a research-based, culturally relevant professional develop-

ment program for teachers serving Native American students. Most teachers report personal background, informal study, or living in the community as the source of cultural knowledge relevant to Alaska Native/American Indian students rather than formal instruction; 71 percent of all Alaska Native/American Indian 4th graders, and 75 percent of all 8th graders had teachers who reported attending no professional or community-based formal programs for assistance in developing culturally specific instructional practices to teach Alaska Native/American Indian students in the past two years. Only 11 percent of fourthgraders in low density public schools, and 26 percent in high density public schools, had teachers who reported attending 1 or 2 professional or community-based programs for help developing such practices in the past 2 years.

Teachers from partner schools will be trained to use Innovation Station equipment, and to implement CITC field-tested activities through annual in-service events. In addition, CITC will train teachers in the process of using 21st century STEM skills to bridge maker culture, youth culture, and Alaska Native culture, so that teachers are able to adapt materials to reflect their own school's distinct linguistic and cultural heritages and specific curricular needs.

While performance outcomes are still being evaluated, the ways rural schools in Alaska Native communities are using Innovation Stations are exceptionally creative and impactful. For example, the Tatitlek Community School is using their Fab Lab equipment to emphasize the preservation of the Sugt'stun language. Teachers have used Fab Lab equipment to label items in the school with Sugt'stun words; posted signs with numbers, shapes and colors in the Tatitlek Fab Lab; and, in partnerships with CITC Fab Lab staff, build wooden boxes engraved with Sugt'stun words and names, thus fully integrating language into the school environment. Similar language and culture activities are being explored and celebrated with Fab Lab equipment and tools in the communities of Nanwalek and Tyonek.

CITC continues to invest in innovation and access to technology to prepare students to move to the next level. Using this approach, in FY21, CITC served 1,029 students through aligned educational services and was able to maintain its 97 percent graduation rate (in contrast to 55 percent for AIAN district-wide) for the seniors participating in CITC classes. CITC's youth education program offered over 10,000 hours of student tutoring in CITC after-school programs and its Fab Lab and new micro labs supported students for another 10,480 hours. It is not enough to simply change the current education systems—we must also offer a variety of learning models that serve to nurture and identify the potential in each of our Alaska Native students.

Radical Learning Elements

To that end, CITC has also implemented a micro-credentialing program that promotes job skills development, professional development skills, and Fab Lab safety training for all ages of youth. Digital badging is recognized across the world as a way to demonstrate accomplished skills, comprehension and expertise through quick, deep-dive online tutorials and the ability to articulate the application of the topic(s). Unlike formal education credentialing, badges provide immediate feedback that a student has made the effort to grow their knowledge base and knows how to apply it. For CITC, the ability to provide badging and micro-credentialing creates access to educational opportunities our participants would not be able to receive in a college or job training school setting.

Holistic Wrap-Around Services

CITC's full suite of services, which includes employment and training, child welfare, recovery support as well as education has created an environment in which the student's whole self and whole family can be engaged in and part of the solution. Using the Five Factors assessment tool, our participants define for themselves what success is, and the various departments within CITC support each and the student/family to remove barriers and achieve success on their terms. CITC's innovative Parents as Teachers tutoring program brought parents into the school, and other programs within CITC support and train both students and their families to achieve success, while holding close the relationships and cultural strengths of Alaska Native values that lead to self-determination.

Conclusion

This combination of dedication to innovation and the transformative power of education integrated with culture and values in the three domains of classroom/after school, Fab Lab and digital badging have charted a path to preparing our students for the jobs of the future. We look forward to working with you to make transformation a reality.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MORRIE LEMEN JR., EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, IÑUPIAT
COMMUNITY OF THE ARCTIC SLOPE

The Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope (ICAS) supports efforts to develop a plan for tribal compacting. ICAS has the capacity to plan, implement and manage a Pre-k–12 tribal education school and educational system to provide tribal schools in all 8 village communities of the North Slope of Alaska. ICAS an IRA Tribe, has the governmental authority to establish and operate a fully functioning Tribal school system. However, ICAS does not have a tax base to support a robust education system. Given that the United States Government and the State of Alaska have the revenue generating sources to support tribes to provide education services to youth in their communities, and ICAS has the ability to provide high quality education in a manner that reflects the unique Iñupiat culture and native ways of learning and knowing, we believe that a compacting agreement is beneficial to all parties.

Throughout rural areas of Alaska, which are predominantly Alaska Native communities, our indigenous youth are performing well below state and national testing averages as evidenced by the required state test (PEAKS) for English/Language arts, and math. The chart 1 below shows the decline in academic performance (the percentages are far below proficiency measures) by North Slope students over the past 5 years and graduation rates between 22–32 percent. The evidence clearly shows that our native youth are not being adequately served by the current public education system. The federally recognized tribes have a tribal constitutional responsibility and right to develop an education system that will support a high-quality education for its citizens.

Chart 1—Total=Total student population; AN=Alaska Native

Far below Proficient % North Slope Borough SD	English Language Arts (ELA) Total	English Language Arts (ELA) AN	Math Total	Math AN	Graduation Rate	Spending Per Student
2020/2021	70.39	76.73	56.52	62.49	73.27	\$39,680.00-\$5,000
2018/2019	64.1	72.47	39.81	45.52	76.99	
2017/2018	61.92	68.94	35.47	40.08	68.15	
2016/2017	55.71	63.75	28.4	32.84	78.38	

Defining what tribal education is, starts with stating what it is not. Tribal education is not:

1. Adopting the current traditional system and delivering educational services with tribal educators.
2. Adding Native culture to the current curriculum
3. Putting up indigenous pictures, symbols and words in the classroom and calling it tribal education.
4. Teaching the native language and culture as a second language and sub-culture of the current American system.

Creating an effective tribal education system is:

1. Building a tribal system from the foundation up utilizing the tribal language, culture and values.
2. Creating teacher certification standards and requirements based in the native language, culture, values and education practices of the local tribe.
3. Preparing youth to effectively work in both the broader American society and the local indigenous communities.
4. Building infrastructures and places to learn that align with an indigenous education model that has been time-tested for thousands of years.
5. Schools that have teachers from their local communities who are grounded in the local indigenous language, culture and practices.
6. Compacting, not contracting between federal and state/local governments that respects the sovereignty of the tribes and focuses on outcomes rather than process and operational mandates.

Benefits of Tribal Education

For thousands of years, Alaska natives were educating their youth to successfully live in one of the harshest environments on our planet. Through native education,

tribes successfully established communities that were healthy and self-sufficient. The community focused practices ensured that all members of the community had food security, housing and organizational structure that supported healthy communities and lifestyles. Prior to colonization, and assimilation practices, there were not excessive dysfunctions and social ills. We now have the opportunity to return to our traditional ways that were successful and through education, guide our youth to become healthy, productive adults, able to determine their life trail that supports their families and communities.

ICAS asks the United States to honor the various treaties and obligations to support tribal sovereignty in establishing and managing robust tribal education systems by providing funding and opening the door for Alaska Tribes to develop their own sources of perpetual revenue. Alaska tribes are not able to fully exercise their sovereign rights if other governmental entities are their only source of revenue. ICAS supports the concept of tribal compacting and can continue to do so to the extent that the tribe has the freedom to exercise its sovereign rights to the fullest extent.

