By ALYSSA SHANKS, Economist

Alaska’s Public Schools
A profile of occupations, earnings, and employment

About 132,000 children attend public schools around the state, and that generates many jobs in a wide range of occupations. In both rural and urban Alaska, the local school district is often among an area’s largest employers.

Teachers make up about 60 percent of employees in public schools, a part of local government known as local education. (See Exhibit 1.) The other 40 percent includes everything from librarians and school nurses to janitors and administrators.

Modest growth for a big employer

With the exception of the state’s few boarding schools, Alaska’s public school enrollment and jobs correspond roughly with the concentration of population. Generally, where there are people, there will be school-aged children — and when there are enough school-aged children, there will be schools and jobs in local education. Enrollment numbers are predictably largest in Anchorage, Mat-Su, Fairbanks, and Juneau. (See Exhibit 2.)

The 21,600 jobs in local education made up 7 percent of all wage and salary employment in 2011. (See Exhibit 3.) By major category, only health care, retail trade, leisure and hospitality, professional and business services, and state government were larger. (See Exhibit 4.)

From 2000 to 2011, jobs in local education grew at an average rate of 1.3 percent a year. That growth rate was slightly below the overall job growth rate of 1.6 percent and well below the growth of health care (7.4 percent) and natural resources and mining (4.4 percent), two of the state’s strongest performers over the last decade. (See Exhibit 5.)

Less-than-average earnings

The average local education job paid $43,800 in 2011, about 11 percent less than the statewide average and 24 percent less than the average for other public sector jobs.

The mix of occupations in local education explains some of the difference, and a possible larger-than-average percentage of part-time jobs could also be a factor because the data set that produces earnings numbers counts a 20-hour-per-week job the same as a full-time job.

In nominal terms, average earnings in local education have climbed from around $35,000 in 2000 to nearly $44,000 in 2011 — but when adjusted for inflation, they actually fell by 7.4 percent over that period. In contrast, overall earnings statewide were up 5.4 percent when adjusted for inflation. (See Exhibit 6.)
Public School Enrollment
Alaska districts, 2011–2012 school year

Northwest Arctic
North Slope
Yukon Flats
Galena
Yukon-Koyukuk
Tanana
Fairbanks North Star
Matanuska-Susitna
Kenai Peninsula
Anchorage
Nome
Bering Strait
Juneau
Pribilof
Unalaska
Aleutian Region
Aleutians East
Yakutat
Haines
Skagway
Kodiak Island
Lake & Peninsula
Lower Kuskokwim
Yupiit
Kuspuk
Iditarod
Kashunamiut
Lower Yukon
Dillingham Southwest Region
Bristol Bay
Nenana
Denali
Alaska Gateway
Delta/Greely
Copper River
Valdez
Cordova
Chugach
Pelican
Wrangell
Kake
Hoonah
Chatham Island
Annette Island
Sitka
Mount Edgecumbe
Petersburg
Hydaburg
Craig
Southeast Island
Klawock
Ketchikan

Number of Students
Preschool - 12th Grade

0
1,000
5,000
10,000
20,000
Local Education a Significant Employer
Alaska industries, 2011

Other 29%
Federal Government 5%
State Government 8%
Construction 5%
Health Care 10%
Retail 11%
Leisure and Hospitality 10%
Professional and Business Services 8%
Transportation and Warehousing 6%
Local Education 7%

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Caution is necessary when interpreting those numbers, however. Many factors affect a sector’s average earnings, including seniority and a change in the mix of occupations, and the education world has certainly seen its share of change in recent years in the form of federal legislation and education reforms.

For example, if a significant percentage of experienced, higher-paid teachers retired or if education reforms resulted in more jobs for lower-paid teachers’ assistants, average earnings would fall even though an individual teacher or other local education worker’s earnings may have more than kept pace with inflation.

The simplistic conclusion to avoid is that earnings for any specific local education occupation — whether it be teachers, administrators, or the many others — have lost ground to inflation or that specific people who work in public schools have seen their earnings decline when adjusted for inflation. That’s a question the average earnings data can’t answer.

Trends in enrollment and employment

Intuitively, one might think enrollment trends would roughly match employment trends — and over a long period, that is likely. However, enrollment fell 1.3 percent from 2000 to 2011, and local education employment grew 13.9 percent. (See Exhibit 7.)

The year-to-year changes in enrollment were generally small, which may partially explain why employment did not follow the same pattern over the period.

Another possible explanation, similar to the earnings data, is that with federal education reform and a variety of state and federal efforts to improve public schools, positions may have been created or maintained that wouldn’t have been otherwise.

The enrollment decline isn’t expected to continue, though, because Alaska’s
Enrollment Declined Slightly

A stable force in the economy

Local education employment has been fairly steady since 2000, varying between 19,000 and 21,600 jobs. Over the last four years, the job count has climbed every year by small percentages. That same basic pattern is expected to continue in the absence of significant shocks to the state’s economy.

School-aged population is projected to grow 24 percent by 2035.