

Great Alaska Schools

2014 Candidate Questionnaire

20 Questions on Alaska Education Policy

Candidate Name: Geran Tarr		Legislative District: 19
Mailing Address: PO Box 13141		
City: Anchorage	Zip: 01810	Phone: 907-229-7851
E-Mail: tarrforstatehouse@gmail.com		Cell:
Prior Elected Office, If Any: State House 2013-14, District 17 (19 in 2014)		

High Standards For Quality Alaska Schools

Background: Great Alaska Schools is committed to the achievement of high quality public education for every Alaska child. To reach this goal we believe Alaska must focus on specific outcomes, and set high standards for schools and teachers. One such set of standards has been established by the Anchorage United for Youth partners with their "90 by 2020" program. They specifically advocate tracking, among other things, whether Alaska children are ready for kindergarten, 3rd grade reading proficiency, 8th grade math proficiency, and high school graduation readiness as measures of educational success. More background information on their efforts can be found at: www.90by2020.org.

1. Do you support efforts like the 90 by 2020 partnership to establish education standards? Yes No
Please Explain

I support a strong, well supported public education system. Our public education system is the great equalizer of opportunity and how Alaskans of all backgrounds have access to success and opportunities for a bright future. Having an educated workforce is absolutely necessary to have a thriving state and economy. I support all efforts to increase student achievement.

2. Are there other measures that you would consider better indicators of school quality/performance? If so, what are they?

I have more than 15 years of teaching experience, at every level, from kindergarten to college. I've worked with thousands of students over the years and know how important it is that we have metrics that demonstrate how students of all abilities are performing. I've worked with many ESL students, for example, that were proficient in the material, but due to language barriers did not perform well on tests. I've also worked with students who experience severe test anxiety. We worked together to accommodate their specific needs while also teaching them the skills necessary to manage their stress as they progress throughout their academic and professional careers. Without these accommodations these students might have otherwise perform poorly. Each student is an individual and we need to have the resources to find ways to create paths for

Assessment of Alaska's Public School System

3. Please describe what you consider to be one or two strengths (or successes) of Alaska's public school system statewide.

Amazing students and dedicated teachers and parents. It's been my experience that the people make all the difference.

4. Please describe what you consider to be one or two weaknesses (or failures) of Alaska's public school system statewide.

Lack of adequate and timely support and class sizes (in some cases) that are too big.

5. Please describe what you consider to be one or two strengths (or successes) of your local school district.

Same as above - Amazing students and dedicated teachers and parents. It's been my experience that the people make all the difference.

6. Please describe what you consider to be one or two weaknesses (or failures) of your local school district.

Same as above- Lack of adequate and timely support and class sizes (in some cases) that are too big.

7. Please describe one or two actions that the Legislature might take that would address a weakness you identified above.

Forward funding of education for an amount necessary to restore essential positions previously cut, maintain current staffing, and where necessary, additional funding to reduce class sizes.

8. Do you believe decisions regarding education spending priorities (e.g., technology, school safety, Pre-K, classroom size, etc.) rest primarily with the Legislature or locally elected School Boards? Please Explain

See attached page.

9. Which state expenditures (e.g., transportation infrastructure, energy infrastructure, public safety, gasoline, etc.) do you consider a higher priority than education funding?

Public safety is something that cannot be compromised and is a basic need. Too many of our students are living in unsafe homes where they experience violence and abuse. This must change and it must be at the top of our list of priorities. A student's ability to succeed is severely limited if they are experiencing violence or abuse. I weight the value and importance of education funding to be on par with public safety.

Public Funds for Private Schools

10. Do you support placing a constitutional amendment on the ballot that would allow public funds to be used to fund students' education at private and religious schools? Yes No
(If yes, skip to Question 12)

11. If no, are there any restrictions or requirements that could be put into place that would change your position on Question 10? Yes No
Please Explain

We have not seen the true potential of our public education system because of inadequate funding for many years, the most recent of which has created a crisis situation in some districts.

Education Funding

Background: Between FY2011 and FY2014, the Base Student Allocation (BSA) was unchanged by the Legislature. Over that period, as a result of this inaction in the face of ordinary inflation, the BSA lost over \$400 in purchasing power. During the 2014 Legislative Session, Great Alaska Schools advocated for an increase in the BSA of \$400 in FY2015 and, as a temporary alternative to inflation-proofing the formula, scheduled increases of \$125 in the following two years.

The 2014 Legislature voted to increase the BSA by \$150 in FY15, \$50 in FY16, and \$50 in FY17. In addition, they appropriated funding "outside" the BSA (using the same distribution formula as the BSA) in an amount equivalent to a BSA increase of \$72 for FY15.

Assuming no funds are appropriated outside the BSA in FY16, the BSA would need to be increased by \$425 that year to return to the purchasing power of FY11.

12. Do you support the actions of the 2014 Legislature regarding the level of education funding provided? Yes No

13. Would you support an increase in the BSA of \$425 in FY16? Yes No
(if yes, skip to Question 16)

14. Would you support any increase in the BSA in FY16? Yes No
(if no, skip to Question 16)

15. What is the maximum increase in the BSA in FY16 that you would support?

16. Would you introduce a bill to effectuate your desired BSA increase? Yes No

17. If a majority of your caucus did not support the level of BSA increase you supported in your response to Questions 13 – 15, would you still vote to approve such a BSA increase (regardless of the consequences within your caucus)? Yes No

18. Do you support inflation-proofing the BSA amount going forward to provide durability and stable purchasing power for Alaska's education funding? (If yes, then skip to Question 20) Yes No

19. Do you support continuing the practice of scheduled increases to the BSA going forward at least three years to provide predictability to education funding? Yes No

20. Would you like to explain any of your answers to Questions 12 – 19? (Please indicate which answer you are explaining.)

To expand on question 16: I co-sponsored a bill to increase the BSA, offered and supported amendments to increase the BSA, helped organize rallies to show overwhelming support for an increase in the BSA.

To expand on question 17: The House Democratic Caucus does not bind a member to any vote. We are free to vote our conscience. In this case, I will always vote to give the necessary resources for our kids to succeed.

To expand on question 11: What is amazing is that through all of this there are results to celebrate, such as increased graduation rates and lower drop-out rates, even leading the nation in improvement in these areas. My first priority is to give the public education system the resources necessary to really demonstrate what can be accomplished, to allow our students to live up to their potential, and to provide a highly skilled workforce for a 21st century economy and the jobs of the future.

Please use the space below to expand on any answers for which you need additional space. (Please indicate which answer you are expanding on.)

I am a dedicated educator and I want best education for all of our students. I want Alaska to be known as a desirable place to live because of the amazing public education system and the many ways that our students are showing great success. I know from working with so many students over the years that we have the talent we need in these students to produce a thriving economy with people who care deeply about our community and our state. We are making gains and must not stop until we are confident that the right leaders are in place to know that education and our future will always be at the top of the priority list. I have a vision for Alaska with a thriving, diversified economy, where we lead the nation in innovation and support research and development from our universities and public-private partnerships. I want Alaska to be a place that people want to come to and stay, and where our families are healthy and our communities safe. A strong, well supported public education system is the foundation necessary to make that vision a reality.

Expanded answer to Question 8

I believe we have to work together as partners to ensure success for all of our students. We know, even in just the Anchorage School District, students and their families are very mobile and often are moving more than once in a school year. The area I represent is a moderate to low income area and many of my families are forced, because of economic circumstances, to move often. I am very aware of the pressure this puts on a family and the potential that instability has to negatively impact a student and their performance. I believe we are better served by working together to help these students and their families.

By working together we can respond to both state and local needs. In my tenure in the legislature, I have worked closely with ASD Superintendent Ed Graff, our School Board members, the principals and staff at all of my area schools, and parents and students to identify and understand needs and barriers to success and learn about accomplishments and areas that have improved.

With all of that said, I will say that local school boards and the members that have frequent interaction with the students and families provide valuable information for state level policy makers and we should listen and incorporate their ideas and suggestions into our work, whether funding or legislation.