



Alaska's Government School Failure: What will it take to fix them?

Description



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A story from Gov. Dunleavy's former Mat-Su Senate District.

A new student in my Wasilla, Alaska, Adult Basic Education (ABE) class recently expressed wonder in how much he had progressed in just a few days of math study here, and, further expressing himself told of the public high school he had attended previously in a small community in California. **Silverado High School** in Victorville, California, had initially been built to be a prison, he told the class, but the greater need for a high school re-purposed the nearly finished lockup. In the early 2000s this government school featured a watchtower, bars on the windows and doors, and a metal fence with razor wire spiraled around the top. Parents of high school students in that zip code dropped their kids off, and yellow buses cycled through transporting idealistic youth each day for matriculation.

In such a government school setting teachers may easily be mistaken for correctional officers.

Other members of my Wasilla class laughed and one expressed the opinion that his Alaska school was the same kind of place only not as obvious.

Imagine. This adult who had never finished high school in California said he was in Alaska to escape his past. He told the assembled class proudly that he didn't know a person in Alaska and his goal here was to overcome the drugs and criminal activities of his recent past. He recognizes his future depends on making decisions to assure positive consequences now that he knows what happens when bad choices cause negative consequences. He enthused to all present that my declaration—*that as his teacher my goal is to “see how fast I can get him out of my class”*—really appealed to him! **For the first time in this young man's life, he was motivated to gain education toward his GED and seek a meaningful career path.**

Instructional Note: Since 2014 the GED.com has been normed at 12th grade. Students can withdraw from Alaska public education and take the GED as early as 17 years old. Parents can go to the web page and download practice tests to begin preparation for taking the math, reading, writing, science and social studies tests.



Alaska's Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations

I attended eighth grade at the Yakutat FAA School. There were two Grade 1-8 schools in Yakutat then; the white school near the airport and the Native school in town. Our previous Lt. Governor, **Byron Mallott** was then manager of his family's general store in Yakutat, himself having attended Mt. Edgecumbe Boarding School in Sitka. (<http://www.mehs.us/>)

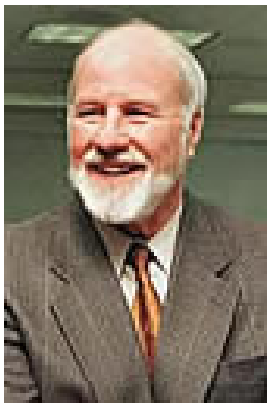
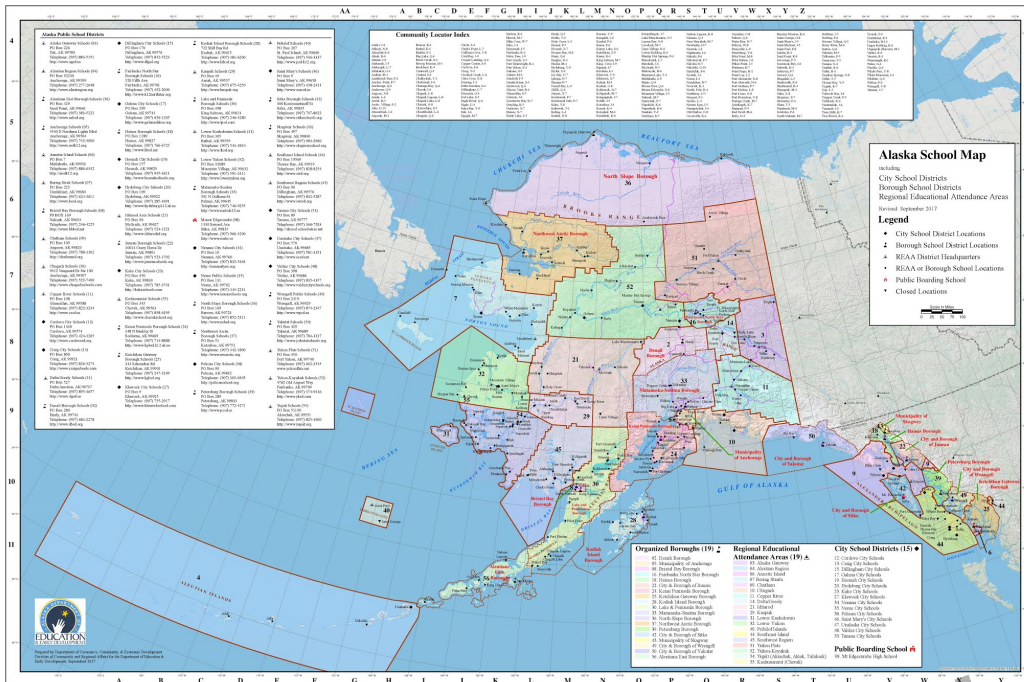
The year in Yakutat was the worst year of my educational career, with a couple of itinerant teachers generally terrorizing the students with their marital drama: she was big and mean and taught 1-3, and he was Harvey Milktoast frequently interrupted and pre-empted by his brash wife. My parents supplemented our school work with after-school studies because they realized this school was a travesty. It didn't help that I was an angry youth, and by the time my folks shipped me off to Washington's Okanagan Valley to live with a family there for my freshman and sophomore years of high school, my dad was fed up with my attitude and behavior. His last words were: “If you get in trouble, buster, you are on your own.”

This was possibly the biggest break of my life! I moved to a small community, lived with a family of apple farmers, and attended a high school where most of the kids were in training to follow the family business in agriculture. The school taught academic basics, Washington History, mechanical drafting, woodshop, and auto mechanics to boys like me. We went to church regularly, I played guitar in the youth group, and I experienced a normal family. Many Alaskans at that time who went away from their villages also learned the difference between living in rural Alaska poverty and experiencing American bounty Outside. Some never returned permanently and others returned to be leaders in their communities.



This dynamic of Alaska public education changed in the early 1970s. A group of Alaska Natives residing in Nunapitchuk—described then as an Eskimo village of 400 people located 410 miles west of Anchorage—decided that it was unfair to send rural students away to high school for nine months per year to get an education. Additionally, one **Anna Tobeluk** was to lend her name to a lawsuit against the State of Alaska because—as described by Andover, Massachusetts attorney **Stephen E. Cotton**—she was “an 18-year-old casualty of Alaska’s failure to provide rural high schools.”¹

With all due respect, I am a success of that system. So is former Lt. Gov. Mallott.



UAF Chancellor
Emeritus Marshall L. Lind
Gov. Hammond.

In 1975 Anna joined as a plaintiff in a lawsuit, *Tobeluk v. Lind* in what became the **Molly Hootch Case** for the Eskimo girl whose name headed the original 1972 list of plaintiffs suing the state for failing to provide rural community high schools. In 1976 **Marshall Lind**, Commissioner of Education under Governor **Jay Hammond**, signed a detailed consent decree providing for establishment of a high school program in 126 villages covered by the litigation, unless people in the village decided against a local program. **This was the easy political way out; Alaska was about to become wealthy beyond most people's imaginations from oil development, and throwing money at public education meant construction jobs building schools and communities keeping their young people at home in programs run mostly by Outside teachers on their Alaskan Adventures. With more than 50 Alaska school districts, each with an elected school board, this was a political win-win-win for**

I submit this political maneuver was a mistake. Instead of having the wisdom to examine best educational options for rural Alaska, our public education system was set for what today is a “money pit;” like a home that defies making enough repairs to be marketable, but is marginally inhabitable, while it keeps costing more and more to maintain as an abode.

The Goal of Education is Autonomy

Alaska's K12 Education Return on Investment						
State	State and Local K12 Spending per Capita (NEA)	Cost of Living Index (C2ER)	State and Local K12 Spending per Capita Adjusted for Cost of Living (NEA and C2ER)	Highest Cost Rank Adjusted for Cost of Living	2013 NAEP 4th Grade Reading Rank Low Income	2013 NAEP 4th Grade Reading Rank Upper/Middle Income
Wyoming	\$ 2,888	96.7	\$ 2,987	1	4th	34th
Alaska	\$ 3,404	131.4	\$ 2,591	2	50th	48th
Nebraska	\$ 1,943	89.5	\$ 2,171	3	24th	27th
New Mexico	\$ 1,949	92.3	\$ 2,112	4	49th	49th
New York	\$ 2,847	136.4	\$ 2,087	5	15th	14th
Ohio	\$ 1,913	92.5	\$ 2,068	6	30th	20th
New Jersey	\$ 2,656	130	\$ 2,043	7	13th	5th
Iowa	\$ 1,878	92.1	\$ 2,039	8	31th	30th
Texas	\$ 1,831	91.8	\$ 1,995	9	36th	29th
Illinois	\$ 1,906	95.6	\$ 1,994	10	43rd	26th
Arkansas	\$ 1,825	91.6	\$ 1,992	11	28th	32nd
Kansas	\$ 1,831	92	\$ 1,990	12	22nd	13th
Wisconsin	\$ 1,902	96.5	\$ 1,971	13	38th	31st
Vermont	\$ 2,349	120.5	\$ 1,949	14	19th	10th
Pennsylvania	\$ 1,937	100.7	\$ 1,924	15	14th	8th
Louisiana	\$ 1,787	95	\$ 1,881	16	42nd	44th
Michigan	\$ 1,773	94.8	\$ 1,870	17	37th	38th
Georgia	\$ 1,720	92.9	\$ 1,851	18	18th	9th
West Virginia	\$ 1,787	97.2	\$ 1,838	19	17th	50th
Minnesota	\$ 1,868	101.9	\$ 1,833	20	27th	19th
Virginia	\$ 1,763	96.2	\$ 1,833	21	26th	6th
North Dakota	\$ 1,804	99.9	\$ 1,806	22	11th	43rd
Connecticut	\$ 2,384	132.6	\$ 1,798	23	21st	3rd
Delaware	\$ 1,911	107.2	\$ 1,783	24	5th	16th
New Hampshire	\$ 2,100	120.7	\$ 1,740	25	2nd	12th
Maryland	\$ 2,064	119.9	\$ 1,721	26	3rd	2nd
Kentucky	\$ 1,546	90.1	\$ 1,716	27	9th	21st
Alabama	\$ 1,583	92.4	\$ 1,713	28	33rd	25th
South Carolina	\$ 1,622	95.6	\$ 1,697	29	44th	35th
Missouri	\$ 1,568	92.8	\$ 1,690	30	19th	24th
Maine	\$ 1,840	110.6	\$ 1,664	31	7th	28th
Montana	\$ 1,624	98.4	\$ 1,650	32	12th	34th
Indiana	\$ 1,494	90.6	\$ 1,649	33	6th	22nd
Rhode Island	\$ 2,049	125.7	\$ 1,630	34	35th	11th
Washington	\$ 1,672	102.6	\$ 1,630	35	25th	15th
Massachusetts	\$ 1,976	122.1	\$ 1,618	36	8th	1st
Mississippi	\$ 1,435	89.1	\$ 1,611	37	45th	39th
Colorado	\$ 1,600	99.5	\$ 1,608	38	20th	7th
Oklahoma	\$ 1,452	90.4	\$ 1,606	39	32nd	42nd
Utah	\$ 1,450	91.1	\$ 1,592	40	23th	36th
South Dakota	\$ 1,583	99.6	\$ 1,589	41	41st	46th
Nevada	\$ 1,473	95.5	\$ 1,542	42	40th	40th
Tennessee	\$ 1,345	90.2	\$ 1,491	43	39th	18th
Oregon	\$ 1,555	106.8	\$ 1,456	44	34th	23rd
North Carolina	\$ 1,360	95.9	\$ 1,418	45	16th	17th
Florida	\$ 1,380	98.2	\$ 1,405	46	1st	4th
Idaho	\$ 1,198	89.8	\$ 1,334	47	29th	41st
California	\$ 1,684	128.1	\$ 1,315	48	48th	37th
Arizona	\$ 1,244	101.9	\$ 1,221	49	47th	47th
Hawaii	\$ 1,410	156.9	\$ 899	50	46th	45th
US Average	\$ 1,823	100				

Ref: National Education Association, The Council for Community and Economic Research, US Department of Education

This chart shows Alaska's ranking among the states in 2013.
It has not improved since then.

It is a cliché that “Parents are the first teachers.” But what options do parents have when their kids are not doing well in public school? As a newly credentialed teacher myself in 2003, I sought venues in and out of public school systems in Juneau and Anchorage to develop my craft. One option I pursued was **Sylvan Learning Center**, while substituting for the Anchorage School District (ASD). I received training and became a Sylvan on-site teacher, helping students having trouble in public education or students doing alright but not good enough. I found the Sylvan system provides an interesting approach to educational enrichment.

Two young entrepreneurs, **Christopher Hoehn- Saric** and **Douglas L. Becker**, took over Sylvan in 1991, and transformed it from a chain of tutoring centers dotting suburban shopping malls around the country to an international education-oriented firm that earned revenues of \$246 million in 1997. In addition to tutoring centers, Sylvan had expanded to offer teacher training, computerized testing, distance learning, and other services.

² In March of 2003 Sylvan Learning Systems Inc.

sold its tutoring and other K-12 educational businesses to a private equity firm to focus on online and overseas higher education services. The tutoring company still does business as Sylvan Learning Centers and other variations.³



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When an Anchorage parent decides they want their child's public education to be supplemented in a Sylvan Learning Center that child is tested through a computer program for current skills. This test provides an overview of knowledge learned to date and evaluates what past learning voids might be leading to current difficulties. Additionally, a child failing a class in ASD can pass that course by passing the corresponding Sylvan coursework.



Cheaper than private school.

Based on analysis of an entry evaluation, applicants are provided a guided learning program, in which the supplementary curriculum is keyed to missing knowledge and skills. As an instructor for Sylvan in Anchorage, I sat at a table joined by three students at a time. They encountered individually prescribed lessons to build skills over 50-minute learning segments. They did work packets, and I checked the answers after the bell rang. The entire program is animated and goal-oriented, because parents get their money back for any kid who won't become involved. Thus, the slogan for Sylvan when I worked there was: "We make learning fun!"

Imagine if parents of kids who were floated through the public system could get their tax payments going to local education back if they didn't have a 12th grade education when they were graduated! And, while the Sylvan approach to training young Alaskans is effective, it isn't cheap. I know one parent who took a second mortgage on the family home to pay for Sylvan supplemental services for one child—but that child passed high school!

Sylvan is based in Behavior Modification techniques which provide tangible rewards for achievement. Students are given tokens for reaching milestones in daily learning activities. After each 50-minute segment various students are publicly recognized by their instructor for achieving instructional goals in the room full of peers. Tokens can be spent to purchase a variety of items from a "store" in the Sylvan Center. In my experience this approach worked best with younger students who wanted toys from the store.



The author at left with one of many Adult Basic Education classes he taught over 9 years.

If All Else Fails

Alaskans who leave early from public education often get a GED. Some have had "Individual Education Plans" for diagnosed learning disabilities, some were distracted from attending school or paying attention in class, some didn't care, some tried but gave up and some never attended any school.

Public education, including special programs, charter schools, special schools and assigned attendants to shepherd students toward a diploma, didn't work for these adults. Parents may be wondering what to do with such a dependent—or individual early leavers may be homeless—but whatever the case Alaskans who don't make it in our money pit system must find an alternative.

That is usually through passing the GED (ged.com).

This problem of declining public education is not unique to Alaska, but the fact we have invested so much while going so many years without even a meaningful conversation about what we are getting for our considerable investment, is shameful. Parents often must accept what is provided unless they have the means for private school or supplemental assistance. Choice in public education is one option that does not have political favor among the education establishment who continue to strive for more financial support without accountability. The problem is getting worse and proposed solutions at this time are mostly cosmetic.

At its website, Sylvan declares: “We Believe learning is everything; learning should be personal; great teachers inspire; technology accelerates learning; Results Matter.”

Making public education accountable and focused on what students need to know should NOT preclude making learning fun.



1 Cotton, Stephen (1984) Educational Research Quarterly <https://www.uaa.alaska.edu/cafe/upload/Alaska-s-Molly-Hootch-Case-Stephen-Cotton.pdf>

2Cavanaugh, Joanne P. (September 1998). [*“Sylvan’s Fast Learners”*](#). Johns Hopkins Magazine. Retrieved 2015-02-22.

3Walsh, Mark (19 March 2003). [*“Sylvan Learning, Changing Focus, Sells K-12 Sector”*](#). Education Week. Retrieved 22 October 2013.

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