



Anchorage School District

Education Center

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February 24, 2021

Alaska Senate Education Committee
Alaska Capitol Building
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Chair Holland and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for accepting my written testimony on SB8 Pre-K/Elem Ed Programs/Funding; Reading. As superintendent of the Anchorage School District, I want to communicate that the content of this bill—preschool access, evidenced-based reading instruction, and a focus on DEED's ability to positively impact and support districts with reading outcomes—will be the most important bill heard this Legislative session. *The future of our state has a stronger relationship to what its children can know and be able to do now, as well as twenty years from now, than any singular financial or social impact legislation.*

My 31-year educational experience, including my time as superintendent of the largest two school districts in Alaska, has brought the issue of student reading outcomes front and center as a crisis. Alaska cannot and will not improve student learning outcomes at any level without a strong reading base. We all know where Alaska students' elementary learning outcomes stand in comparison to the other states in our nation—last. The reading research is clear on how to make meaningful changes via a strong, research-based curriculum and pedagogy. Added to this body of work is evidence from other think tanks in the business realm.

As we all know, the premise of a successful business is to realize a return on investment, more specifically, real dollars matter. Early literacy via Pre-K and strong reading instruction do provide the best value for your, the Legislature's, financial investment to schools. In short, research from the Business Roundtable (2016) makes it clear that by embracing the Science of Reading, a state will get a return on its investment utilizing policy to ensure reading proficiency by third grade.

Let's not just say again in the Thirty-Second Legislature that we want change, then point at school districts and say, "just get better" without the support evidenced as being needed from you. The change we all desire cannot be done without our collective investment in these six policy steps outlined in the research. Two of these steps already exist in our statutory language (*).

1. **Expand access to high-quality Pre-K learning.** Early learning is key to ensure ALL students learn. Some kids win the "parent lottery" when born. They are born into families with the resources necessary for early learning.
2. **Offer high-quality kindergarten*.** Our state is a star in this area. We pay for full-day kindergarten. Ensuring the reading instruction is strong will impact outcomes.

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3. **Use data and assessment to track our progress***. Alaska has the data, but we must USE the data to inform our decisions around reading instruction.
4. **Equip and train educators in grades Pre-K – 3 to be great reading instructors.** The reading wars are over in regard to whole language or letter, sound, spelling knowledge.
5. Science-based reading in the five areas is critical. Teachers must instruct students in phonemic awareness and phonics.
6. **Require systemic interventions for struggling readers.** Some students will need more intensive instruction to keep pace with grade level expectations.
7. **Coordinate governance of Pre-K and Grades K-3 to promote efficiencies and maximize impact.** Strong state level leadership and administration oversight are needed.

The Senate Education holds a bill, SB8, which makes actionable the additional steps needed to produce significant change in reading outcomes in our state. I am happy to speak more on this topic. This legislation is essential for the improvement that you and I both want to see in our children's learning and achievement in our great state.

Respectfully,



Deena M. Bishop, Ed.D.
Superintendent