

# ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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WHILE IN SESSION  
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JUNEAU, AK 99801  
(907) 465-3704

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WHILE IN ANCHORAGE  
1500 W BENSON BLVD  
ANCHORAGE, AK 99503  
(907) 269-0169

**SENATOR Tom Begich**

*Senate Democratic Leader*

## **Senate Bill 6: Alaska Early Education Program**

### **Sponsor Statement**

Early education is imperative for our state. When examining Alaska's long-term economy, it is essential to consider how we can both increase Alaskan's productivity as well as reduce potential drains resulting from the unrealized potential of our citizens. Early education is an important part of that equation.

The markers for success develop early in life and brain science underscores that how we use our brains at those crucial early years before we enter Kindergarten – as well as how prepared we are when we enter our K – 12 education have a dramatic impact on how well we will do in school and life. In particular, research shows us that those who live in poverty have an incredibly difficult time catching up with others if they come to school ill-prepared. That same research shows that those who have a high-quality preschool experience go on to future academic and personal success. Studies reported in national media identified that every dollar invested in high quality Pre-K can save up to \$7 in long-term government expense by reducing the need for remedial education, and involvement in the criminal justice and public assistance systems.

High quality early education programs are an investment in our future. Universal early education available to students before they enter kindergarten improves school readiness, reading levels, and long-term economic performance. Long term studies such as the Perry Preschool project also suggest students with access to high quality pre-school are less likely to be incarcerated and less likely to receive government assistance as adults. Alaska's current pre-kindergarten programs – such as those in Anchorage, Mat-Su, The Lower Kuskokwim School District and Nome – and our early education programs including Head Start, Best Beginnings, and Parents as Teachers, provide access to families for such high quality early education, but are, according to our Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), only available to 10% of Alaska's 4 year olds. SB6 would take lessons learned from those programs and provide all school districts with the opportunity to provide high quality early education to their students if they so choose.

There is much to be said about early education, but the critical piece is that children's pace of intellectual development peaks before age six, making those years especially important for future success. School outcome data and academic research show that children who participate in early education programs exceed in developing soft skills tied to future success including conscientiousness, perseverance, sociability, and curiosity. We have seen those results nationally, but also have that data here for Alaska after over ten years of demonstration projects around Pre-

K in our state. The current Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment, children in early education programs in Alaska show dramatic growth even comparing student aptitude changes between the Fall and Spring – and that is a success we should all share. It is time for all Alaskans to have an opportunity to participate in the success of these demonstration efforts. This legislation provides that opportunity.

The Alaska Early Education Program Act will offer school districts the opportunity to develop high quality early education programs that are culturally appropriate and tailored to their students through a three-year grants process based on Alaska's current Pre-K program and the successful efforts of Oklahoma and other states. In year one, the lowest performing 20 percent of school districts – the first cohort – will be eligible to apply for these three-year early education development grants. The second cohort would begin in year two, the third in year three, the fourth in year four, and the final cohort in year five. After three years under the grants program, DEED would be responsible for approving a district's early education program as DEED compliant, and that District's early education students in future years would then be included in the district's student count as ½ day students for the purposes of funding. This system will slowly build early education capacity into those school districts that are lowest performing (generally not including our largest school districts) before adding the largest school districts later in the cycle.

Smart investments in our oil and gas royalties and the PFD have made our State one of the most economically equitable in the country. Similar smart investments in early education have the potential to create a generation of Alaskans prepared to make the greatest impact on this state that we have ever seen.