



**Fern Desjardins**

Member of the Maine State Board of Education and NASBE's Board of Directors



**Robin Stevens**

Member of the Nebraska State Board of Education



**Sandra Kowalski**

Member of the Alaska State Board of Education

# The NASBE Interview

*Fern Desjardins is a member of the Maine State Board of Education and NASBE's Board of Directors. She was a teacher, elementary school principal, and superintendent in the RSU-33/MSAD 33 school administrative unit district in Aroostook County before retiring in 2017.*

*Robin Stevens is a member of the Nebraska State Board of Education and spent his career as a teacher and coach, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent in small schools in Iowa and Nebraska.*

*Sandra Kowalski is a member of the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development and has been a teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent in rural and urban communities in Alaska. She also served as the director of indigenous programs in the College of Community and Rural Development at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), and she is assistant superintendent in the Northwest Arctic Borough School District. They were interviewed on Nov. 9 and 17.*



## What is your personal and professional connection with rural schools?

**Fern:** I've lived all my life in St. Agatha, Maine, in Aroostook County near the Canadian border. It has a population of approximately 750 and is part of a two-town school administrative unit, RSU-33, which has a preK-12 enrollment of 240, with one elementary school and one middle/high school. I attended the K-12 schools in RSU-33 and spent my entire 43-year career in the school system. Aroostook County is the largest county east of the Mississippi, larger than Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. There are only 9,300 students enrolled across the county, so that gives you an idea of how rural we really are.

**Robin:** I grew up on a 440-acre farm west of Eustis, Nebraska. I had a graduating class of 18. I got my degrees from University of Nebraska at Kearney, which is about 25,000 people—my big move into an urban area. All my teaching career was in small, rural communities. I started in Cherokee, Iowa, and then moved to southwest Nebraska, with average graduating classes of 25 to 30. Gothenburg, where I currently live, is a town of 3,000 to 4,000. I am a representative of the western half of Nebraska—a fairly substantial landmass. About a third of the state's 244 districts are in the western district. We go from Minatare, which averages about 10 per graduating class, to North Platte, which averages close to 300, but many of the 75 districts are closer to Minatare than North Platte.

**Sandra:** I live in Alaska's Northwest Arctic Borough, about 39,000 square miles large. We have 11 villages that are not connected by roads, and I work out of Kotzebue, which is the hub. This is where I'm from. I taught in Deering, one of the smaller villages and in Kotzebue, where I was a teacher and principal. On the state board, in addition to

representing an urban and on-the-road-system communities, I represent a large swath of the state with lots of rural schools.

## How does your background in rural education inform your work on the state board?

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**Fern:** Our goal is to provide equal opportunities to all students, and to do that, we sometimes have to do more for some students. The state board should comprise members that represent state demographics so that decisions that negatively impact some areas or some students can be surfaced and addressed. The pandemic has brought to light some inequities in rural areas. Some rural and underserved areas of Maine did not have internet access. It was impossible to provide equitable online learning without student internet access and learning devices. This past summer, Maine approved a \$15 million broadband bond to expand internet in our underserved areas. It's not just about rural areas and cities; it's about what are we providing, and what do they need? We do very well with our funding formula by providing targeted funding for disadvantaged students, English learners, and an adjustment for isolated small schools.

There are also advantages to small schools. Because I had a small staff and enrollment, we were able to provide more individualized help and support. Whenever there was a reform going on, I could get right on it with my small staff and have a meeting with parents to talk about it. And as for accountability, I used to tell my staff, "We have glass walls," because everything is visible. Kids go home and talk about what happened at school, and it's the talk of the town. School is the life of the community. There's a sense of belonging and responsibility.

I was the principal of a very small rural elementary school that became nationally recognized by the Blue Ribbon Schools Program when I was principal. That was because of dedicated teachers and staff. That very same school was again recognized as a Blue Ribbon School in 2017 under a different principal. It will remain a high-achieving school because of the culture in the school and communities. School funding determines programs and services, but the people in the school determine the quality and effectiveness of those programs and

services. Money only takes us to a certain point. Afterward, it's about what do we do, and how do we support teachers? I participated in program approval reviews for educator preparation programs because I recognize the huge impact these programs have on the effectiveness of our schools, rural and urban.

**Sandra:** There are over 200 federally recognized tribes in our state. So not only is Alaska massive in terms of its size, it's also diverse in terms of its populations and geographic areas. The rural perspective needs to be brought to the state board. There are so many implications: funding, equity of access to internet, enriching learning opportunities. There's also a strong push for Alaskan Native people to have more of a voice in what goes on in their own schools. The school system has brought in modern education and technology, but this influx has also caused a lot of damage to Native languages and cultures. Many issues come up when an indigenous culture is ignored on indigenous land. I represent that perspective: We need to acknowledge the land and the people in our rural communities as who they are. Once we can do that in Alaskan Native communities and schools, we'll see people thrive.

I grew up in a public school, but the generation before me were sent to boarding school. Mind you, non-Native children were getting a public education, but the Alaska Native population was taught by religious entities that were moving missions into rural Alaska. To go to secondary or postsecondary, you were flown out of your village to places like Oregon or Sitka in Southeast Alaska. You weren't raised in your home community in your teenage years. If the church was of the mind-set to not accept the Native language and culture in school, that's what happened. So that trauma still exists, and there is still oftentimes this disconnect between families and schools for that reason alone.

Our school is the center of our community. It's where student activities and potlucks take place, principals become natural community leaders, and teachers are loved for their role. But as far as trusting the school and understanding how to support your child in that environment—you have a whole generation who weren't parented through their schooling and didn't know how to parent the next generation for their schooling. We value our schools in rural Alaska, but

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we have a lot of work to do to heal. One of my focuses on the state board is to keep bringing up that piece: that Alaska Native communities need a stronger voice and say in how their schools operate, and that is part of the healing that needs to happen.

We have traditional, subsistence-based knowledge in our communities that is good grounds for science study, social studies, for engaging students in writing, for bringing elders in to explain what character and hard work looks like. We have the world around us, with fish and caribou, and we have people who value bringing that knowledge to schools. Another asset we have is strong relationships. A financial adviser who flew in from the city to help teachers set up retirement accounts said, “People here don’t think ahead. They don’t invest in retirement accounts; I don’t see them taking care of their own future.” And I said, “You’re totally missing it. We’re investing in our future by taking care of our elders, bringing fish to our aunts. We take care of each other, and that’s our best retirement plan, and we will have people taking care of us.”

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### **Certainly, there are unique assets in rural schools. What are the obstacles to rural students receiving an equitable education?**

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**Robin:** Connectivity is the first thing that comes to mind. But the pandemic has magnified lots of issues, including early childhood opportunities. States and localities closed down childcare centers and preschools across all areas of the United States, and it really had an impact on the families of western Nebraska. Some things are not different for rural areas. There is poverty everywhere, not just in Lincoln. There is poverty in Minatare and North Platte. The pandemic magnifies poverty.

**Sandra:** In many cases, students in rural Alaska perform less favorably on our state tests and other assessments. Unlocking that is something school leaders, teachers, and school boards are trying to find meaningful ways to do, and the state board supports innovation and vision seeking from local leaders. We’re working toward building that capacity in our rural communities. We’re looking at our charter regulations and the ability to create tribal compacts for education. These are longer term

efforts we want to advocate and support to give local communities ownership. The federal and state accountability system does filter down into what happens in classrooms to some degree, but what’s missing is the sprung-from-community piece, which is just inherently there in Western education and other communities. We need to create that in rural Alaskan Native communities.

We’re one of those rural areas where the impact of [the pandemic] is just starting to be realized. We can have a village of 300 where there is no medical facility for a COVID patient with serious symptoms. They are flown into Kotzebue, or if they need more serious care, into Anchorage—so several hundreds of miles and at great cost. Kotzebue is the most impacted; we have remote learning only in Kotzebue. In the villages, we have instituted all the safety protocols. If we don’t have enough square footage, we have students coming on A and B track—two days a week rather than four. All of our teachers, like much of the country, have to be ready to teach remotely and in person at the same time.

Added to that, we don’t have consistent internet. If I’m at my apartment in Kotzebue it wouldn’t be a quality call, and it costs me five times what it would in Fairbanks. It’s unaffordable, low quality, and doesn’t work well for distance learning. And that’s Kotzebue. The villages are even more challenged, so all of our teaching has to be planned so that it can happen offline and remote. But we’re still using technology. We have a refresh cycle: All our student-issued devices are brought into the school on a schedule, disinfected, and then teachers put refreshed content on them, parents pick up the devices, and for the next two weeks students are calling into classes, usually with their parents’ cellphones, and engaging with the content on those devices. We’re using Microsoft OneNote: The student does assignments on their device at home, and as soon as the device walks into the building, it syncs and teachers can retrieve assignments. It’s not what we prefer, but we’re finding ways.

The state has determined that if a student is on remote learning they are default present, so it looks like we have excellent attendance when in reality we don’t. We saw the loss of connection in the springtime. This year to try to address this, on Wednesdays teachers reach out to students they haven’t had contact with,

and we've created a different attendance code to track those students. I see social media posts where parents are feeling pretty miserable because they feel like their students' grades or lack of follow-through on assignments is a reflection on the parents, who are already stressed. So it's not just a loss of connections with students, it's the relationship with the entire family that's affected by this pandemic.

**Fern:** With student enrollment decreases, rural schools may not be able to afford the staff needed to offer diverse courses in-house: world languages, upper-level science and math, Advanced Placement. Or different staff: having the same teacher teaching algebra I and II, geometry, and trigonometry, and the art teacher, music teacher, and PE teacher are teaching kindergarten to grade 12. Fewer course offerings means less flexibility for students. Yes, juniors and seniors can take early college classes online, but some kids prefer that in-person interaction with teacher and peers.

Our kids' exposure to cultural diversity or diverse ideologies is very limited. The limited diversity of teachers and students may streamline the thoughts and opinions shared in classroom discussions. Minorities in rural schools can have a challenge in forming social groups. There are fewer extracurricular and co-curricular activities and thus less of an opportunity to develop social and leadership skills.

But are these things an issue of rural versus urban, or is the real issue school size? Can we make a distinction, or are they so intertwined that they cannot be separated? Whether our state board is discussing improved career and technical education or expanded internet access, the amount of funding will be partially determined by enrollment. And enrollment in rural areas is less than in urban areas.

## Is recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools an issue for you?

**Robin:** Most definitely. The farther west you go in Nebraska, the more difficult recruiting and retaining teachers is. We have built in some flexibility with certification, and provisional certifications are available for substitute teachers, which, with permanent staff in quarantine, is becoming a huge issue. The pandemic has

magnified the teacher and substitute shortage. From the standpoint of choices students make in college, our schools are microcosms of society. Do they go into education? Well, it's not terribly lucrative, especially early on. They look for \$60,000 jobs right out of the chute, and you can't blame them. My wife and I spent our professional careers in education. We didn't badmouth the profession to our daughters; we loved it. But neither of our daughters teach.

There is also concern about student behavior and therefore working conditions. We need to provide better training, not only for staff coming into the profession but to those already there who never were trained to handle some of the issues we have. We need more counselors. We need more people who are involved with mental health. With justice and social concerns front and center, it puts a strain on the school system and on teacher colleges.

**Fern:** It's the same in Maine. We have shortages in some critical areas. Rural schools pay a little less, and benefits are not the same. There are fewer applicants. Our teachers spend more time planning because they are teaching biology, chemistry, and physics, whereas a teacher in an urban school may just have five sections of biology. So what do rural teachers do? They leave for schools where they have less prep time and they can be the best teacher they can be. Economics of scale comes into the picture: Rural schools require the same services as larger schools, but fewer students benefit.

Guidelines for the safe return to in-person instruction this fall—with social distancing, smaller class sizes, maximum numbers in the cafeteria, having adequate staff to supervise students—have forced schools to hire added staff. Some units created positions to deliver and coordinate remote and distance learning. Because of the need for additional staff, our governor, Janet Mills, signed two executive orders to provide flexibility. Anyone applying now does not and will never have to take the Praxis. Anything missing on an application for recertification was automatically extended to July 1, 2021. Governor Mills opened it up even more by allowing anyone with a bachelor's degree to get an emergency teacher certificate, valid for a year. And certification reciprocity is now offered for teachers, specialists, and

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administrators who were issued comparable certificates in another state or country.

A statewide committee has been revising the rule for credentialing. Some of the changes being recommended include different pathways to teacher certification by grade spans and endorsements—combining some endorsements and eliminating some. Two years ago, they tried to rush a change in the rule. They brought it to the state board, and it was rejected and sent back. This time, the rulemaking is a grass-roots effort where everybody is represented, and I think we are going to end up with a much better rulemaking.

**Sandra:** We're trying to reverse the loss of teachers with onboarding that is culturally and community based. And we're starting to realize that in order to recruit more young people into education, we have to understand what they're trying to get when they pursue education. One of the things we know about Native youth in general is that when you ask them what they want out of a college career, it's usually, "I want to bring something back to my community." We're learning at UAF that a lot of students who sign up for a six-week precollege program in the summer want to learn and teach their native language. So we have this inkling, not hard data yet, that if we can help people learn their indigenous language and culture, we will be able to retain more of them as teachers, even if at first they're not going to college to learn to be a teacher.

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**What other resource challenges are rural schools facing?**

**Fern:** Some rural communities do not have the capacity to raise additional funds to support public education. They are limited in the number of businesses that can generate property tax revenue or provide employment. It is hard to attract young families unless there are employment opportunities. The pandemic is beginning to change this, with more people working from home. That is going to work to our advantage in rural areas.

**Sandra:** There is a base student allocation in Alaska with multipliers for regions based on the cost of educating students. That formula is decades old and needs to be revised, but it's

always a challenging political topic in Juneau. As a result, funding has not kept up with increasing costs. We used to have differences between rural and urban. I don't think we have that anymore; what we have is a lack of funding for education across the board. The other challenge we have for rural schools is preschool funding. It's an astronomical cost but necessary. We need to figure out how to provide for our young children in Alaska, and in rural areas in particular.

**Robin:** I really hope we can get some stimulus from the national government, especially in education, early childhood education in particular. The sooner the better. We need to incentivize teachers in pay and support. That is generally a local issue, but somehow, somehow, we have got to make our legislators and local boards understand that if you truly want to have the best people—and education is a people profession—then we have to start paying them and incentivizing them. Another thing we should push at the local level is the idea of it taking a community to develop a child. If we are going to make Gothenburg the best it can be, we need to partner up with our community, whether that be businesses, local government, or whatever the case might be.

As I watched the election results come in, I was so concerned about the rural-urban divide. All you had to do was look at every state: The more urban the area, the more blue the state, the more Democratic, the more liberal in its thinking. The more rural, the more red, the more Republican, the more conservative. We have to figure out a way to bring those two together—rural and urban—and not just in Nebraska. It is an issue in nearly every state in the union. ■