

Alaska State Legislature

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Senator Bettye Davis

SB 8 - "An Act relating to questionnaires and surveys administered in the public schools."

Sponsor Statement

The purpose of SB 8 is to increase participation in the national biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) in order to meet the minimum 60% participation level required by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) for the results to be validated and published along with other states. There have been years when the state has not met minimum participation levels. Failure to obtain survey information adversely affects the ability of educators, planners, policy makers, and parents to understand and address the important health and social issues that affect students' happiness and success in the future.

To help achieve this objective SB 8 changes the parental consent requirement for the YRBS from active to passive, that is, from written to implied consent if parents are given notice at least two weeks in advance of the survey by U.S. mail, or home delivery; the opportunity to review the entire survey at the school or the district's web site; and a form with return envelope to deny permission in writing.

Parents who do not want their children to participate usually notify the school immediately at registration in the beginning of the school year, or after notice and before the YRBS is given early in the spring semester. It is the attention of the other parents SB 8 is designed to reach. Failure of parents to return written consent forms in the past has been found often to be the result of lack of attention rather than refusal. Since the biennial survey is only given to a representative number of the 53 Alaska School Districts and only to a representative sampling of high school classes, many parents and students will never be involved with the survey.

Students are not forced or required to participate. They may independently decline to participate or to answer specific questions in this completely voluntary and anonymous survey. If they do participate, absolute privacy and anonymity are maintained by strict administrative procedures and the return of individual surveys in private and secure sealed envelopes to CDC.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey helps guide and evaluate important health and prevention programs in both the public and private sectors. Local, state, and federal officials, schools, state and federal agencies, public and private grant programs, and nonprofit health organizations rely on these surveys to educate, allocate resources, and compare trends concerning safe behaviors. These include injury prevention, tobacco prevention and control, obesity prevention, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke prevention, safe and drug free schools, substance abuse prevention, violence and suicide prevention, HIV and STD prevention, and connectedness to teachers, parents and other adults.

In short, SB 8 simply makes it easier to obtain information on youth risk behaviors without violating students' or parents' rights to privacy, nor diminishing the ability of parents to supervise their children. At the same time SB 8 increases parental notice with ample opportunity, instructions, and forms to opt out.