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## **Governance Structures in the Anchorage School District, November 2011**

Governance in school districts is complex. There are multiple layers of decision-making, from within-school policies to federal rules and regulations. In this brief we address district- and state-level governance structures and responsibilities, addressing both program and budget decisions.

### **Program Governance**

#### *District Governance*

The school governance structure in Alaska gives responsibility for the daily operation of schools to local school boards, which make policy within the confines of general state laws and regulations. Anchorage's school board has seven members, elected to three-year terms and limited to serving three terms. The board sets overall policy for the school district. It determines, for example, the district's high-school graduation requirements and sets performance goals for student academic achievement, graduation rates, and other areas. The board does not implement programs to achieve those goals. The district superintendent puts board policies into effect.

The school board hires the superintendent, who has the authority and responsibility to adopt administrative rules and regulations supporting board policy; develop the education plan for the district; and oversee all curricular, staffing, and business decisions. The superintendent also makes final decisions about hiring school principals; principals then hire teachers for their schools. The district is organized into six major divisions, all reporting directly to the superintendent. A district organizational chart is at <http://www.asdk12.org/aboutasd/OrgChart/>.

Decisions about what to teach and to whom are made at both the district and school levels. The district sets content and performance standards, within the constraints of state content and performance standards. The district also determines (with a few exceptions) the curricula and texts schools use. Classroom teachers decide how best to teach the curriculum, with support from their colleagues, principal, and district curriculum specialists. Teachers and administrators at the school level also decide, with input from parents, about placing students in specific courses.

Besides formal governance structures, the district has a number of advisory committees and councils that allow parents, students, and community members to provide input for district decision-making. Some of those are the English Language Learners Advisory Committee, the Capital Improvement Advisory Committee, the Controversial Concerns Committee, the Multicultural Education Concerns Advisory Committee, the Native Advisory Committee, and the Special Education Advisory Council.

The district also works with eight bargaining units, including the Anchorage Education Association, representing certificated teachers and other professional educators; the association not only bargains for contracts but also advocates and lobbies for education issues at the district and state levels and provides various services to its members. Another bargaining unit is the Teamsters Union, which represents food service and maintenance workers and bus drivers.

#### *State Governance*

The Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development sets regulations and provides broad guidance to school districts by setting state curriculum content and performance standards and grade level expectations, as well as overseeing state standardized assessments of student learning. The state

board also sets minimum high-school graduation requirements, although districts can require more, as the Anchorage district does. The state board does not dictate specific curricula to be used in schools; such decisions are left to districts. State board members are appointed by the governor for five-year terms; they can be reappointed.

The chief state school officer is the Commissioner of Education, appointed by the state board, subject to approval by the governor—and as a department executive officer, the commissioner serves at the pleasure of the governor. The commissioner’s job is implementing policies set by the state board, as well as heading the state Department of Education and Early Development—which is responsible for broad supervision of public education at the elementary, secondary, and adult levels, including career and vocational education; for support services for districts; and for providing some other education services. It also administers state libraries and museums.

The Alaska constitution puts responsibility for public education in the hands of the state legislature, stating, “The legislature shall by general law establish and maintain a system of public schools open to all children of the state, and may provide for other public educational institutions” (Article VII, Section I). This does not mean, however, that the legislature exercises direct control over schools or the state Department of Education and Early Development. Rather, the legislature exercises control primarily through setting broad statutes, providing support for program changes, and determining the level of state aid to schools (see below). An example of how the legislature encourages program change is a 2011 act that established a joint legislative task force on theme-based education.

### **Fiscal Control**

The Anchorage School District operates under three levels of fiscal authority—state, municipal, and school board. The superintendent initially drafts the district budget, based on enrollment projections and a best estimate of legislature funding for the next year. Because the timing of the budget preparation cycle and the state budget cycle differ, the district has to adjust its approved budget in late spring, once the legislature and the governor finalize the state budget. Anchorage’s school board modifies the budget or approves it as proposed, then transmits it to the Anchorage Assembly for approval, along with recommendations from the municipal Budget Advisory Commission. The assembly and the mayor have final approval of the upper limit of the budget and local taxes.

The state legislature decides the level of state aid to districts, setting a base student allocation—funding per pupil. But operating costs vary considerably among districts. Those differing costs are rolled into a formula that also takes into account average daily membership, numbers of special-needs students, local contributions (in districts like Anchorage that have tax bases), and other factors to create adjusted average daily membership figures—which are in turn multiplied by the base student allocation to determine state aid to individual districts. The legislature and governor complete the annual state budget process in late spring. Once the level of state funding for schools is determined, the district must revise its budget as necessary—and the Anchorage Assembly and the mayor must once again approve any increases in the upper limit of the budget and local taxes.

The state also requires a local contribution to school funding from local property taxes, in districts with tax bases. But there is a cap on the amount local communities can contribute to district budgets, which is equivalent to the required local contribution plus 23% of the basic need calculation. The Anchorage Assembly determines the level of local contribution within these limits, and the mayor can invoke veto power and reduce the school district’s budget and local source appropriation. At present, the school district receives a local contribution lower than the tax cap would allow.