

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

Senate Education Committee

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Senate Bill 111

Early Education, Reading Intervention, and Virtual Education

Sponsor Statement

The Academic Improvement and Modernization (AIM) Act is a bipartisan effort to improve reading skills through increased accountability, well placed resources, and by leveraging the modernization efforts we have already begun during the pandemic. This bill affirms it is time to rise to this challenge and invest in the success of our children.

Unfortunately, Alaska currently ranks 50th out of the 50 states in fourth grade reading — even though Alaska spends more per student on education than most other states. This is not a new problem. The data shows Alaska has been well below the national average for decades. And, since at least 2014, the legislature has been debating how to close the achievement gap. It is time for action.

SB 111 seeks to improve our student outcomes through several avenues. First, the bill recognizes that students must be ready to learn when they enter kindergarten. In the most recent assessment of early education quality across the United States, Alaska scored just one out of ten. That is why the AIM Act establishes a financial incentive for districts to improve the quality of their early education programs by allowing districts to include students of high-quality early education programs in the foundation formula. The bill also creates a targeted grant program for low performing districts that need to develop or improve their early education programs.

Next, the AIM Act calls on the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) to establish assessment tools, as those described in the nationally acclaimed Florida Model, to identify students that are falling behind. Also referred to as the “Read By 9 Program,” this model then directs school districts to provide intervention services to those students that need it. This “testing with purpose” process will provide real help to Alaskan students.

In addition to the assistance provided to students, the AIM Act ensures that teachers are well prepared to meet the challenge. This bill adds six reading specialist positions at DEED that will work directly with teachers across the state to improve the quality of education in Alaska. It also requires the Board of Education to establish training and testing requirements in evidence-based reading instruction.

Finally, SB 111 creates a virtual education consortium, managed by DEED. Such a consortium has been under consideration even before the 2020 pandemic, but this timely effort will leverage the recent investments in virtual learning. It will allow students that did well working remotely to continue to do so and will modernize the way Alaska’s teachers access professional development courses.

Thank you for your consideration of the Academic Improvement and Modernization Act.