



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

**Department of Education
& Early Development**

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

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Subject: Alaska School Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism Report

Dear Superintendents,

I hope this message finds you well as we approach the close of the fall semester. The excitement of the season often brings a sense of joy, but I recognize that the holidays can bring different experiences for our students as well. It is through the full engagement of staff that we ensure a positive close to the year, and I want to thank you for your leadership. The positive culture you cultivate in your schools adds tremendous value to your communities.

At the most recent State School Board Meeting, I had the opportunity to present on the critical topic of attendance and absenteeism. Our team at the Department prepared the attached materials, which provide a detailed overview of this issue. Following the presentation, a robust conversation ensued, and I encourage you to listen to it when you have the opportunity.

As you know, attendance is a cornerstone of student success, and the issue of chronic absenteeism demands our immediate attention. During the 2022–2023 school year, 45% of students in Alaska were identified as chronically absent—missing more than 10% of the academic year. Alarming, this figure is more than double the national average, where nearly one in two students misses approximately 18 days of school annually in Alaska.

This concerning statistic prompted the State Board of Education Chair to ask, “What can be done to address this issue?” It’s important to note that even sporadic absences matter. Research shows that students who miss just two to four days in September are five times more likely to become chronically absent during the school year. Nationally, kindergarten students account for the highest number of missed school days, which aligns with the concerns voiced by early literacy teachers under the Reads Act: if students aren’t present, we can’t teach them.

Fortunately, there is good news. Many districts in Alaska are excelling in improving attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism, as highlighted in the presentation. Our Superintendent of the Year, Dan Polta, summed it up perfectly:

“Our primary focus has been to raise the presence of positive messaging around attendance and improve attendance data collection and sharing. By reducing chronic absenteeism, we aim to work directly with families on hurdles to regular attendance.”

The Department is committed to supporting your efforts through established systems. We aim to support you in this work by:

1. Building community support via awareness campaigns.
2. Enhancing data collection to identify and address barriers.
3. Fostering collaboration with families, educators, and communities.

On a related note, I want to address the use of e-learning days. These were valuable during the pandemic but are currently not aligned with a focused approach to learning. Virtual school days, often utilized for inclement weather, do not adequately meet students' needs. Unless prior approval is granted for long-term emergencies, virtual days should not replace in-person instruction for "brick-and-mortar" schools. Families who have opted for in-person learning deserve the full 170 school days required by statute.

Together, we can create a culture that prioritizes attendance and supports every student's success. Thank you for your continued dedication to this shared mission.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Deena M. Bishop". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Deena M. Bishop, Ed.D.