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MEMORANDUM

Date: April 28, 2021

To: Members of the House Education Committee

From: Löki Gale Tobin, Office of Senator Tom Begich

RE: **Progression/Retention in HB 164**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a written response regarding how CS HB 164 addresses progression/retention for K-3rd grade students.

As previously mentioned, current state policy permits school districts to design and implement a retention policy without any oversight, guardrails, or reporting requirements. Alaska currently has no consistent and standardized statewide data on K-12 retention local district policies or rates.

To assist in the discussion, please allow me to define the terms used:

Hard retention (also known as test-based retention)

- A student does not progress to the next grade due to not achieving a specific score on a standardized test.

Soft retention

- A student does not progress due to a variety of delays or struggles developmentally or academically.

Research from Florida affirms that there is significantly less developmental disruption when retention occurs in the earliest grades.

To help inform and develop better statewide policy and affirm local control, CS HB 164 requires school districts to submit annual reports to DEED that includes the following information. This information will be submitted to the legislature and made public.

1. How many K-3rd grade students were retained.
2. Why a student was retained.
3. How many students were progressed based on good cause exemptions or parent/guardian waivers.
4. Strategies employed to help the student build their reading skills after they were retained.

As Commissioner Johnson has said, this bill is not a retention bill. It is a reading bill that acknowledges there are many strategies employed by teachers, district staff, and parents/guardians/family members to help their students. Retention should always be the last option considered. As CS HB 164 requires individual reading plans after a student is identified as a struggling reader, there is no "one size fits all" policy or a single assessment a student will be evaluated under. Parents/guardians/family members will receive at least ten updates as to their students' progress. Additionally, CS HB 164 also includes language around alternative reading assessments, reading portfolios, consultations with a parent/guardian/family member, extra support outside of the school year, summer school, small group work, at-home support – all these things must be included in the discussion of what approaches will help improve a student's reading.

Under CS HB 164, school districts will still design and implement their own retention policies; however, under CS HB 164, districts will now be required to involve a family member when retention is being considered for a student in K-3rd grade. Parents/guardians/family members must be notified when a student is identified to be struggling with reading (early in the school year), so interventions and support can be provided before any discussion of retention occurs.

Additional safeguards will also be implemented around local school district retention policies, including new good cause exemptions that will prohibit a school district from retaining a student who already has an IEP, a student identified to be an English language learner, and a student who has already been retained.

Finally, CS HB 164 affirms that any decision to retain a student must be made through conference with a parent/guardian and the parent/guardian has the final say. Local teachers and superintendents asked for a signed waiver to be included in this approach to ensure there is a record of communication and collaboration. CS HB 164 also directs local school boards to establish mid-year promotion policies. If a student is retained, parents/guardians/family members must understand how their student may be promoted mid-year.

CS HB 164 requires that if any student is considered for retention, the school district must offer evidence-based reading interventions well before retention is considered an option.