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SB 6: Alaska Reads Act Sponsor Statement

CS Sponsor Substitute Senate Bill 6 (EDU)

Version: 31-LS0159\O

Early education is imperative for our state. When examining Alaska's long-term economy and opportunity for all Alaskans, 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 and the ability to read 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. 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 such as the Perry Preschool Project Study and others report 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 voluntary early education available to students before they enter kindergarten improves school readiness, reading levels, and long-term economic performance. Long term studies, again such as the Perry Preschool Project Study, also suggest students with access to high quality preschool 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. CS SSSB6 (EDU) 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.

CS SSSB 6 (EDU) also establishes new statewide literacy program and intensive reading intervention services for students experiencing reading deficiencies starting in Kindergarten through grade three. Initially, up to ten struggling schools will have the opportunity to apply for an on-the-ground reading intervention specialist to be engaged and present in their school for an entire year.

DEED funded reading intervention specialists will support existing school staff, engage and build community understanding in evidence-based reading and work with local teachers and support staff to improve reading scores and assessments through evidence-based reading instruction.

Thrice annual reading proficiency screenings or assessments provide teachers and school officials with the required insight into each student's reading proficiency. For students experiencing reading deficiencies, each student will receive personalized and individual attention to improve their reading proficiency.

There is much to be said about early education, but the critical piece is that children's pace of intellectual development potential peaks before age six, making those years especially important for future success. An important partnership between a parent and child begins before the child enters kindergarten, when the parent helps the child develop rich linguistic experiences that help form the foundation for reading and writing, which are the main vehicles for content acquisition. High quality early education prepares students for reading readiness, allowing students to enter kindergarten armed with the knowledge and tools for future academic success.

School outcome data and academic research also 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 show that 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.

CS SSSB 6 (EDU) and the Alaska Reads 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.

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.