Testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Field Hearing

"BEST – Building Educational Success Together"

By Peggy Cowan, Superintendent
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Introduction:

Thank you for inviting me to this hearing. I am honored to be here today and to represent the North Slope Borough School District (NSBSD). I am Peggy Cowan superintendent of schools. The North Slope Borough School District is a district of eight villages and eleven schools across the arctic slope of Alaska. The district is the largest geographical school district. There are only eleven states that are larger than the 89,000 square miles of our district. In a way we reflect the great state that we are part of, with vast distances and few people, our student population is 1,850 preschool through twelfth grade, primarily Iñupiaq.

I am here today to share with you our long term, systemic change effort to transform the learning of the students through changing the curriculum to acknowledge the geographical and cultural context within which they live.

Background:

To understand our curriculum work, you need to understand our context. Our district exists because the Borough was founded forty years ago so that the people

of the arctic slope of Alaska could direct their own destiny. The first Mayor of the North Slope Borough, Eben Hopson, stated at that time,

> "Among our entire international Iñupiat community, we of the North Slope are the only Iñupiaq who have achieved true self-government with the formation of the North Slope Borough. We have the greatest opportunity to direct our own destiny as we have for the past millennia. Possibly the greatest significance of home rule is that it enables us to regain control of the education of our children."

This vision of home rule and control of education is the foundation of the current work in developing a culturally relevant curriculum. The home rule is actualized today through the North Slope Borough School District Board of Education. The curriculum revision is part of the Board developed and adopted strategic plan for the district and enables the district to meet the mission.

Curriculum Alignment Integration and Mapping in the NSBSD:

There are three elements of our curriculum work, the locally developed Iñupiaq Learning Framework, the Alaska State Standards in Content Areas and the Understanding by Design Curriculum Framework. The curriculum process that the district is following is called Understanding by Design (UbD), a research-based best practice in curriculum and instructional design. In UbD the educational aim is student understanding—the ability to make meaning of and transfer important learning. Understanding by Design is a mission driven curriculum process. The teachers and staff of the district are accountable to the same national requirements of Adequate Yearly Progress and the state requirements of Standards-Based Assessments, but are accountable to the NSBSD Board of Education for the mission, which is,

“Learning in our schools is rooted in the values, history and language of the Iñupiat. Students develop the academic and cultural skills and knowledge to be:

- Critical and creative thinkers able to adapt in a changing environment and world;
- Active, responsible, contributing members of their communities; and
- Confident, healthy young adults, able to envision, plan and take control of their destiny.”

The curriculum work actualizes that mission and the Board’s strategic plan first goal, “All students will reach their intellectual potential and achieve academic success through integrating Iñupiaq knowledge systems into core content areas.”

The knowledge and skills of the Iñupiaq knowledge systems are articulated through the Iñupiaq Learning Framework, the foundation of the curriculum. The Iñupiaq Learning Framework is the product of a multiple year process of asking the community two questions:

> “What knowledge needs to be acquired to truly live as a healthy Iñupiaq? What does a well-educated, well grounded eighteen year old Iñupiaq look like?”

Jana Harcharek, Director of Iñupiaq Education visited every community in the North Slope Borough and brought the community feedback on these questions to a group of community members from across the slope called Iḷiññiaġnikun Apquisiuqtit, “People who break trail for learning.”. The articulation of what the communities envisioned is the Inupiaq Learning Framework represented by Mapkuqput Iñuuniaġniġmi – Our Blanket of Life. The blanket represents our learning framework, it is bond together by spirituality and language. The Iñupiaq Learning Framework is divided into four realms of the Iñupiaq world, the Environmental

Realm, Community Realm, Historical Realm and Individual Realm. Within each of the realms are Core Themes. For example, within the Historical Realm are Core Themes of Unipkaat, Quliaqtuat, Uqalukutuat (which are legend/old stories, one's life experience and true story), North Slope History and Modern History.

The state's content area standards determine what to teach in the academic areas and district developed performance expectations for each of the Iñupiaq Learning Framework Core Themes articulate the understandings for the local culture and history. Both the entire curriculum and classroom instruction are developed collaboratively by school district staff combining these two elements into units that are rigorous academically and culturally relevant. Examples of these lessons are substituting stories of local Elders for lessons in language arts textbooks; middle school science labs on density where students measure the difference when putting whale meat or whale fat in a beaker of water; an algebra one lesson using a formula for a body going up and down on a blanket toss; or an algebra two lesson using the arched trajectory of a harpoon.

Just as the root of the work is in the community's vision for education, we return to the communities for feedback. Each content area curriculum committee will bring their work to a Steering Committee of local people to review and provide feedback to let the staff know if we are meeting their vision.

The district is starting year three of a five-year plan to transform the curriculum. The district must stay the course and continue the process to provide our students with a foundation that fits both the Iñupiaq and Western worlds.

Thank you. Quyanak.