

• Arctic

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The Corps cancelled the solicitation last October to modify the project's first phase. The project was put on hold as the Corps went back to the drawing board and redesigned it at a cheaper cost, with a priority on beginning the process even if that meant starting at a smaller scale.

Sfraga's comments on the Port of Nome and the Bering Strait region were part of a larger presentation to the committee, an overview of the importance of the Arctic and the opportunities and challenges that poses for Alaska.

He discussed how Russian and Chinese vessels traversing the Bering and Chukchi seas are becoming more common, entering U.S. waters more than ever before.

"I like the idea of our state being a critical part of our homeland security and our national defense," Sfraga said.

A multi-agency approach is needed with Alaska at the table, Sfraga said, with any future U.S. foreign policy addressing the Arctic.

Geographer and lifelong Alaskan, Sfraga was nominated to the ambassador position by President Joe Biden in 2022 and was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in September 2024.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski was an advocate for the creation of the Arctic ambassador position, which is tasked with leading and coordinating the advancement of U.S. interests in the Arctic and strengthening cooperation among Arctic nations.

"When I had the absolute honor as serving as a diplomat in this country, it was clear that when the United States walked in the room, everybody wanted to hear what we had to say," Sfraga said.

Sfraga stepped down from the position on Jan. 20, as is customary for ambassadors to do at the end of the administration who appointed them. Sfraga said the months he spent as the first Arctic ambassador for the U.S. was not as long as he would've liked.

There has been no announcement of a new appointment by the Trump administration.

"There's kind of a fire hose of

things happening in the world today, a lot of it pertaining to the Arctic, Greenland and with Canada. Hearing the talk of making them the 51st state, how does this impact the status of things in the Arctic?" Anchorage Sen. Bill Wilechowski asked at the state Senate committee hearing.

Sfraga said he thinks there are questions from allies about the strength of their partnerships with the U.S. right now.

"Whether it's Arctic or not Arctic, there's real questions, and we see them on the news, and we see them elsewhere, wondering where is the United States' foreign policy right now?" he said.

But he assured the committee that Alaska is known in the Arctic, with personal relationships that go back decades, ranging from state leadership to Indigenous populations. And those relationships are being maintained, regardless of what's happening in Washington, D.C.

"So I think Alaska does have a role, and it has a role on one side of the Arctic, and that is protectors, defenders."



Photo by Anna Lionas

ADVOCATING— Rep. Neal Foster (D-Nome) meets with Superintendent of Nome Schools Jamie Burgess, Nome-Beltz Principal Teriscovkya Smith and teacher Holly Harlow during the educators' trip to the Capitol last week, making their case for an increase in school funding.

School district blindly balances budget

By Anna Lionas

In less than a month Nome Public Schools will approve its budget for the 2025-2026 school year. The district is hoping for a funding increase from the state at a time as legislators are struggling to balance the state's budget.

Last week, representatives from Nome schools traveled to Juneau where they met with lawmakers and explained how no increase in funding would hurt the district, which already has whittled down its budget in recent years to avoid firing staff.

"We've been quiet cutting for so long, just trying to keep everything status quo," Superintendent Jamie Burgess said in a meeting with Rep. Neal Foster (D-Nome) on March 31.

Also present in the Capitol was Nome-Beltz Principal Teriscovkya Smith and teacher Holly Harlow. They met one-on-one with Foster, Sen. Donald Olson (D-Golovin) and Sen. Löki Tobin (D-Anchorage) as part of a statewide superintendents and administrators fly-in.

On Tuesday, Nome Public Schools presented the school board with its final draft budget for the 2025-2026 school year, budgeting a \$680 (or 11 percent) increase to the state's per-student base funding formula, which is uncertain until the legislature and governor finish their budget work.

Lawmakers are facing a deficit of several hundred million dollars, as state revenues fall short of covering existing spending, much less a larger increase in the school funding formula.

Even with the placeholder, the Nome district would have to take money out of reserves to fund a remaining deficit. The school board has made it clear they don't want to cut teaching positions.

Each school district has a different budget deadline. The City of Nome requires it by May 1, which is likely before the legislature will take final action on the state budget.

"I'm fairly confident we're going to get something. The question is, how much and when will we actually know what we're getting?" Burgess told the Nugget.

Foster told the visiting Nomeites that education has been a priority for many legislators this year. House and Senate leaders are relatively aligned to understand the need for more money for schools, however, the challenge is getting Gov. Mike Dunleavy to sign on.

Last year, Dunleavy vetoed a permanent increase to the per student funding formula – the Base Student Allocation, or BSA – which has not been significantly increased in a decade.

Districts instead received a one-time formula boost of \$680 per student; that number has returned this year as a possible increase option if the House-approved \$1,000 doesn't make it through.

Foster said it's been difficult to work with the governor, who has remained steadfast that more money alone won't fix Alaska's education system.

The Alaska Council of School Administrators gave a presentation dur-

ing a joint House and Senate Education Hearing, stating a \$1,808 increase to the BSA was needed to keep up with inflation. No legislative leaders are pushing anything close to that large of an increase.

In an April 3 post on X, Dunleavy said the latest version of the funding-formula legislation working its way through the Senate falls short of education reforms families deserve, citing constraints on homeschool students and lack of policies to improve student achievement.

The \$1,000 increase is what Superintendent Burgess has her eyes on. If legislators and the governor approve that amount, Nome Public Schools wouldn't have to dip into district savings which are meant to go toward a long-planned housing project for teachers and local law enforcement.

The lack of affordable housing is part of the problem in recruiting new teachers. Principal Smith explained to Rep. Foster that she has an open position for a high school English teacher she can't fill, because she can't ensure they'll have a place to live in the teacher dorms or their salary will be enough to rent or buy in town.

"Our children have increased mental, social, emotional needs and mental health needs. We don't have funding to bring in the staff that we need to help these kids. We can't even be competitive in what we can offer," Burgess told Foster.

Another major struggle, which contributes to reduced funding, is declining enrollment.

This school year alone 81 students have withdrawn from Nome Public Schools; 25 of those have dropped out. The district ended the 2024 school year with 669 students enrolled.

Burgess explained how the district offers multiple alternative options to traditional public school: A homeschool program, a charter school and hospitality program. They also recently approved an ANSEP acceleration program which would have highschoolers dually enrolled in college courses, and they're looking into creation of a tribal compact school.

"We've really tried to be responsive to what our community and our parents say that they desire," Burgess said.

But more funding is what would really make a difference in the budget.

In the worst-case scenario, if no additional state funding comes through, Nome Public Schools will be staring down to cut 11 teaching positions, almost 20 percent of the classified staff. With a formula increase of \$680, they can get by this time, but not for years to come.

"That's the reality of where we are," Burgess told the Nugget. "And you can only cut non-instructional costs so much, the building has to be heated."

Burgess said the district is advocating for the \$1,000 increase, and the group from Nome hammered this home during their meetings with



Photo by Anna Lionas

GET TO WORK—Representatives Chuck Kopp (R-Anchorage), Andy Josephson (D-Anchorage), Bryce Edgmon (I-Dillingham) and Louise Stutes (R-Kodiak) pack up following a press conference in speaker chambers on Tuesday April 8.

• PFD and school funding

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to pass the committee.

Speaker of the House Bryce Edgmon (I-Dillingham) said it's a matter of working with the minority to "bridge the differences" on the PFD. He said he understands the perspectives of his fellow Bush caucus members, "but we can't get it done unless we sit down and work together, we simply can't."

Other options for balancing the budget are cuts in other spending areas, as suggested by the House minority.

Falling oil prices, however, are deepening the state budget gap, which is short hundreds of millions

of dollars in revenue.

"We are in extraordinary circumstances with the price of oil and the stock market falling daily," Rep. Loise Stutes (R-Kodiak) said during the press meeting.

Increasing revenue is another option. A bill introduced in the Senate proposes increasing taxes on oil companies. Kopp opposes those measures. He said Tuesday he doesn't want to kill an "energy renaissance," referencing ConocoPhillips' North Slope Willow project and other potential oil projects proposed over the next few years.

For now, the goal is to have a balanced budget bill on the House floor by next week, though it's unclear

how that will happen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, were all in a pickle. It's not just the House majority, it's the House minority, it's the governor, it's the Senate majority, it's the Senate minority. We all own the situation in front of us," Edgmon said.

This reporting from the State Capitol by Nugget reporter Anna Lionas is made possible by the Alaska Center for Excellence in Journalism's Legislative Reporter Exchange. Alaska news outlets, please contact diana@nomenugget.com to republish this story.

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