



Testimony in Support of SB 111

Dear Senate Education Committee,

As the President & CEO of the Alaska Children's Trust (ACT), please accept this letter as my written testimony for SB 111. The following letter represents my support and key areas of interest for SB 111, the Alaska Academic Improvement and Modernization Act. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on this critical legislation.

As the statewide lead organization, focused on preventing child abuse and neglect and ensuring our children thrive, we are thrilled to see the Alaska Senate recognize the importance of pre-k on our students' educational development and the return-on-investment Alaska would experience in savings on remedial education measures and in the criminal justice and public assistance systems.

In reviewing SB 111, there are some key provisions that we support. The first provision of course is the establishment of pre-k programs, providing the base for working Alaska towards universal pre-k. I would also like to applaud the inclusion of the Alaska Reads Act. Alaska's reading proficiency is dismal. Nearly seventy-five percent of Alaska's fourth graders scored below proficient on reading achievement tests per the latest KIDS COUNT Education report. Fourth grade reading proficiency in 2019 is the past decade.

I also support the extension of these grants to the bottom 20% of performing school districts. This is the best way to achieve equity in our educational system, as legislation often disburses funding on an equal basis versus an equity basis- it is refreshing to see this legislation is using a more equitable approach to our early childhood education problems. This provision ensures this investment would go to where there is the greatest need. I also support enabling school districts to reserve up to 50% of operating funds to carry over into the next year, as this adds necessary stabilization of funding for our public education system. Finally, the creation and maintenance of the virtual education consortium is a welcome step toward increasing our education system's accessibility and modernization.

Our review of SB 111 also identified areas of enhancements that could be made to further strengthen the bill. Alaska ranks 49th out of 50 states for education by KIDS COUNT - we must do our very best to ensure success for our children, which starts with putting forward the best legislation possible.

The first area I would like to discuss is the concept of hard retention. Hard retention should be pursued cautiously. It seems logical that if a student is not meeting the mark, they should be held back so they have the time and support to gain the knowledge and skills needed to progress forward. Unfortunately, retention has a broad impact on a child beyond just academics. Academically, studies in educational psychology confirm that retained students achieve at lower levels, complete fewer years of school, and have worse social-emotional outcomes. Retention can cause the issue we are trying to resolve to become worse, plus add more challenges to a child's life. An article in the Journal of Public Economics warns that retained students may be harmed by stigmatization, reduced expectations for their academic performance on the part of teachers and parents, and the challenge of adjusting to a new peer group. Hard retention does not solve Alaska's reading proficiency problems. Hard retention would cause our statewide fourth grade reading level proficiencies to increase, only because those not proficient are eliminated from the count due to this retention policy. Changing the way we count does not eliminate the issue.

We applaud the Committee's goal of being fiscally responsible but there are better methods than to repeal funding for pre-k programs after only seven years. With the nature of our financial stability, many school districts may be discouraged to establish a pre-k program that could only vanish in a few years. Decades of research across multiple

states, in rural and urban communities, various socio-economic groups, show that pre-k is extremely effective in preparing children for school and providing them with the social emotional skills they need to be successful. Rather than repealing funding, an audit of these programs would track results better and would highlight where funding is needed and where savings could be made.

One of the greatest aspects of Alaska is our diversity. Ensuring our diversity and ability to connect culturally is key to a child's educational success. Adjusting bill language to allow for greater cultural relevancy and responsiveness would give school districts more local control over their pre-k programs and meet the needs of their children.

Our final recommendation is regarding the change to the age a child starts Kindergarten. It is worth noting that this age change would be a departure from the national standard. We appreciate the intent and the examination of how other countries start school at a later date, however, the success of these students is not solely based on starting school when they are older. These same countries provide universal childcare, pre-k, and many other supports to families. Most of these services are limited and/or non-existent in the United States and we cannot expect the same results when we do not provide the same environment. We recommend keeping the starting age of Kindergarten as currently outlined.

Simple enhancements to this legislation could make SB 111 more impactful, resulting in better outcomes for our students. Thank you for your time, consideration, and efforts to bring Alaska's early childhood education up to a higher standard.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'TJ Storrs', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Trevor J. Storrs

President/CEO of Alaska Children's Trust