

Dear Chair Holland and Senate Education committee members:

I write today as an educator of Alaska's children in my thirtieth year of teaching reading. I am hopeful that Senate Bill 8 can reach all of Alaska's children by providing highly trained teachers in literacy who understand the complexities of teaching reading and writing.

In reviewing the SB 8 I want to highlight two words. The words "programs" and "systematic" imply that there is a singular line to get all students reading. There is not a single line but many pathways. To make this point, let us consider how children learn to talk. All children do not learn to talk on the same day, but their development happens along a continuum. This logic applies to reading and writing.

Teaching reading and writing is complex. Students come from many backgrounds and experiences. Teachers must know where their children come from to understand how best to teach them.

I have been fortunate in my career to have taught hundreds of kids to learn to read and write. Although there are practices and tools that I use for all students, there have been no two children taught in the same way. Some children learn to read effortlessly, while others struggle. It is my job to figure out what kids need and to support each child with the correct tools to turn them into readers and writers.

This brings me to my second point. In the bill, I see no mention of "writing". We know that children must learn writing to communicate effectively today. Our current standards have kindergartners writing narratives, opinions, and information texts. Why is writing excluded in this bill? Often it is writing that gives you a clearer picture of what a child knows. Writing helps a child use and understand phonics along with the nuances in our language that are not phonetic. (Can you sound out 'sure'?)

A third concern is that the language "culturally responsive" is only mentioned in the first part of the bill. Depending on the assessments that the state adopts, many of these tests are not culturally responsive to the children in remote

villages. I would urge you to look closely at the assessments to make sure that the tests are not written with a bias of any kind.

In my view, we need a long-term investment in our schools. Please do not adopt a reading bill that supports districts for a short time and then takes funding away. Look at the mandates that you are requiring to see if they are practical for rural and city schools. Train teachers but train them in sound pedagogy not programs. Train them to understand the developmental levels of students, not nonsense words. Put an emphasis on all parts of literacy, not a single test. By training teachers, tests are not as highly problematic because teachers know the student's level. What you may not be aware of is that these screener tests rarely tell teachers what they do not know.

The real issue that has been studied and reported for decades is poverty. I know from speaking to teachers from remote schools that one of the biggest challenges is books. What if we changed this whole bill and provided big libraries to every community across the state and then did an after-action report on reading scores?

Programs do not teach children. Parents, teachers, and community members teach children. Schools need teachers who are highly trained, access to great books and time to read and write.

For an in-depth look at the history of how we approach reading in America please visit this link by educator and professor, Paul L. Thomas EdD. What Alaska is trying to do in reading is happening across the nation and we can learn from the insights of others.

<https://radical scholarship.wordpress.com/2021/01/24/open-letter-to-sc-house-and-senate-concerning-bill-3613/>

One last question. How has the pandemic changed your view on SB 8? How will levels of children be determined given that many children missed months of school?

Thank you for your consideration and thoughtfulness in literacy.

Yours in education,

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