

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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Sponsor Statement

Senate Bill 84: Language Immersion Schools and Teacher Certification.

As a father, I know firsthand that children are not only my future, but Alaska's future. For that future to be sound, we need to encourage our children to seek a further understanding of the world around them: how it operates, different viewpoints, and how diversity makes us stronger. Having students not only learn a second language but be immersed in a second language creates a greater capacity for growth.

Some schools in Alaska have already started immersion programs. Spanish immersion is offered at Fronteras in the Mat-Su and German at Rilke Schule in Anchorage. Japanese, Russian, and Spanish immersion programs are also available in the Anchorage School District. Schools in rural Alaska, such as Ayaprun Elitnaurvik in Bethel and Nikaitchuat Iisagvait in Kotzebue are using immersion education to revitalize endangered Alaskan Native languages.

SB 84 creates a designation for language immersion charter schools, which have the specific mission to produce bilingual students, preserve or revitalize endangered languages, or provide a learning experience consistent with a foreign culture.

These language immersion schools have high statutory standards for both the teachers and the school structure. Teachers will be well qualified individuals who are both capable instructors and fluent in the language of instruction. These schools are unique in that they will have an academic policy committee that includes not just teachers, employees, and parents, but language and cultural experts.

Some of Alaska's languages have few speakers remaining, often only elders. For these languages, local governments best know who in their communities are good with children and fluent in the language. This bill allows the state to approve teacher certificates issued by local tribes to teach in local language immersion charter schools. Lastly, the bill allows children being taught in a different language to test in that language, if high-quality benchmark tests exist.

More language immersion programs would be a great asset to Alaska, both helping keep indigenous languages alive and fostering greater understanding of foreign languages and cultures.