

Great Alaska Schools

2014 Candidate Questionnaire

20 Questions on Alaska Education Policy

Candidate Name: BERTA GARDNER	Legislative District: SEN I
Mailing Address: 1405 MATTERHORN WAY	
City: ANCHORAGE, AK Zip: 99508	Phone: 907-223-9330
E-Mail: BERTA.GARDNER@GMAIL.COM	Cell:
Prior Elected Office, If Any: SEN H (RENAMED SEN I), 4 TERMS STATE HOUSE	

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

The 90 by 2020 is an Anchorage based effort to improve graduation rates by coordinating efforts of a variety of interest groups including local businesses, nonprofits, government with community and education leaders. The movement is focused on school readiness and on 8th grade math successes as an effort to assist students in graduation.

This is a common sense and data-driven approach which tries to merge local volunteers and interest groups with government effort. I watch with interest and appreciation.

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

The factors which contribute to high quality and high performance are not a mystery. They are: quality early education, recruitment, training and retention of highly effective teachers, policies and funding which support and enhance student learning, classroom innovation with high expectations, and access to the tools necessary to achieve them.

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.

It is my belief that schools are generally warm and welcoming places where students of all shapes, sizes, ethnic groups etc are safe and valued.

I love the fact that three Anchorage high schools are the three most diverse high schools in the nation.

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

We do not offer access for all children to a system of optional, high quality preschools.

Although Alaska has many wonderful teachers and administrators, our teacher selection, preparation and standards are not rigorous enough.

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

Anchorage Schools offer over 100 optional programs, and there are numerous educational approaches available to students. The district has worked hard to promote variety while retaining focus on the core mission of educating all comers.

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

The problems I see are basically the fallout from state funding amounts: class sizes are too large and support staff positions are cut, resulting in a loss of individualized services to students.

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

Early, reliable, adequate funding would allow districts to plan ahead and spend funds most effectively.

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

If funding were adequate and elected boards free to do their jobs, they could determine how best to manage technology, school safety, early learning classroom sizes etc. We have a legislative body hungry to micromanage schools.

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 the only one. Students who are not safe cannot learn, so a basic level of community and individual safety is necessary as a starting point.

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

To me this is a black and white issue. Public funds should be used for public schools where the accountability measures, requirements for spending, and welcome for all comers is a given.

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.)

I was unable to answer question 15. I like to say that I will support BSA at any level for which need can be demonstrated. Adequate funding for our schools is a primary obligation of government.

The BSA increase of \$404 is data I collected in a legislative research request which asked what BSA was needed to hold schools harmless for the years of flat funding. I filed SB147 which would set the \$404 increase into statute and put inflation-proofing into statute.

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

For 10 years I have joined my caucus (8 years with House Democrats and 2 years with Senate Democrats) which has championed early funding for schools, predictable funding for schools (inflation proofing in statute), and adequate funding for schools (BSA level in statute). We have also consistently argued for statewide access to voluntary quality early education, for school breakfasts for Title I schools, and for defined benefits for public employees (to allow districts to attract and retain talented, professional teachers).

It is frustrating to see political convictions trump data-driven decisions time and again.