

Testimony in Support of SSSB 6 – Alaska Reads Act
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Good Morning Mr Chairman and members of the Senate Education Committee.

My name is Norm Wooten and I'm the Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. And thank you Senator Begich for introducing this legislation.

Pre-K is a topic near and dear to the hearts of school board members. For many years we have had resolutions supporting both Pre-K and reading proficiency by the 3rd grade.

The 2011 report of the Alaska Advisory Task Force on Higher Education & Career Readiness stated in part:

"Children who receive quality early education arrive at school ready to learn and perform better in school. They are less likely to need expensive special education interventions, and they are more likely to graduate from high school and to successfully enter the workforce."

"Research is clear that when students enter kindergarten, 40% of them on average are one to three years behind grade level, and too many of them stay behind throughout their school careers. Alaska can invest a relatively small amount in early childhood and innovative K-12 programs, or a vastly greater amount at the college level. Today's third-grader can't wait for, and our public treasury cannot afford, a remediation response that doesn't begin until the 3rd grade."

Reading and literacy are the great equalizers in the world in which we live. Students who cannot read are educationally crippled in every other academic subject, as well as being career disadvantaged throughout adulthood. Our children must learn to read, and deserve no less from us.

AASB unequivocally supports Pre-K, early assessment of reading proficiency, interventions for less than proficient readers, and high quality professional development to enable educators to create proficient readers.

However, my recommendation is to carefully consider the provision for retention of students. It seems to me that retaining a child for lack of reading proficiency may be more of a failure of the system, rather than the fault of the child. I applaud the bill's provision for early assessments and implementation of interventions. This seems to be a more logical approach than retention, and one that is more about improvement.

I would also ask that the committee consider what some of my members are calling "over prescriptive details for districts to implement." It seems as if providing high quality professional development to educators and paraprofessionals in reading instruction and intervention, and then holding them accountable, would be more productive and better serve students in our quest for reading proficiency by 3rd grade.

My final concern is the aggressive timeline for implementing the provisions of the bill. I'm apprehensive about the capacity of DEED to find sufficient numbers of educators trained and competent in teaching reading, implementing interventions, and providing professional development to those needing assistance. I want to be optimistic about the schedule because our students need these skills so desperately. However, should DEED not be able to fully implement the programs called for in the bill, some legislators and the public might deem the initiative a failure and back away from the funding before giving it an opportunity to improve our children's reading proficiency.

Please do not take my concerns as opposition to the bill. I am excited about addressing what I refer to as a "reading crisis." AASB's resolutions, adopted by our membership, have sought this type of state support for years. Our districts are anxious to begin the work. None of us want to graduate yet another class of students with less than a highly proficient reading skill. I only ask for careful consideration of the legislation to ensure it is the very best we can provide for our students.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to testify before the committee.