

# Alaska State Legislature

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## HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair  
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair

## Memorandum

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**Date:** May 9, 2022

**To:** Senator Roger Holland, Chair  
Senate Education Committee  
Senator Tom Begich,  
Senate Minority Leader

**From:** Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair  
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair  
House Education Committee

**Re:** House Education Committee Substitute to Senate Bill 111, "Alaska Reads Act"

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Dear Chair Holland, Senator Begich, and Senate Education Committee,

We submit this letter concerning the House Education Committee Substitute to Senate Bill 111. We believe the additions and changes in our CS strengthen SB 111's intent to support the reading achievements of Alaska's students.

Our committee heard many concerns this year regarding the effectiveness of the available reading curriculum for all Alaska students. What we found is that students must be able to relate and connect to their lessons in order to learn, a sentiment that is strongly supported by the science of reading principles. This means that to help many of our students succeed, we need to be teaching with local, place-based, and culturally relevant tools.

The example has been brought before our committee many times that "there are no busses, subways, sidewalks or street curbs" in most rural Alaska villages. However, these are often the examples found in textbooks and assessment tools that are being used to teach our children. Our version of the Alaska Reads Act takes this, and many of the unique cultural differences found across our vast state, into account by writing in a strong level of local control and acknowledging the Alaska Native cultural heritage that informs over twenty percent of our student population. To support this effort, this bill creates a Division of Alaska Cultural Education in DEED to assist districts in making certain that available curriculum, screening tools, and professional development will help effectively educate all of Alaska's children.

Our schools must work with our students and meet them where they are for them to succeed. While some individual districts may have developed culturally relevant curricula and screening tools, these assets are not available to all, and will take time and resources to develop for more districts, and the Division of Alaska Cultural Education can help. This version of SB 111 adds support for districts to create their own Alaska cultural and language immersion schools. Place-based knowledge is important for all of Alaska's students. The lack of awareness of the strength of traditional knowledge in our curricula is a gap in our instruction. Correcting this will help all students to better connect with their studies.

Additionally, this version adds more district reading specialists and fiscal supports to aid teachers and paraprofessionals in professional development, development of the reading program, use of screening tools, implementing reading improvement plans, and adaptive curriculum. Putting this forth as an unfunded mandate would risk overextending already strained classrooms leaving our children, who are already struggling, at a disadvantage as their learning tools and supports are stretched even thinner.

We want to move more quickly to expand access to universal optional Pre-K. This CS accelerates access to Pre-K so that more four year olds are ready to learn in kindergarten, and adds fiscal supports to do this.

This bill also increases student funding in the Base Student Allocation (BSA) for the first time in six years. We recognize districts are already working to improve reading skills with our students. By providing a BSA increase, this allows districts to address rising fixed costs and leaves funding in place for reading program training, and interventions, or other district needs.

In addition, we have added a return to a defined benefits option to aid in teacher and paraprofessional retention. We heard in testimony that the districts with the five highest reading scores have the longest teacher retention, and the districts with the lowest reading scores have some of the lowest teacher retention rates in the state.

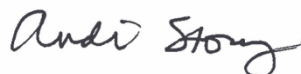
We have heard it argued that this isn't a retention bill, and so our version of SB 111 makes certain of this by removing the retention language. Years of research shows that holding back students does not improve academic performance and can actually be harmful for children over time socially, emotionally, and academically. Instead of retention, additional supports and summer school programs are to be made available to families and students who choose to utilize extra supports to help kids make reading gains through their districts.

Our children need champions. It is our belief that together we can build a brighter future for our children and Alaska. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to work together on this historic legislation.

Sincerely,



Rep. Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair



Rep. Andi Story, Co-Chair

