

Transcript of Speech given by Rep. Ethan Berkowitz
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Introduction by Mr. Cronberg, President of NEA-Alaska:

Representative Ethan Berkowitz was first elected to the Alaska State House in 1996, and is currently serving as the House Minority Leader. Representative Berkowitz graduated from Harvard in 1983 with a degree in government and economics. He received a master's degree from Cambridge in 1986, and his law degree from the Hastings College of Law in 1990. Prior to being elected to the legislature, Ethan served as the Assistant District Attorney in Anchorage. Representative Berkowitz enjoys hockey, fishing, travel, and reading. His commitment to K-12 education has been proven by his actions over the last seven-plus years in Juneau.

The last time Representative Berkowitz spoke to the NEA-Alaska Board of Directors, he brought along his daughter Hannah on her third birthday. Tonight he is before us, in spite of the happenings in Juneau, and, most importantly, the birth of his second child, son Noah, a mere nine days ago.

Delegates, please welcome the Minority Leader of the Alaska State House of Representatives, Ethan Berkowitz.

Representative Berkowitz:

Wow. It kinds of makes me blush, and, actually, I didn't remember that I brought Hannah with me on the last occasion. Noah is with me today, and so is my wife, Mara Kimmell, there in the back.

I figured I'd get Noah started the same way the rest of us grew up in the family, which is with education all around us. I come from a line of teachers. My grandmother taught for a long time. She told me many times that if it hadn't been for the NEA she'd have never gotten a job. And my sister-in-law teaches here at Bartlett. My mother-in-law teaches. So for me this is a little bit like a family dinner, except there is a lot more people here, and I don't have to clean dishes afterwards.

And I want to begin first by thanking you because I know the effort that you all put into the work you do. So thank you very much. Thank you for making schools ready for learning. Thank you for the contributions, the money that you actually spend to make classroom supplies available to students. I know that's what happens. And thank you so much for caring enough to devote your lives to teaching. Thank you.

I want to see a show of hands here. How many people do what you do somewhat as a labor of love? How many of you have some concern about the level of funding, for example, that is available? I thought that might be the case.

I came here -- I want to make three points tonight, three things that should stick with you.

First -- and you know this better than anybody -- what you do, it is not about programs. It is not about politics. It is not about propaganda. What you do is about people.

The second thing I want to tell you is that you have power and use it. You have the power to participate in the political process and change political results. Take advantage of that power. Make your voice heard.

The third thing I want to say is that educators and policy makers are partners, that we need to work together to deliver the type of educational system to the people we both serve, and we need to do a better job of that working together.

You know, I think about all the programs and the statistics and the easy slogans that clutter up politics, and particularly the politics of education. We have got HSQE, the High School Qualifying Exam, NCLB, the No Child Left Behind, pass rates, failure rates, the measures of adequate progress. It's about people. And we need to always, always remember that.

Now, I want to make a few comments about No Child Left Behind. What a great slogan. Too bad that they stole it from the Children's Defense Fund, but what a great slogan. Except for educators. And I say that because it's a negative vision. The slogan should have been, "Lift Every Child Up," "Move Every Child Forward," because that's what we are trying to do. And I'm really concerned that we have constrained ourselves by defining ourselves in a negative way. I don't think it is enough for us to create slogans for you in Juneau or Washington, D.C. I think we need to make sure that you have the resources you need to do the job, and do the job right, not just a mediocre job, but an excellent job.

That's not to say I don't support accountability. I do. Accountability is important, but more important than accountability is responsibility, and the primary responsibility isn't testing. It's teaching. We always need to remember that.

You know, I watch how the testing absorbs far too much of scarce educational dollars. If we were flush with money maybe we could do more with it, but when times are tight the priority is in the classroom. The we ought to make sure the classroom sizes are not burgeoning, that we are doing enough to recruit and retain teachers. We are not doing that. The headline today in the "Anchorage Daily News" says it all. It is a grim reality out there. We live in a resource development state. The best resource we have is people. Let's develop it. Let's invest in it. The yield will be monumental.

When I go back to Juneau, the budget for education in this state is being constricted and constricted and constricted. And like a snake squeezing its pray, it's going to squeeze the life out of education at some point, and we need to stand up and fight against that. We need to fight together. You know, I have been really lucky in the last couple of years to be part of a coalition, primarily Democrats, but occasionally we get some of the guys on the other side to help us out. But we have done things to try and keep the budget somewhat healthy, and it is going to be very, very tough this year.

We need you to participate, because otherwise the statistics about education are going to dominate. And I think there is something sadistic about statistics. I mean, statistics make it easy to be anonymous. We talk about this percentage or that percentage of people who aren't passing, or these percentage of schools that are failing. Those are real people. Those are real people who money can make a difference to, who budget can make a difference to, who good teachers can make a difference to, who small classrooms can make a difference to, who the inspiration from a quality education can make a difference to.

And I keep coming back to this testing, because that's what we talk about all the time in Juneau, is testing, testing, testing. Sometimes I think there would be a lot less testing in Juneau if the legislators actually had to take the test.

But for me, when I think of education, I think of it as the way to head down the road towards wisdom the way to open up the quality of life for people. And what does it mean? I think of the people that I know in my life who are the wisest. And to me an education ought to entrust a student with three primary qualities: The ability to think critically, the ability to empathize, to walk in someone else's shoes, and the ability to exercise intellectual curiosity and take joy in the world around you. That's what education should do.

And the focus that we place on testing distracts us from that. It means all we are doing is teaching to the test. That's wrong. You know, there is a lot of good things in "No Child Left Behind." There is a lot of good things about accountability. But we are not doing accountability for the benefit of the students, and that's where the focus needs to be. We need to stay focused on the people we serve.

I can say it over and over again because I don't hear it enough, and it just sounds better to me when I hear it. We serve people.

You know, there is so many great things we can do in Alaska. In a lot of ways we start with a blank slate. We can create an educational system here that is the envy of every other state in the union. We need vision. We need creativity. We need imagination. We have the people who are working hard. We have the ability. I see in this room the dedication to deliver a quality service, but I don't see you getting the support you need from your policy partners in Juneau and in Washington, D.C.

I made the mistake of writing this speech down. I never do that. It hogties me somewhat. I feel like I'm missing things. But we need to do a lot better for the students

of this state. It is not enough to deliver a mediocre product. It is not enough to try and reach average standards. Each student is an individual. I have never met an average Alaskan. I have never met a mediocre Alaskan. I have never met a standardized Alaskan.

You know, I travel around this state. There are great people everywhere. We do some incredible things, whether it's Yupik education in the lower YK -- we need to preserve things like that. Or my sister-in-law who is doing Special Ed at Bartlett, or the great kids I met when I spent my day at West who were winning national awards. These are faces to me. And so when I think of people who are not going to pass the qualifying exam for whatever reason, because we are trying to standardize them, I think that there are people out there, people whose spirits are going to be crushed, whose dreams are going to be diminished. That's wrong. That's leaving children behind. That not pushing them forward. That's not leading them through an education. You have a responsibility not just to teach but to fight for the people you serve. And I'm asking you, I'm pleading with you, to fight with us this year. Stand shoulder to shoulder with us in Juneau and Washington, D.C. There is so much change we can do.

You know, this is Alaska. It is the Great Land -- the Great Land. We need to reach out and grab it. We need to push hard for a better future. It is not going to come if you are silent in the face of budget cuts, if you acquiesce when they make your class sizes larger, if you hope someone else will pick up the standard. Because there is nobody else. There is just us. There is just those of us lonely souls locked up here in the northwest corner of the continent, and we can do it better than anybody else, and we can do it in our own unique way.

But we need to fight for what we think is right, and we need to fight together. Because there is not enough of us to fight in a divided way. And so when they come to you with budget proposals that would divide us by region, reject them. When they come to you with budget proposals that would put K through 12 against the university or against vocational training, reject them. When they say can we can help you and hurt someone else, reject them. Because the people that they are going to hurt to help you, those are our friends, our families, our neighbors, and we are in this together.

Well, that's now my exit line. So thank you. You are explaining why I love educators. So thank you all very much.