



NAACP

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

Anchorage, Alaska Branch – Kevin McGee, President

January 24, 2017

Senator Hughes
Senate Education Committee
Capitol Building
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Representative Drummond
House Education Committee
Capitol Building
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Re: Support for SB 27 and HB 94 for a Reading Proficiency Task Force

Dear Senator Hughes and Representative Drummond,

Please consider our support for new bills SB 27 and HB 64 to create a legislative task force to recommend changes for improving reading and addressing dyslexic students. We believe the bills may help raise the academic proficiency of Alaska public school students. A plan for advancing literacy in public schools in Alaska both to meet State standards and to rise into the ranks of the rest of the U.S. is urgently needed. Senate Bill 27 and HB 64 are a step toward that plan.

Introductions

By way of introduction, the Anchorage branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) comprises long time Alaskan parents and grandparents deeply concerned about the poor track record of literacy achievement among Alaska public school students. With other groups of concerned citizens and parents, we are alarmed by chronically low reading and writing scores across the state. We and the Alaska Branch of the International Dyslexia Association (AKBIDA), Decoding Dyslexia, and the Alaska chapter of Literate Nation have first-hand experience with schools' slow response to students who find it difficult to learn to read.

To be clear at the outset, the Anchorage NAACP's scope of concern is not limited to Anchorage kids or to brown kids or to poor kids. We are concerned about bad reading and math skills generally among the 128,000 public school students in the State. We support SB 27 and HB 64 as the Legislature's step toward a remedy.

An Urgent Problem

In Alaska, poor academic achievement in general and low literacy skills in particular pose an urgent problem. Among Alaska's 128,000 public school students, almost two-thirds are behind in English language and mathematics. The attached graphs of Alaska Measures of Progress 2015 results among school districts show that 65 percent of students taking the test did not meet State standards. Applying that rate to all public school grades, indicates that some 80,000 kids are behind. That is not news, however. For many years, Alaska has consistently scored among the worst-performing states on key national reading and math tests. (Please see illustrations of National Assessment of Educational Progress in the attachments.) These bottom-of-the-barrel outcomes appear entrenched. Both the poor outcomes themselves and the absence of improvements over the years indicate a system of public education in Alaska that in our view inadequately serves students and does not meet the law.

Poor academic performance among Alaska students appears systemic and ubiquitous. It is not just a rural problem or a poor people problem or a brown people problem. Although we know, not surprisingly, that higher-income students generally perform better, in only a minor proportion of schools statewide do most students meet State standards. (See the chart of districts' 2015 AMP performance in the attachments.) Furthermore, white Alaska kids have consistently managed to score below other white kids in the U.S. Although we applaud the many bright spots of student achievement, we are concerned about the overall low level of reading, writing and math performance that characterizes Alaska public schools.

The urgency of low academic performance has recently become even sharper in light of the State's financial prospects. In the past, high State oil revenue may have made it easier to infer that improvements in education might be forthcoming. And perhaps the plentitude of good blue-collar jobs obscured the value of education in economic competition. However, the decline in both the price and production of oil strips away those two masks. Now, the decline of State revenues shows that educational improvements are more necessary and at the same time less likely. We think that neither hope and patience nor the prospect of high State revenues any longer will lead to gains in academic performance in Alaska.

These days Alaska needs to plan what it will do differently. We know that the Department of Education shares that view, based on its "Alaska State Literacy Blueprint" (2011). Among other things, for example, the Department outlined the role of certified reading or literacy specialists and collaboration with universities regarding teacher preparation in overcoming low literacy proficiency. And we are happy to learn that the Department will make its own committees to make recommendations this year for educational improvements.

The Objective

We want Alaska public school students to rise quickly into the ranks of the rest of the U.S. in reading, writing and math. We will know the goal has been achieved when we see significant gains on the order of a grade-level improvement in statewide scores as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In addition, we will know that Alaska's public school system is adequate when students' performance rises to the State's own grade-level academic standards. SB 27 and HB 64 may be part of the remedy.

Accountability

We are bringing the urgent problem of low academic proficiency to your attention because we believe the Legislature is accountable for academic proficiency among public school students. The good news is that under the State Constitution the Legislature is responsible for public schools. The bad news is that you are also accountable for them. Through your hands pass more than one billion dollars per year to pay for

public education. The Legislature has the authority to pay for and govern Alaska's public schools and in turn it is accountable for the result.

As background, we understand that families and individuals carry the greatest responsibility for children's education. In fact, our organization acknowledges that and works hard to support families in that regard. We know that schools can only affect what goes on within their four walls, and consequently have limits on their accountability for academic performance.

Nevertheless, academic improvement plans that may come from a task force to be created by SB 27 and HB 64 are important, and this discussion is aimed at how they may help the Legislature meet its obligations to public schools. We know that schools hold many of the keys to academic improvements even in the face of poor student preparedness because we have seen examples of those improvements from around the U.S. and in Alaska.

As further background, please know that recently we have reminded many State policy makers and school budget managers about their responsibility. We have brought it to the attention of the Governor by way of letters and at several meetings in the last two years. We spoke with Commissioners Hanley and Johnson and their top staff on several occasions as well, sometimes with the Governor in attendance. We have met with a number of legislators and their aides, reminding them of their obligation, showing them the challenge of low scores, and asking for legislation to improve the public schools, pre-K programs, and reading instruction in particular. We have spoken before the Board of Education about the need to enhance literacy education as some other states have done; we will speak to the Board again.

In our initial efforts to trace accountability for public school academic performance, we've discovered two things, as follows:

- The State has not stepped out in front to develop its own urgent, home-grown approach and to lead with its own initiatives. We've seen no strongly-voiced vision yet from the State for dramatically raising reading and math skills of tens of thousands of kids. Perhaps SB 27 and HB 64 will change that.
- The second discovery has to do with accountability as it is associated with the allocation of money. With some exceptions, neither the Department, the school districts, the Governor, nor the Legislature justify their pattern of spending more than one billion dollars of State money annually for school operations on the basis that their allocation maximizes the math and reading performance of more than one hundred thousand kids. We've seen no State or district budgeting plan that targets dramatic improvements in reading and math skills of our students. Few of the many State and local government position-holders responsible for sending money to public schools has acknowledged to us that they bear responsibility for urgent academic improvements. Perhaps SB 27 and HB 64 will change that.

By way of example, in the wake of the AMP scores and the proposed cuts to pre-K budgets last spring we asked Commissioner Hanley and later Dr. Johnson what the Department of Education would do differently to raise academic proficiency. Neither had an answer.

At the local level in Anchorage, we have also approached the School District, the municipal Assembly, and the teachers' union several times. Those groups share accountability for adequate instruction because they influence school budgeting. We've asked them to consider focusing on academic achievement in these times of program reductions. We are proud of our schools and we are on the side of the teachers and the School District. But we are not above suggesting priorities for them to re-focus on. For example, we asked them to develop a stronger teacher corps, that is, more teachers with stronger skills.

In addition, we've started approaching the University of Alaska regarding improving teacher training. Although the conversation is off to a rocky start, we will continue asking the colleges of education how they will improve K-12 literacy instruction by way of stronger teacher training. The University's colleges of education hold several keys to improved academic performance of K-12 students, we believe. By way of their charters and their budgets, the colleges are in our view accountable for the effectiveness of the teachers they produce.

An illustration of a vision without accountability for academic proficiency was provided at a meeting in Anchorage in November. Education Matters, Inc. was good enough to sponsor discussions among almost 100 educators and education advocates about their expectations for high school graduates in the 21st century. People in the room ranged from teachers, principals and administrators to politicians and policy advocates. When asked to provide their profile of a high school graduate, they offered a long list of social and personal habits which are not measured but would put the Boy Scouts to shame. Literacy and academic skills of graduates, however, which can be measured, were lost among the virtues for which the educators' could not be held accountable. Perhaps it is little wonder Alaska kids' reading scores on average have not risen if educators don't judge their own performance by it.

We are glad to know that the mission of the State Board of Education and Early Development is to "ensure quality standards-based instruction to improve academic achievement for all students." Alaska's academic standards are fine, in our view, and instruction based on them certainly is critical for academic gains. However, we are afraid that the Board's mission is far from accomplished and we were disheartened to see no plan and no action for catching up on academic achievement.

To understand that view, please consider some recent comments and budgeting decisions from the Governor. Last year Governor Walker published an opinion piece outlining his concerns about public education (see it attached). The NAACP Anchorage and the Alaska Reading Coalition applaud his intent to adequately fund education, broaden the conversation about education and do four things differently. Those improvements were strengthening early education and computer networks, reducing expenses, and helping school districts retain students. The Governor said he is a fan of vocational education and understands Alaska's low academic ranking among the states. We were certainly glad to read that in his article

On the other hand, the Governor has not walked the talk about improving education. In both of his first two years in office, Governor Walker and the Department of Education led the way in reducing public school funding. The Legislature got the message that less money for schools was all right and then reduced school funding even further. The Department also proposed to greatly reduce Alaska's limited but successful pre-K programs. However, nowhere have we heard from the Governor or the Department that dramatically raising literacy skills of tens of thousands of Alaska students is urgent. And that is in spite of the fact that reading, writing and math skills are critical to the vocational education and high school retention improvements that the Governor likes. Nowhere has he asked what Alaska or schools need to do differently to raise up academic proficiency among the 80,000 students who are behind.

Turning in your direction, our questions for the Legislature are what is your vision for Alaska public schools, and what will you do differently to fulfill that vision? What will the Legislature do to raise the reading and writing and speaking skills of 80,000 students by a grade level? Perhaps SB 27 and HB 34 will answer those questions.

The Moore Decision

To focus tightly on accountability, please consider the view that the State is legally responsible for raising

student academic proficiency. The Alaska Constitution, VII §1, requires the Legislature to maintain a system of public education, and the State courts require it to be adequate. In the view of many states' courts, adequacy is to be judged by academic results rather than simply "inputs."

In her conclusions regarding Alaska educational adequacy in the case of *Moore, et al. v. State of Alaska* in 2007, Judge Gleason said the Alaska Constitution set some limits on school management. The judge pointed out (page 175) that DEED's academic standards formed a "constitutional floor" of an adequate education. She added on page 188 that

"If generations of children within a school district are failing to achieve proficiency, if a school or a district has not adopted an appropriate curriculum to teach language arts and math that is aligned with the State's performance standards, if basic learning is not taking place for a substantial majority of a school's children, then the Constitution places the obligation upon the Legislature to insure that the State is directing its best efforts to remedy the situation."

Consider our view that if academic performance outcomes today were a criterion for judging the adequacy of public education in Alaska under the law, the public education system would be found inadequate. Almost two-thirds of students did not meet State's English and math standards according to recent statewide tests, Alaska Measures of Progress. A similar proportion did poorly in the National Assessment of Educational Progress as it has for years (see the attachments.) Alaska students' language and math skills rank near the bottom compared to other states, and a relatively low proportion of students are college or career ready. SB 27 and HB 64 may help the Legislature see the problem and turn it around.

Objections and Distractions

We've learned to expect objections and distractions from very smart, experienced, well-meaning people. Please do not let them put you off. Please avoid the temptation of attractive one-offs, nifty experiments, the allure of more parental choices, and policy fads like charter schools and vouchers. In other successful states, none of those have demonstrated that they can lift academic achievement at the scale of tens of thousands of kids. Focus instead on big, broad results and evaluate efforts on their "outcomes." Don't let the bottomless arguments over "inputs" interfere. Make education leaders responsible for their claims.

We've learned to expect several kinds of objections to our insistence on better reading scores. You may wish to consider them beforehand.

First, long-time professional educators, whether in the teacher organizations or State government, sometimes object that we are not smart enough about the legal and student challenges they face and about pedagogy to propose solutions. In response, we would ask them how they plan to raise the proficiency of 80,000 Alaska kids after decades of stagnant scores. You will find that the professional educators in Alaska have developed no statewide plan for dramatic improvements in reading proficiency.

Secondly, you may hear some in the school districts, the Department of Education and Legislature object that our proposals will cost them money. In response, we would ask them for a counter-proposal, including funding or not, that still will meet the goal of rapid, dramatic, reliable statewide academic improvement. You'll find that people's fears about money stand in the way of 80,000 kids' effort to read.

Thirdly, the Department of Education and school boards sometimes say not to worry, that they are taking on the problem with wonderful tactics and have bright spot examples to prove it, and that we should support their current efforts. We are thrilled by their successes and promising methods. But we've

learned those examples are more akin to bailing a boat with a spoon than to the large-scale approaches needed to turn around the trajectories of 80,000 Alaskan students who are behind. In addition, some of the very leaders that claim they are addressing the problem are at the same time proposing reductions to pre-K and classroom instructors.

Dyslexia

We want State law to address dyslexia. Our parent coalition's first-hand experience and research shows that dyslexia is a major source of shortcomings in learning to read. Dyslexia is an inborn disability affecting a child's capability to de-code the symbols necessary for reading and writing. The problem is found among both affluent and poor kids alike and extends into adulthood. Dyslexic kids and their families face tremendous hurdles. As much as 15 percent of the student population is likely dyslexic. However, our experience is that Alaska public schools do not recognize dyslexia yet and are not equipped to handle the challenge. Consequently, families and their students continue to suffer and Alaska's overall reading accomplishments remain low.

There is good news, however. Most dyslexic kids are otherwise bright, motivated and hard-working. With modern techniques and a lot of focused work, virtually all dyslexic kids can learn to read. Please see the attachments for reports of methods and successes. We believe that public schools are obligated to teach dyslexic kids to read and that they can do that with the proper techniques, once the challenge has been taken up.

In fact, that was the main story at our meeting in Juneau last spring with Governor Walker, Lieutenant Governor Mallot, members of the Governor's staff and two of your Department administrators. The most important member of our visiting group was a young dyslexic student. He told the Governor the story of his family's plan to leave Juneau this year in order for him to attend an Outside school that will teach him how to read. With that as background, we will ask you to sponsor regulations that recognize dyslexia.

In order to address Alaska's chronically low reading proficiency among school children, please consider a fundamental re-approach to teaching reading. We know that the Department has attempted to address Alaska's stagnant reading scores through the years. However, the most important changes have not filtered down to the classroom and do not deliver the instructional intensity and dose needed to improve reading proficiency scores statewide.

We ask you to lead the charge to design, implement and fund a five year plan for high quality reading and writing instruction aimed at our lowest-proficiency readers. The plan's objectives would be doubling the number of Alaskan students performing at the advanced reading proficiency levels and raising the majority up to meeting the State's English language standards.

As technical background, evidence-based reading instruction starts with foundational reading skills. They include phonological and phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondence, phonics, rapid automatic naming, vocabulary, oral language and working memory (Cunningham, 2001; Connor, Alberto, Compton, & O'Connor, 2014; Moats et al., 2010). Although the importance of these skills in teaching reading may be widely acknowledged in Alaska, too many teachers lack the content knowledge and practical skills to teach reading well. (That is to say nothing about the need to raise the reading-teacher-to-pupil ratio for the 80,000 students who read poorly.) Furthermore, there is wide variation among districts' capacities to ensure that teachers become highly knowledgeable and skilled in teaching reading. We refer you to the "International Dyslexia Association Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading." It articulates the scientific knowledge considered foundational for reading instruction to let all kids, even those with dyslexia, become reading-proficient (Moats et al., 2010). You'll find full references for the citations in the attachments.

Consider as well that high quality reading and writing instruction for the lowest proficient readers frequently raises proficiency for other readers. Evidence-based reading and writing instruction for students with dyslexia by way of improvements in teacher preparation and professional development is expected to raise the reading proficiency levels for all of Alaska's pupils. Research advances elsewhere provide a consensus about how both atypical and typical children learn to read and their overlapping instructional needs. While the speed of learning and dosages of instruction may vary among children, they are similarly well-tuned to direct, systematic, and explicit instruction (Dehaene, 2009). This form of instruction is identified as critical in preventing reading difficulties such as those frequently associated with dyslexia (Connor et al., 2014). We understand that if Alaska meets the instructional needs of students with dyslexia, all students in Alaska will reap the benefits.

Consider that several regulatory and legislative approaches can provide opportunities to transform Alaska's chronically low scores in reading and writing proficiency and put Alaska's children on par with their peers in the Lower 48. The plan should consider regulatory and legislative approaches described in academic reports cited in the attachments.

After studying other states, such as Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, and North Carolina, we have found it easy to conclude that Alaska can improve reading proficiency as well. An example of the necessary commitment is demonstrated by Connecticut's plan to eliminate the achievement gap. Briefly, Connecticut promoted best practices in early literacy by encouraging research to determine specific reading instruments coupled with professional development (Gillis, 2012). Connecticut is now publishing the results showing double-digit percentage gains in reading grade level for first, second and third grade students (Coyne & Oldham, 2015). On a smaller scale, we also have seen that Erie Elementary School in Colorado implemented similar professional development for teachers and nearly doubled the number of students at the advanced reading proficiency level (Sauer, 2013). You may wish to consider how poor communities in Charlotte, Boston and Tampa have managed dramatic improvements in national reading scores and now rank among the best in the U.S.

Dyslexia law. As the first part of an Alaska reading plan, we will ask that Alaska join other states having a dyslexia law. Please see the table below. Alaska's reading plan could produce similar results if it were based on dyslexia laws that already benefit students with dyslexia in the United States. Those laws provide for screening, definition, interventions, pre-service teacher preparation, in-service professional development, and accommodations or a dyslexia/literacy pilot. Comprehensive efforts elsewhere involve at least three of those six elements carried out through legislative or regulatory efforts (Youman and Mather, 2015).

Dyslexia laws have proliferated in recent years and Alaska is one of the few states without one. We refer you to the fall 2016 issue of the International Dyslexia Association's journal "Perspectives on Language and Literacy." Please see the journal's articles focused on eliminating teacher education gaps for children with dyslexia (Carreker & McCombes-tolis, 2016).

Please also see a table in the attachment summarizing the recent legislative accomplishments of other states. Nineteen have defined dyslexia, for example. Seventeen states offer training for teachers in dealing with dyslexic students. Thirteen states have a larger percentage of rural residents than Alaska does, according to NAEP, and have higher 2015 fourth grade reading scores. Ranked in order of population size, those having scores higher than Alaska's score of 213 and with a larger percentage rural population are as follows:

228 Wyoming
224 Iowa

232 New Hampshire
225 North Dakota
217 Alabama
228 Kentucky
220 South Dakota
218 Arkansas
225 Montana
214 Mississippi
216 West Virginia
230 Vermont
224 Maine

Four of the 13 more-rural states, in italics, already have dyslexia laws or handbooks.

Implement disabilities act. Secondly, as part of an Alaska reading plan we will ask for implementation of the guidance that clarified regulations under the “Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)” in the October 2015 “Dear Colleague” letter from the United States Department of Education (Yudin, 2015).

Strengthen licensure standards. Thirdly, the Alaska reading plan should lead the way toward Department of Education and University of Alaska programs and State regulations for improving teacher preparation. Those regulations should ensure that significantly improved preparation in reading instruction is delivered by the University of Alaska colleges of education faculty. Those improvements would involve scientifically-evidenced faculty expertise and providing pre-service teacher candidates with a minimum of 12 to 15 credit hours in foundational reading instruction. Improvements in teacher preparation also are likely to require regulations for research-based teacher licensure exams in reading. One exam would be required for certifications that include teaching reading. A more advanced licensure exam would be required for those seeking certification as special educators or reading specialists. Massachusetts, with some of the best improvements in reading, offers an excellent example to consider. We hesitate to say how to run educational programs, but we don’t see their leaders making improvements. Perhaps SB 27 and HB 64 will change that.

The Greatest Stake

Even more kids, not necessarily just those suffering dyslexia, are behind in reading because they arrive in class poorly prepared. We know that many kids are abused, neglected, face crises, undergo trauma, are homeless, or have parents who are illiterate. In an Anchorage elementary school we visited, the principal had arranged sleeping pads in safe places for his students. He knew exactly how many were in crises each day. As we all know, such conditions contribute to poor reading skills everywhere, from Alaska to Florida. It is the mission of public schools to overcome those disadvantages.

Using Anchorage School District as an example, more than 24,000 kids there are behind in reading. In spite of that, the district eliminated four or five dozen instructor positions this year. Those students are not likely to ever catch up.

To take another example from Anchorage, consider some middle school math classes. One teacher has 27 kids per class, a typical pupil:teacher ratio planned by the Anchorage School District. The students started their school year still learning the multiplication table and were about three grade levels behind on average. The District provides no extra instruction and has no plans in that direction. On the Alaska

Measures of Progress test in 2015, 85 percent of the school's eighth graders did not meet the State math standards. Those kids likely will not catch up, but will leave high school still way behind in math.

Alaska school kids are behind academically and are becoming economically uncompetitive. To turn that around is the responsibility of the Legislature. SB 27 and HB 64 are a step in the right direction.

The good news is that we know how to teach poorly prepared kids to read. Other states have shown that it takes modern, data-driven methods and direct instruction on a large scale. You'll find success stories in cities like Tampa, Charlotte and Boston which have dramatically raised reading scores. You'll understand the methods from the results of reading research labs in Connecticut and Ohio. And here in Anchorage, the school district applies a system of screening, progress monitoring and calibrated instruction for many readers who are behind grade level. We understand that it is very effective where it is applied correctly, although we've learned it is applied less widely than it could be. We believe every kid can learn to read.

To effectively reach and teach the large numbers of poor readers with these effective methods, however, requires numbers of expert reading teachers. On that score, the news is not good. That is why we will suggest that the task force created by SB 27 and HB 64 look to other states for success stories to bring home to Alaska. We'll suggest that the task force plan how to deploy a cadre of expert reading instructors needed to raise up the reading skills of 80,000 Alaska students who are behind grade level. To help with that, we also will suggest the task force consider arranging with the University of Alaska's colleges of education to turn out hundreds more teachers trained in modern reading instruction methods.

Although SB 27 and HB 64 are focused on reading, and correctly so, the problem of low academic achievement is even larger. On the Alaska Measures of Progress test in 2015, Alaskan students scored just as poorly on math as they did in reading. To raise the reading and math proficiency of Alaska students may take serious, broad, voluntary high-quality pre-K programs as well as hundreds if not thousands more skilled elementary and secondary school teachers of reading and math. Examples from successful states show that hard work within the public schools is mainly responsible for their dramatic improvements in proficiency among millions of kids.

Next Steps for Instruction Improvement

The NAACP urges your education committees to recommend passage of SB 27 and HB 64 this session. We also urge the committees to improve the bills by amending them as follows:

- Provide for more, and more-expert reading instruction in public schools in 2017-2018.
- Require schools to demonstrate significant improvements in reading scores.
- Require the reading proficiency task force to hire professional experts, from out of state if necessary, to help conduct research.
- Approve a fiscal note to fund the task force including those professional experts.

In addition, we ask the education committees to hold hearings in parallel with HB 27 and HB 64 and to recommend State general fund budget increases to provide significant improvement in reading and math proficiency in schools statewide beginning FY 2017-2018.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike Bronson" followed by a horizontal line.

Mike Bronson
Education Committee
NAACP Anchorage Branch

A handwritten signature in blue ink that appears to read "for" followed by a horizontal line.

Rev. W. Greene, Pastor
Education Committee
NAACP Anchorage Branch

Attachments