



FAIRBANKS NORTH STAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Members of the Senate Education Committee
RE: SB 8 and SB 42

This letter is to provide input on SB 8, the Alaska Reads Act, and SB 42, the Alaska Reading and Virtual Education Act. First, thank you for your advocacy on behalf of Alaska's students and the vital need for reading proficiency by our students. There is no doubt that emphasizing early identification and intervention for struggling readers is key to the success for many students. I also am excited about the possibility of a virtual education consortium and the opportunities it could create for Alaska's students and educators. I am especially excited about an increased focus on early childhood education.

When the Alaska Reads Act was introduced last spring, I wrote this committee expressing my concerns with the misuse of data that premised much of the act. NAEP scores and the supposed successes of states like Florida and Mississippi raise red flags if they are to be used as a basis for Alaska's reading initiatives. Most importantly, there is no proof that retention of third graders based on reading proficiency actually improves reading performance and, in fact, there is considerable research to indicate the negative effects of retention on student outcomes. The retention language, especially the language in SB 42, is concerning. In Fairbanks, retention must be based upon evidence that retention will be beneficial and outweigh the potential negative consequences. Making retention the default for low performing students is not the right approach.

Many Alaskan schools, especially larger urban districts, already have successful reading instruction and intervention systems in place. Legislation which supports those efforts with funding and training could have a large positive impact on reading proficiency levels of students. However, just as our individual students should have targeted instruction, Alaskan school districts need individualized supports and are not well served by a one-size-fits-all approach. Any bill that addresses the complex issues around reading should not support one-size-fits-all screeners, plans, and approaches. As a reading bill moves forward, I encourage you to avoid unfunded mandates for districts, prescriptive approaches to teaching reading, and directing districts how to teach reading.

Listening to your meeting on Monday, February 15, it sounds like the intent is to combine SB 8 and SB 42 into one, more comprehensive bill. As you go forward, please consider the following specific concerns, questions, and suggestions.

SB 8/Sec 3 and SB 42/Sec 5

- Current language in both bills state districts shall "annually provide to parents" a number of items.
 - Suggestion: Replace "shall annually provide" in line 10 with "**shall make publicly available.**" Providing copies to each family is both a labor and staffing expense to districts already suffering from limited resources. Making this information and strategies available as a resource is much more feasible for districts.
- The switch to "literacy" from "reading" and inclusion of culturally responsive strategies and intervention is important to keep.

SB 8/Sec 4 and SB 42/Sec 9

- SB 42 adds reporting around the number of various employee groups as compared to others. It is unclear how reporting this information relates to implementing reading interventions and how it will be used.
- The reporting of “progress made to implement the reading intervention programs” is important, as is the inclusion of “culturally responsive” professional development. This reporting may help districts focus around sustained, embedded professional learning for staff.

SB 8/Sec 5 and SB 42/Sec 11:

- SB 42 proposes to move the kindergarten deadline from September 1 to June 1. This move would have negative impact, especially for families transferring in from outside Alaska. The national trend seems to be to move the deadline for enrollment later in the year, such as October 1, and our military and other families transferring in plan on a fall deadline for entering kindergarten.
 - Suggestion: Leave the September 1 date.

SB 8/Sec 7 and SB 42/Sec 13:

- How does reporting the number of students in grades K – 3 include or apply to students who did not attend kindergarten? As kindergarten is not mandatory in the state of Alaska, there may be a skewing of data based on these students’ lack of exposure to quality literacy instruction and (if necessary) intervention.
- The phrase “demonstrated sufficient reading skills for grade progression” is vague. Even the proficiency scales identified in PEAKS scoring are simply proficiency on standards and were not designed to be indicators of skills needed for grade progression.
- Once a statewide screener or assessment is chosen, it will be critical to define this intent. We do not have levels of proficiency against standards identified like we do for PEAKS.
 - Suggestion: Delay the implementation of a statewide screener and allow time for Alaskan educators to work through defining grade level proficiency for K-2.
- Both bills direct districts to create a mechanism to track students in grades 4-10 who were retained. Given the transiency of many students, how will districts be expected to track this information?
- In many districts, the small *n* size of this data will either make the data not statistically significant or provide identifying information around specific students.

SB 8/Sec 7 and SB 42/Sec 14

- Support for early education programs, especially for districts identified as needing support, is critically important and appreciated.
- Kindergarten is not mandatory in Alaska. How will these early education supports benefit students who do not attend kindergarten or early education programs? Will there be a move to make kindergarten mandatory?

SB 8/Sec 12 and SB 42/Sec 18: Reading Intervention Programs:

- The two bills have some important differences in requirements and language. Please ensure that language around culturally relevant education programs is preserved.

SB 8/ Sec 13

- The bill bases its requirements identified by the National Reading Panel in the year 2000 over twenty years ago! More recent research (e.g. Skaanes & Domoradzki, 2020) connects the importance of writing to improving reading skills.
 - Suggestion: Replace “based on the five components of evidence based reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel” with “based on the essential components of evidence-based reading instruction identified by current research.”

SB 8/Sec 19 and SB 42/Sec 29

- While it is helpful to diagnose characteristics of dyslexia, it is but one of many reading disorders. It seems odd to call out this specifically when the goal is a comprehensive screener.
 - Suggestion: Eliminate the phrase “including students with characteristics of dyslexia,” or at the least replace “dyslexia” with “reading disabilities.”
- How will “sufficient reading skills” be defined at each grade level and within each testing window? Proficiency against standards or on a screener does not provide a whole picture of a student’s reading abilities.
- It will be critical that the state’s chosen assessment provides data and a reporting scale that clearly aligns with both PEAKS and NWEA/MAP, so that consistent data can be tracked and compared.
 - Suggestion: Identify a list of screeners that meet the intent of the bill and, more importantly, provide teachers with formative information on students’ reading levels. Allow a transition period for districts so they can modify existing vendor contracts, update grant reporting, etc. to reflect a new data tool.
- How will the state provide targeted instruction? Perhaps this is just vague wording, and the intent is to provide tools for targeting instruction based on student needs? What would this look like in practice?
 - Suggestion: Clarify or eliminate.
- Both bills detail requirements for developing, implementing, and monitoring individual reading improvement plans. This section presents a huge undertaking, and will require significant expense and effort to create, monitor, and track. Although larger districts may be able to accommodate this requirement, smaller rural districts will have difficulty meeting this mandate. SB 8 includes language requiring the plans to be “culturally responsive” in that process which is important.
- Both bills indicate retention as the default, unless there is proof on an exemption. The extensive research on the long term negative outcomes of retention shows this presumption to be backwards, as retention should be used only when there is evidence to indicate its necessary for the long term achievement of a student. Retention should not be a solution to students not meeting grade level benchmarks, nor is retention an evidence-based intervention.
- Both bills involve school boards in retention practices instead of relying on the professionals working directly with a student. This potentially politicizes decisions that should be made in the best interest of individual students, especially in small communities in rural Alaska.
 - Suggestion: Retention should not be the answer provided by this bill. This section should be removed and replaced with much simpler language, such as “Districts must have written policy that defines processes and indicators of retention.” If the concern is parent involvement, add a statement indicating “Parents/ guardians must be included as an integral part of all retention processes.”

SB 8/Sec 22 and SB 42/Sec 37

- Teacher retention (and recruitment) are serious issues in Alaska and look to be growing challenges in the future. The focus on a statewide solution in this section is very valuable.

SB 42/Sec 32: Virtual Education

- Statewide support for virtual education options (for students and educators) is critical.
- The demands on DEED to review curriculum, provide training, and support the technical aspects of the system will be significant. Will DEED be provided additional staff to accomplish this?
- Concerns:
 - In order for districts to fully commit to this partnership, there needs to be a guarantee that it will be funded for several years and supported at the state level.
 - The concept of requiring common inservice days and potentially daily bell schedules will be very difficult to navigate. It would be a shame for these to be barriers to districts participating.
 - Without increased bandwidth across the state, not all districts or students will be able to fully participate.

I applaud Senator Hughes and Senator Begich for bringing legislation forward which focuses resources on improving the reading skills of all of our students and supports school districts in that endeavor. State-level support for funding and training to support local efforts to target students, provide quality intervention, and increase teacher readiness for literacy instruction could have a large positive impact on reading proficiency levels of students across the state. Additionally, a commitment to a statewide virtual program will provide opportunities that are not limited by a district or student's zipcode, and which increase equity for all. I look forward to seeing the future iterations of these bills.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Cc: State House Education Committee
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