



Anchorage School District

Education Center

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January 25, 2022

Senate Finance Committee
Alaska State Legislature
State Capitol
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Senate Finance Chair and members,

Thank you for allowing me to speak on SB 111 Early Education, Reading Intervention. The bill before you has clarity of purpose and the rigor needed in our schools which will provide Alaska a return on its public education investment. Literacy is a fundamental right of all students in our state and must become a no fail-mission for all classrooms.

I provided my first testimony on the present bill to the 31st Legislature in 2020, explicitly sharing that Alaska's schools are in a reading achievement crisis.

Please know, I am not here to shame our schools or students. I am present, as an educator before you, frustrated about the inability of lawmakers to pass a bill that prioritizes effective teaching to ensure all students learn to read. I am outraged that we are not collectively unsettled by the student outcomes in our schools.

SB 111 clearly articulates a change in our state – to guarantee all students, whether in-person or virtual, receive the benefit of evidence-informed instruction from qualified, well-trained teachers.

Acquisition of fundamental skills is essential to allow students to be successful in the learning of rigorous, higher order thinking to thrive in the modern world – basically, to build our state into the future.

I want to be clear; our schools exist to help students master complex academic material as they matriculate educationally. However, that is not possible without the ability to read well – 60 percent of Alaska's students are being left behind. We must do better at teaching all kids.

As this is the third year on the topic, I will briefly share my thoughts on the bill's detractors:

- **To the testimony that the requirements in the bill are too high:**
 - I want you to know that kids are tougher and smarter than we think. In other countries, matriculation exams help inject drive into the education system, creating a bright finish line for kids and schools to work towards, not mass failure.
 - While I am proud of the social emotional work we do in schools, sometimes our own empathy for a child's homelife strips the rigor from our classrooms. Their family's status

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should not be a reason for their failure, it is their brains that matter. High quality education is needed so generational poverty or dysfunction is not inherited by our students.

- **To the testimony that we assess kids too much:**
 - It is true that assessments cannot measure every success that matters in school or in life, but they can tell us what students have been learning and what school is like for them. Schleicher, the gentleman who designed the PISA, Program for International Student Assessment, shared it best when he said, “without data, you are just another person with an opinion.”
 - The bill’s provisions place “manageable pressure” on districts, schools, families, and students to focus on learning and progress. The information gained via the assessment requirement will communicate and drive Alaska forward.
- **To the testimony that this bill devalues teaching:**
 - Educating kids is hard work. Alaska’s teachers matter – qualified, well-prepared, and supported teachers can do this work. It has been accomplished by teachers in other states, and I know our educators are just as smart and care for our students just as much.
 - Nevertheless, if and what kids learn should not be left to chance. Coherent, clear sets of standards and expectations should exist in our state.

In reality, SB 111 simply codifies what we already know about good instructional reading practices, quality early learning experiences, and high efficacy virtual learning programs. It allows schools and teachers to focus and prioritize the learning in our classrooms.

In summary, legislation must remain relevant and uphold and reflect the values and beliefs of a society. Let’s focus on our young people. I read once that “kids have a good detector about what adults take seriously and what counts.”

I am here today to testify that SB 111 counts. It empowers our schools and teachers to ensure students are readers and thinkers in today’s global society – while at the same time providing accountability for the dollars spent on public education in Alaska.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and for your consideration of SB 111. Please reach out to me if you have any questions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deena M. Bishop', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Deena M. Bishop, Ed.D.
Superintendent