



March 17, 2022

House Education Committee

RE: Support for HB 164

Dear Members of the House Education Committee:

Coalition for Education Equity, under our previous name, Citizens for the Educational Advancement of Alaska's Children (CEAAC), joined in the Moore v. State of Alaska litigation filed in 2004. That lawsuit, filed by parents, students, and REAA school districts, contended that the enormous achievement gap between urban and rural students was a product of inadequate support in rural districts. The Court ultimately found that the State had a constitutional duty to ensure that an acceptable educational opportunity is provided to all children in the state and that the State failed to provide meaningful oversight, and technical and educational assistance to districts with chronically underperforming schools.

Expert testimony in the case established several underlying issues for these struggling school districts: 1) students were starting kindergarten 2-3 years behind in language development; 2) districts had a lack of educational resources necessary to implement intensive interventions; and 3) there was an inadequate supply of qualified teachers in rural districts due to challenges recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers, lack of in-depth professional development, and teachers operating without the resources, time, or skills to implement intensive interventions. The settlement of the Moore lawsuit in 2012 established grants to address some of these issues, but there has been no policy enacted to provide systemic improvements to education in Alaska. The Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) has been working to make some of these improvements through regulation and the use of grants, but they are also limited by lack of capacity.

The Alaska Reads Act (HB 164 and SB 111) takes the initial steps to establish education policy rooted in effective, evidence-based strategies that address some of these underlying issues. It expands high-quality early learning programs (pre-kindergarten) using a phased approach, beginning with the highest-need districts, and eventually reaching all districts in the state. These programs are voluntary, not mandated, and will include financial support, professional training, and technical assistance to school districts to develop or improve their programs. The bill specifies that these programs will be locally designed and culturally responsive. High-quality early education is one of the clearest paths to closing achievement gaps and improving student performance for our highest need students across the state.

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The bill also establishes that reading curricula for prekindergarten through grade 3 be based on the five components of evidence-based reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, oral language skills, and reading comprehension). This is accompanied by interventions for students struggling with reading, as well as a DEED-established statewide reading program to assist and provide support and resources for school districts and teachers in providing reading intervention services.

The bill does not mandate that reading curricula be in English, nor does it do anything to threaten or minimize the many wonderful dual-language and language immersion programs that have been developed in our schools across the state. Still, multiple amendments in the House Education Committee have resulted in strengthening protections of and support for these programs, as well as the rich culture and heritage that serve as their foundation. We support these updates and believe they make the bill better.

Coalition for Education Equity supports passage of the Alaska Reads Act because we believe it will help children, and help our schools better serve our children, whether in rural or urban Alaska. Our coalition membership includes rural and urban school districts, which are represented on our board of directors by superintendents with years, if not decades, of education experience across the state. We have witnessed and experienced firsthand the challenges and disparities that have contributed to poor educational outcomes for our children. We have worked exhaustively with our communities and teachers to develop successful innovative programs that meet the needs of our students, but we know that it is not enough. We have been fighting for years for education policy that finally takes up the recommendations outlined in the Moore decisions by expanding access to high-quality pre-elementary programs, providing targeted interventions to our lowest-performing schools, and expanding the capacity of DEED to assist, support, and provide essential resources to our school districts and educators. The Alaska Reads Act addresses each of these and we urge our legislators to pass this legislation.

Sincerely,



Scott MacManus  
President



Jamie Burgess  
Vice President

CC: HB 164 Bill Sponsor Representative Chris Tuck  
House Finance Committee  
Representative Bryce Edgmon  
Representative Neal Foster  
Representative Josiah Patkotak  
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky