



Testimony by Carl Rose, Executive Director, Association of Alaska School Boards,
in support of S. 1905 Rural Teacher Housing, March 16 hearing by the US. Senate Indian Affairs
Committee in Anchorage

S. 1905 RURAL TEACHER HOUSING

For the record, my name is Carl Rose, Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards. On behalf of Alaska's elected school board members, I would like to thank Sen. Murkowski and the U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee for tackling the issue of rural teacher housing.

AASB supports S. 1905, proposing a grant program to build housing for school district employees in rural Alaska. Inferior or unavailable teacher housing has been a long-time concern for school districts in rural Alaska. AASB Resolution #4.4, passed by our membership in November 2003, specifically cites inadequate rural teacher housing as a contributing factor in the teacher and administrator shortage.

The lack of suitable teacher housing in rural Alaska is really about reducing the teacher turnover rate. It is about attracting, and more importantly retaining, quality educators in areas of the state that need them most.

It is no surprise that rural Alaska, for the most part, lags behind the rest of the state, for a variety of reasons, when it comes to measurements of student achievement. Today, we are more serious than ever about changing that. Closing the achievement gap between the indigenous peoples of Alaska and others will require commitment—it will require quality instructors, involved parents, engaged students, caring communities, adequate funding, and yes, reasonable accommodations for school staff.

We must remember, housing is a basic need. By not attending to this, teachers are forced to spend their valuable discretionary time tending to this basic need rather than on classroom planning and other educational activities. The impact on the continuity of instructional programming is profound.

Exit interviews of departing teachers often cite their housing situation as a contributing factor in the decision to leave. Administrators lament their inability to secure funds for teacher housing when there are so many unmet needs in the way of student programs, major maintenance repairs and *school* construction needs.

The reality is--housing, in many parts of rural Alaska, is substandard when compared to the rest of the country. Some teachers have complained upon seeing their housing that they were tricked into coming to the district. The fact is, what appears to be substandard housing to new hires may, in fact, be the norm for that community.

Instead, we talk about Alaska's high starting salaries and the Great Alaskan Adventure in order to attract potential educators. Yet, for some teachers, the quality of teacher housing when they get to the district is anything but great. Poor insulation, leaking ceilings, and honey buckets, in the end, do little to retain quality educators.

Consider these anecdotes. In Kodiak, one year the district placed a teacher with construction skills on the payroll for two weeks prior to the school year so he could upgrade a teacher housing facility that contained a simple barrel wood stove into a livable unit. In Arctic Village, two teachers new to the village arrived, assuming that the teacher housing available last year would be available this year. It was not. One teacher ultimately found housing from a contractor who was leaving for the school year. The other

teacher stayed in the school for a number of weeks while another unit was made available. She then moved into a vacant property (a known party home with a barrel stove) while renovations continued.

Last year Education Secretary Rod Paige and Sen. Murkowski were able to see first-hand the conditions facing rural Alaska. They, too, heard stories from teachers living out of classrooms, even closets.

If we really believe that all children can learn, and if we truly believe that No Child should be Left Behind, then we must create the environment in which that can happen. Adequate teacher housing that helps retain quality teachers is part of that equation.

For its part, the State of Alaska has been unable to meet the growing backlog of major maintenance and school construction projects for public schools for nearly 20 years. A tremendous backlog exists today-- somewhere in the neighborhood of \$530 million—and that does NOT include teacher housing. Our highest priority is to put money into the classroom. But skyrocketing operational costs and other mandates take money out of the classroom. Way down on the list of priorities is teacher housing.

For well over a decade we in Alaska have been managing decline. The loss of buying power due to inflation, coupled with increased fixed costs in the operational budget, have had a tremendous impact on the educational dollar.

As a young and rapidly growing state, Alaska is simply unprepared to address rural teacher housing at this time. Our infrastructure needs outpace available resources.

In conclusion... For many districts, staff housing is simply low on the priority list when it comes to spending scarce educational resources. A rural teacher housing program would not only help alleviate an immediate problem, it would help the state recognize just how important adequate teacher housing is toward success in the village classroom. It would provide a roadmap to follow into the future.

Thank you for your time.

QUESTIONS

For testifier Carl Rose, Association of Alaska School Boards

1. What has the state done recently to address rural teacher housing in Alaska?

ANS: Under pressure from the state supreme court, Proposition C passed in November 2002. General obligation bonds are paying for \$170 million in rural school construction and major maintenance projects. A debt reimbursement program was also implemented for communities with taxing authority. Funding for new schools and major maintenance meant that, for some rural districts, funds could be freed up elsewhere in the budget to address other priorities, including housing needs.

In 2003 the Alaska Legislature passed SB 25 establishing within the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation a teachers and nurses housing loan program to assist public school teachers and registered nurses to purchase housing with no down payment. Loans are for owner-occupied, single-family housing and may be made only to an individual employed full-time in a public school in the state who is required to be certificated and holds a position as a teacher, counselor, principal, vice or assistant principal, provider of special education or related services, or as a registered nurse and is licensed to practice registered nursing. The loan can be up to 100 percent of the value of the property. The legislature appropriated \$2.1 million within the capital budget to pay for the program. This year, Gov. Murkowski is proposing to revamp the program to make it more user friendly for school districts.

2. Why do so many districts appear unable to take steps to ensure teachers have adequate housing?

ANS: It's really a matter of priorities. School districts have been managing decline for well over a decade in Alaska. Schools are faced with trying to protect the basic educational program. For example, trying to attract a new k-12 math teacher takes precedent. The \$10,000 earmarked for housing renovations may be better spent on a travel stipend to attract a few quality teachers to the community. Housing needs get put on the back burner.

3. Doesn't Alaska have reserve funds that could be used to address rural teacher housing needs?

ANS: It is true that Alaska has a Permanent Fund – a state savings account that pays dividends to residents. It is currently valued at \$28 billion. Like most funding sources, however, the Permanent Fund has strings attached. The Permanent Fund is constitutionally protected. Alaskans are currently debating whether or not to use earnings from the fund to pay for government services. We have been down this road before—unsuccessfully.

4. Other states have rural areas. What is unique about Alaska's rural areas that make the issue of teacher housing so challenging?

ANS: The cultural differences are many. There is the language barrier: English is still a second language in some areas. How you make eye contact matters. How fast you talk matters. How much time you give to a person when waiting for a response...matters.

Construction and maintenance in permafrost conditions present their own set of obstacles. There is a short construction season dictated by the weather.

Distance: Replacing an oil stove part may require flying the piece in to the village. You cannot run down the street to the nearest hardware store in a village of 200 people, with no paved roads and perhaps only 1 or 2 vehicles, and expect it to be stocked as if it were a community of 80,000.

Living conditions: Living in a plywood cabin with a barrel stove, without paved roads, with one village sewage lagoon, may seem like 3rd world living conditions to some, but it is the standard in some villages where only a hundred years ago the indigenous people were nomadic. The challenges it poses to attracting and retaining quality educators are considerable.

Safety: In many rural areas there is no police protection, only Village Public Safety Officers.

5. How can we help you? What can we do to best address rural teacher housing in Alaska?

ANS: This is a great first step. Highlight the issue. Create a housing program that is workable and easy for districts to participate in. Make it a priority. Then fund it.