

To: Alaska State Legislature and Board of Education Members

From:

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RE: SB 111

We appreciate the legislature's intensive focus on supporting Alaska's students in developing reading proficiencies, and the targeted support and funding associated with these efforts. The time, energy, and passion that the Senate exhibits in supporting Alaska's students and educators is to be commended.

The intent of SB 111, as we understand it, is to solve the identified problem of low reading scores of K-12 students in Alaska, particularly as represented by standardized test data (e.g., NAEP or PEAKs). While this metric alone may warrant action, we urge you to consider that it is but one data point among many. Legislative action, in particular, should be guided by the myriad data available to us. Even if we take our NAEP scores at face value, a closer look at what the test itself evaluates is warranted. The NAEP website offers example questions from previous tests. In short, content on the test includes literary and informational texts, vocabulary, locate/recall, integrate/interpret, critique/evaluate. Luckily, supporting K-12 students in reading comprehension and higher order thinking around reading can easily fit within culturally responsive pedagogies (and support increased engagement in school, which will in turn positively affect graduation rates).

In support of the reading achievement of K-12 students in Alaska we suggest that the current approach for early reading interventions as outlined in SB 111 and the limited scope of the curricular and instructional supports for teachers be reconsidered. We need to be judicious about the contrast set forth between approaches to teaching reading, which can set up false dichotomies. Instead, empowering highly qualified teachers with access to regular and ongoing support and continual professional learning is essential to provide an expanded view of the range of effective literacy instructional practice.

Because Alaska is a linguistically and culturally diverse state, it is essential that culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) and sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012) and curricular choices be integral to any reform. As it is currently proposed, these pedagogical and curricular approaches are too limited to be of service to the students and teachers in the state, as discussed below:

1. The newly crafted Alaska Reading Playbook appears to underscore the interrelatedness of reading, writing, talking and listening, as do the most recent version of the Alaska Early Learning Standards (<https://www.alaskaedg.org/domain-5-communication-language-and-literacy/>). These

standards are intended to provide a robust and coherent vision for supporting students' literacy learning and do not match the current version of the bill before you, or the design of the intervention and curricular choices being suggested for use in districts across the state. The professional learning opportunities being offered to Alaskan educators appear to be focused solely on processes centered in what is referred to as the "Science of Reading," which reduce instruction to foundational skills and lack the deeper focus on comprehension necessary for success on NAEP (and in reading!).

2. Reading is not solely a cognitive process. Centering the process of reading as being limited to what is assessed by a particular standardized measure, particularly related to the core focus of the "Science of Reading," ignores the complex social and cultural contexts that influence motivation and engagement of student readers (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021).
3. Motivation and engagement are supported by providing students with a wide range of texts, direct application of phonics instruction to authentic text (through both reading and writing), opportunities for choice (Fisher & Frey, 2018), and opportunities to engage in discussion and application of what is learned from text (Venegas, 2018). There are many ways that classroom instructional design and the classroom and home community can influence students' positive relationships with text (whether that is text they are consuming or producing).
4. By limiting the scope of assessed reading to early grades, we overlook the essential vertical continuum of growth necessary to become proficient readers in a K-12 system. As texts and concepts grow increasingly complex, our K-12 students need continual support to engage with and make meaning of these texts (Schoenbach, Greenleaf & Murphy, 2012).
5. Narrowing our focus for reading instruction will not serve students as they continue to move through the grades. Of concern, clearly, to both the legislature and the Department of Education, is the performance data for 4th and 8th grade reading scores. These scores will not be mediated, but instead exacerbated by a limited focus, particularly on spelling-sound correspondences, of reading instruction: "Beginning in the 1960s, we have seen widely publicized studies of a given approach to phonics instruction influencing policy. However, we have not seen evidence of any approach to beginning reading validated in the upper elementary grades and beyond" (Au & Raphael, 2021, p. S66).
6. It is essential that we continually focus on supporting our students to engage with text, to develop comprehension and critical thinking skills across content areas and across a wide range of texts. A focus on "programs" versus the effectiveness of teaching practices is not the way forward (Fisher, Frey & Hattie, 2018). These approaches can build on students' strengths and be continually refined by highly supported teachers.
7. A "key and strategic investment" to move us forward would be a collective, supportive, and ongoing dialogue with educators across the state to support teachers' growth, rather than a punitive or reductive approach that can have the effect of stifling teacher engagement with and creativity in the teaching of reading.

Our goal as teacher educators is to support our pre-service and in-service candidates in deepening their awareness of a wide range of approaches to supporting students' literacy development. These approaches are not limited to a single curriculum or stance. We advocate for a more strengths-based and empowering approach to literacy instruction and curricular choice that provides agency for Alaskan educators and students. Please note that we stand behind the work and advocacy of the Alaska State Literacy Association and their concerns with this piece of legislation, and will continue to work tirelessly to support Alaskan educators and students to meet the most robust and rigorous academic standards, while also taking into account the deep linguistic and cultural strengths of our state.

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