

Senate Finance Subcommittee on Education & Early Development, March 9, 2017

Abbe Hensley, Executive Director, Best Beginnings

ahensley@bestbeginningsalaska.org * 907.297.3301

Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with information about Best Beginnings and our work so that you can make good programmatic and funding decisions.

I'm honored to be testifying with two very knowledgeable and committed early childhood advocates, Anji Gallanos and Debi Baldwin. And thank you for your commitment to Alaska's children.

Alaskans are unique, our children are unique. Let's make sure, to the extent possible, parents can choose from a menu of options to help them prepare their children for school, and for life. –Investing in Alaska's Young Children document

Best Beginnings is a public-private partnership mobilizing people and resources to ensure all Alaska children begin school ready to succeed. Since its inception 10 years ago, Best Beginnings and the Department of Education & Early Development have been partners in this work, and Best Beginnings has received funding from DEED to carry out work under the “Early Development” part of the name that the Department lacked capacity for implementing or felt would be more successful if community-based. Through Best Beginnings' public-private partnership with DEED, Best Beginnings promotes the Alaska State Literacy Blueprint, specifically the Birth to Kindergarten Content of Instruction component.

Through the partnership, Best Beginnings also provides activities called for in **Sec. 14.03.072. Early literacy information.** part of which states (b) In partnership with local media outlets, the department shall create and implement a communications campaign to educate parents and guardians about the importance of early literacy. The campaign shall include an Internet website that provides access to current research on early literacy, book recommendations, and vocabulary-building exercises.

Best Beginnings is not just about programs.

As a catalyst for improving school readiness, Best Beginnings works both at the grass roots and grass top levels. At the grass top level, we are engaged in a number of statewide collaborative efforts, such as the Alaska Early Childhood Advocacy Group and the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (co-chaired by the commissioners of the Departments of Education & Early Development and Health & Social Services), the Alaska Children's Trust Kids Count Data Project, Strengthening Families, and others. I work closely with Anji Gallanos at DEED on a number of projects. And, because we are based in Anchorage, we have leadership roles in the two collective impact initiatives to increase high school graduation rates – of course, that trajectory starts at birth.

Early learning is a societal imperative for Alaska. That statement was made over 10 years ago by current Lt Governor Byron Mallott, when he was a member of the Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Task Force that gave birth to Best Beginnings in September 2006. Best Beginnings has worked ever since to inform and educate parents, families, and the general public about the importance of the early years, the time when a child's brain grows and develops the most.

Currently Best Beginnings hosts an extensive website with content for parents and caregivers. In fact, we often get requests from people around the state and the country for permission to use or adapt our materials for the parents they serve. In FY 2016, 7,172 unique Alaska individuals accessed educational resources and information through the website.

We have a lively and engaging social media presence with over 2,023 Facebook "friends." Statewide and local media outlets air our educational radio and television spots, tens of thousands of times every year. We distribute activity guides in English, Spanish, and Yup'ik at no charge to parents and early educators. *Babies on Track*, the DVD and

Alaska-themed board books set, continues to be a valuable resource for its intended audience – parents of children under two.

At the grass roots level, the program people know best is Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. Best Beginnings has fostered a network of local Imagination Libraries, and provides training, technical assistance, and funding for a portion of their annual costs. The Dollywood Foundation that manages the program says that Alaska is one of three states they point to as doing an exemplary job with Imagination Library. Best Beginnings has been invited to present at their biannual conference several times. In fact, they consider Best Beginnings their representative in Alaska.

Every month, children from birth to age 5 in participating communities receive a new, high-quality, age-appropriate book in the mail, addressed to them – at no cost to their families. No, Dolly doesn’t pay for the books. In FY 2016, Alaska Imagination Libraries spent \$548,407 on books and postage. The estimated market value of those books is \$1,617,930 – a savings of \$1,000,000.

The cost of the program is \$30 per year per child – for 12 books. In 2014 we set a goal of reaching 50% of the children under 5. We got to 44% in the spring of 2015, and then state funding was reduced from \$937,500 to \$320,000.

Right now, we’re at about 35%, with 19,123 children getting books this month. The Dollywood Foundation mails 1,000,000 books a month across the US. In Alaska, it’s not just a book distribution program, but a means of enhancing parent-child bonding and positive relationships. According to reports I’ve seen, we think this can also help prevent or mitigate child abuse and neglect.

Please refer to “Impact FY 2016” in Best Beginnings’ Year in Review document (attached) for selected statistics.

Do new, high-quality, age-appropriate books in the hands of children under 5 and their families make a difference? The answer is a resounding yes! Nearly every week another well-regarded study is released that ties together availability of children's books and child-parent early reading experiences with better short- and long-term outcomes for that child.

This is just one example.

“Evaluating the relationship between the *Imagination Library* early childhood literacy program and kindergarten readiness,” Samiei et al, February 12, 2013

Abstract

Research Findings: This study examines the association between participation in the *Imagination Library* early childhood literacy program and early language and math skills at kindergarten entry. The findings suggest participation in the program is positively and significantly associated with **higher measures of early language and math development**. This association remains after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors, pre-kindergarten educational experience, and family reading habits.

Practice or Policy: These results offer support for policy interventions designed to advance kindergarten readiness by increasing young children's access to early literacy materials.

Here in Alaska, we don't have the resources or large enough groups of children to do expensive gold standard research, but we have taken some smaller steps. In 2009 and 2011 two UAA professors surveyed parents whose children were enrolled but had not yet received books and parents whose children had been enrolled for longer than a year. Parents in the second group reported their children had more interest and enthusiasm for books and reading, they had more books in their home, they read more, and felt their children were better prepared for kindergarten. The Juneau Imagination Library found that Imagination Library children scored higher on the literacy and language development portion of the Alaska Development Profile and that children were being read to more.

Looking forward, researchers with REL Northwest have designed an evaluation plan for Imagination Library in Alaska and are working on developing a budget for it. The Dollywood Foundation has agreed to work with us on surveying parents of all enrolled Alaska children whose parents have provided email addresses. In the meanwhile, we do have reports from parents whose children are currently enrolled in Imagination Library.

From Anchorage Imagination Library family engagement surveys, as of December 31, 2016, for FY 2017:

- 92% of parents/families report increased knowledge of parenting and child development
- 84% of parents/families report receiving Imagination Library books has increased the amount of time spent reading with their child

Comments from a survey emailed to parents of Alaska Native children, January 2017:

- A great way to spend time with her & better than watching cartoons.
- Great bonding time for the both of us
- I never knew a child could love books and reading at such a young age!
- She likes to point to the different characters and repeat their name, or species, and I can really tell that she is really learning.
- I never knew it could be so connecting for us!
- At almost three she now "reads" to me - using the pictures as clues for the story.
- I spend more time with my kids reading.
- The variety of books we receive sparks her wonderful imagination.
- My child has a larger vocabulary than before.

All these activities are positive indicators of a child being better prepared for kindergarten and more apt to become a good reader by third grade and on a path to graduate from high school, go on to postsecondary training or college, stay out of prison, and become a productive citizen contributing to society. Did you know that more than 60 percent of all prison inmates are functionally illiterate, according to begintoread.com?

Best Beginnings is an efficient and effective steward of funds received from the State and from our other funders – foundations, corporations, and individuals. I call your attention to the circle graphs.

Best Beginnings and our Imagination Library partners know these are tough times. We also know that we must invest in our children if we have any hope of a prosperous future. I invite those of you who are interested to work with the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC) during the interim to ensure efforts around early childhood are collaborative and coordinated – and make the most difference for the most young Alaskans.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.