



FAIRBANKS NORTH STAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

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February 17, 2021

Members of the Senate Education Committee
RE: SB8/SB42

This letter is to provide input on SB8, the Alaska Reads Act and SB 42 the Alaska Reading and Virtual Education Act. My name is Ellis Ott, Ph.D. and I am the statistician for the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District. I am the school district representative for AK for the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) forum, a member of the Alaska Department of Education's Technical Advisory Committee and my expertise is about data-informed decision-making. These comments will address both bills as there seems to be intention to combine them in the future into one, more comprehensive bill.

I fully support universal preschool, evidence-based interventions, and periodic assessments three times a year to inform intervention decisions. There is significant supporting evidence of both the immediate benefit and return on investment for those strategies. However, I have a serious concern about how SB8 and SB 42 are addressing the 3rd grade retention decision.

Retention in isolation has years of evidence indicating negative impacts for students including higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates. Per our local School Board Policy 983.1, one relevant factor in determining retention is "Formal and informal test scores indicate skills substantially below grade level" which is much lower than "scoring at a proficient or higher achievement level" in Sec.31 Page 29 line 4 of SB42 (similarly for SB8). Our policy is not "social promotion" it is "evidence-based promotion" – there needs to be significant evidence that a student is well below grade level and will benefit from retention. Currently, Fairbanks' 3rd grade retention rate is only 0.2% or 2 per 1,000 students. SB8 and SB42's threshold of proficiency excluding exemptions will include substantially more 3rd grade students in Fairbanks for retention. The retention component should either be removed entirely or made optional for school districts. Optional retention would align with current SB8 and the vote of Senators in 2020 to not amend SB6 to require retention based on proficiency alone from a single test.

To address the importance of needing substantial evidence for a retention decision, I have analyzed the predictive validity of graduation in 2018-2019 using the 3rd grade performance on the state assessment from 2009-10. Of the 526 potential graduates that had 3rd grade test scores, 292 or 55.5% did not achieve a reading score similar to the threshold outlined in SB8 and SB42 (proficiency). However, the graduation rate of these students was 75%! The method correctly identified graduates and non-graduates at a mere 291 out of 526, an accuracy of 55%! Although the national study from the Annie E. Casey Foundation ([Double Jeopardy](#)) claim that "struggling readers are four times as likely to not graduate" is partially accurate (25% non-graduation vs 6.8% non-graduation for not meeting threshold vs. meeting threshold students), the study completely misses the substantial percentage of false positives (at 75%) – the students that still graduate despite the supposed deficiency. For making the extremely sensitive decision of retention which impacts a student's entire education pathway, the accuracy needs to be substantially higher and aligned with our district's current policies.

I have also analyzed the predictive validity of proficiency in 4th grade English Language Arts (ELA) in 2018-2019 using the 3rd grade performance in 2017-2018. Of the 905 3rd grade students, 537 or 59.3% did not achieve proficiency in ELA in 2017-2018. The ELA proficiency rate of these students in 2018-2019 was 18%! The method correctly identified proficient and non-proficient ELA students in the following year at 751 out of 905, an accuracy of 83%! Thus, the decision to provide strong evidence-based interventions has substantially higher accuracy than “proficiency-based” retention.

Our district should have the flexibility (and proven expertise) to utilize far more accumulated and accurate evidence. For example, my advanced early warning system (AEWS) which identifies students in low, medium, and high risk of dropout has an accuracy of 89% in predicting dropout (see [Fairbanks Dropout Data Dashboard](#)) – The AEWS uses extensive evidence including 2 years of attendance rates, grade point average, local and state assessment results, etc. Retention alone is so strong of a predictor of dropout that all retained students are identified as ‘high risk.’ Another example is from the Educational Opportunity project at Stanford University which conducted analysis to provide nationally comparative data by school district (state assessment results aligned to the NAEP in grades 3-8 from 2009 to 2018 → lots of data → [Ed Opportunity Project](#)). All of the five largest school districts in Alaska showed close to the national average. The unweighted average performance of the remaining school districts was well below the national average. The five largest school districts contain about 70% of all students in the state.

I welcome evidence-based accountability and transparency in data. I’ve created a publically available dashboard with data on enrollment, discipline, state and local assessments, school climate, graduation rates, etc. There are many years of data (19 years of enrollment for example), and also extensive options for comparing groups and filtering: [Data Dashboard](#). I believe that transparency in data is central to providing strong support for data-informed decision making.

Also, parents have the right to refuse state testing and “opt out”. What will the policy be for families that do not meet any ‘exemption’ and refuse testing? Will parents have the final say to refuse retention? Or, will there be no parent choice? Will school districts be forced to retain students against our better judgment and strong evidence to promote? I recommend removing the poison pill of “proficiency-based” retention to bring all of the focus and attention back to the amazing and fully supported ideas of universal preschool and evidence-based reading interventions.

For the goal of improving achievement, universal preschool, evidence-based promotion, early warning systems, and evidence-based interventions are substantially effective and accurate. Universal preschool and evidence-based interventions are exciting opportunities to support our students!

Respectfully,

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