

Dear members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Kelly Lessens and I'm the parent of two young children in the Anchorage School District.

I'm writing today to share my wholehearted support for State-supported, universal, voluntary pre-kindergarten across the state of Alaska, as well as to express my understanding of the importance of teaching reading according to science and evidence, especially among K-3 students.

And while I am delighted to see an emphasis on culturally responsive intervention strategies framed in SB 8 as it stands, I am also **deeply concerned** about key aspects of the bill, and ask that you address them before moving it out of committee.

First, I write to share my concern that nowhere in this bill is there any reference to or standards protecting all children's age-appropriate needs (among students enrolled in pre-K through grade 3) to develop foundational pre-literacy skills through play, songs, conversation, creativity, curiosity, engagement, imagination, sharing, sensory needs, pretend, role-playing, collaborating, social-emotional growth, or gross motor skill development, or even to learn in classrooms with high standards for the learning environment. As Pasi Sahlberg, whose work in Finland's schools has commanded international acclaim for more than a decade and a half, writes, all children--and young children especially--need SEED: "systematic exploration, experimentation, and discovery" in order to achieve academic success.

Although SB 8 is a reading bill, these "SEED" skills are critical for building background knowledge, pre-literacy, and the normal child development needed for successful academic and personal achievement. If we, as a state, want improved classroom outcomes in grades K-3, we need to ensure that ample and adequate time for these crucial aspects of children's developmental needs are not forsaken in the quest for higher test scores alone.

This is not an either-or proposition. It's a "yes, and."

Second, I write to share my trepidation regarding SB 8's guidelines for student retention as they are enumerated on pages 17, 19, and 23. It is my understanding that low income students, students with special needs, students who are homeless or in transition, English language learners, and students of color will be disproportionately impacted by these retention standards, especially if they are not given the developmental space afforded by an emphasis on SEED skills.

Pre-Kindergarten and grades K-3 should, above all else, excite a child to be in a classroom, engage their innate sense of wonder and curiosity, and afford them opportunities to have windows onto the world. As they age, these children are, of course, capable of increasing amounts of focused, directed learning--but they never lose their need for engagement and discovery.

As the parent of a 4th grader who reads at a middle-school level, and of a kindergartener who is eagerly unlocking the code to read but clearly needs direct instruction to accomplish this, I ask you to support their *whole selves* by affirming all students' rights to high-quality, play-based early childhood education ALONGSIDE their rights to receive systematic, science-based reading instruction.

If SB 8 passes as it stands, and Alaska schools do not pass struggling readers on to 4th grade, Alaska's 3rd grade reading scores will rise and appease those among us who would weaponize test scores. But retention in and of itself will not support the needs of the whole child. Please use SB 8 as an opportunity

to highlight the role of "SEED" skills in Alaska's pre-K - 3 educational opportunities AND the importance of systematic early reading instruction.

Sincerely,
Kelly Lessens
Anchorage