

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION & SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE

January 31, 2001

1:45 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Lyda Green, Chair
Senator Loren Leman, Vice Chair
Senator Gary Wilken
Senator Jerry Ward
Senator Bettye Davis

MEMBERS ABSENT

All Members Present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

Overview - Department of Education and Early Development

SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 2
Relating to declaring March 2001 as Sobriety Awareness Month.
MOVED CSSCR 2(HES)OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

SCR 2 - See HESS minutes dated 1/29/01.

WITNESS REGISTER

Ms. Shirley Holloway, Commissioner
Department of Education &
Early Development
801 W 10th St.
Juneau, AK 99801-1894

Ms. Yvonne Chase, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Education &
Early Development
801 W 10th St.
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Mr. Bruce Johnson, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Education &
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Mr. Eddy Jeans
School Finance and Facilities Section
Department of Education &
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801 W 10th St.
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ACTION NARRATIVE

TAPE 01-6, SIDE A

Number 001

VICE-CHAIRMAN LEMAN called the Senate Health, Education & Social Services Committee meeting to order at 1:45 p.m. Present were Senators Ward, Davis, Wilken and Leman. The first order of business to come before the committee was SCR 2.

#SCR2

SCR 2-SOBRIETY AWARENESS MONTH

SENATOR WARD, sponsor of SCR 2, moved to adopt a proposed committee substitute. There being no objection, CSSCR 2(HES) was adopted in lieu of the original resolution.

He explained that CSSCR 2(HES) adds a reference to inhalant abuse on page 1, lines 7 and 14, and on page 2, lines 4 and 6. He pointed out that change was made as a result of testimony heard at the January 29 hearing.

VICE-CHAIRMAN LEMAN asked if anyone else wished to testify. No one did.

SENATOR WARD moved CSSCR 2(HES) from committee with individual recommendations. There being no objection, the motion carried.

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VICE-CHAIRMAN LEMAN noted the next item on the agenda was the overview by the Department of Education and Early Development (DOEED).

SENATOR WILKEN noted he had to leave to testify on legislation in another committee.

OVERVIEW BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION & EARLY DEVELOPMENT

MS. SHIRLEY HOLLOWAY, Commissioner of DOEED, introduced Deputy Commissioner Bruce Johnson, Deputy Commissioner Yvonne Chase, and

Beth Nordlund, legislative liaison to DOEED.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY stated that five fundamental beliefs drive the work of DOEED:

- All children, given adequate opportunity and support, can learn.
- High standards in early development programs increase the potential for high student achievement in later school years.
- High student standards, which set high expectations, produce high achievement.
- Results matter.
- Financial support for schools must be equitable.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY stated that Deputy Commissioner Chase will discuss quality initiatives in early development. Afterward, she and Deputy Commissioner Johnson will review the new statewide assessment system. The two will then give the Committee DOEED's rationale for the request for a responsible and fair high school qualifying exam timeline. She noted committee packets contain a copy of the Alaska Board of Education's resolution on this topic. The two will describe other accountability measures that will be implemented, specifically the school designator program. The presentation will conclude with Mr. Eddy Jeans, School Finance and Facilities Section director, giving the committee an overview of the public school funding program.

SENATOR DAVIS asked if the group brought a copy of the assessment results.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY said they did and the results could be found in a DOEED document entitled "Assessment Overview."

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER YVONNE CHASE explained DOEED's early development quality initiatives. Those initiatives track with three major categories in the quality schools initiative: the quality professional standards; the family, school, business and community network; and the school excellence standards.

Under the quality professional standards, DOEED is developing a comprehensive system of standards for early childhood professionals. This design has been called the Alaska SEED (State Education and Early Development) program. It lays out the competencies and educational requirements for the various levels of early development professionals - something that has been in the works for three years and is now ready for implementation. DOEED was able to acquire additional federal funding this year that will be used to implement the design and assist the University of Alaska

in completing an essential piece of this process: a bachelors degree program in early childhood development with a distance delivery option. This process was fast-tracked because Head Start is federally mandated to have at least 50 percent of its staff have CDAs by FY 03.

DOEED began a pilot childcare apprenticeship program with help from the Alaska Human Resource Investment Council (AHRIC) and a federal grant. The program's purpose is to address the wage issues in this historically low-wage industry. The average wage for childcare workers is less than that for a parking lot attendant.

Another initiative is the childcare grant program and, thanks to the assistance of the Legislature last year, it has expanded. That program is focused on licensing facilities in the state and increasing the quality of childcare programs.

CHAIR GREEN had arrived and asked Ms. Chase if she had any information on licensing.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHASE offered to discuss licensing after she explained the initiatives. She explained that DOEED is in the process of developing regulations that will place greater focus on standards in childcare facilities. Current regulations focus on licensing. Some statutory changes may be necessary.

The next initiative pertains to the family, schools, business and community network, which emphasizes the partnership among agencies, particularly DOEED and DHSS. Because resources for early development are limited, both departments wanted to make sure they were coordinated. The elimination of the waitlist in the childcare subsidy program has been a major accomplishment because, for the last several years, the program has had a waitlist and the number of families needing childcare increased to 1200 due to welfare reform by the end of last fiscal year. The Legislature appropriated additional funds for the childcare subsidy and the waitlist has been eliminated in every location except Anchorage. Sufficient funds are available to Anchorage and workers are moving through the list.

CHAIR GREEN asked if that program is run by the Municipality of Anchorage.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHASE said it is.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHASE explained the last item under the family network initiative is the development of a five star rating system for facilities. A number of states are taking this direction to

give parents a clearer way to evaluate the quality differences among facilities.

The last initiative pertains to school excellence standards. That initiative is twofold: DOEED is encouraging accreditation and is trying to restructure the system to provide a financial incentive for facilities to move through the licensing and accreditation process. At this time only 25 of Alaska's facilities are accredited; most of those are on military installations where accreditation is required. In reviewing the eligibility system for the childcare subsidy program, DOEED is looking at barriers that might prevent parents from using the system. For example, DOEED can subsidize a parent for up to 97 percent of the cost of childcare but, at one lower income level, the subsidy is 85 percent. Therefore, a parent who might get a slight income increase may then have the cost of childcare increase from three to 15 percent. If the parent has two or three children, that amount can be substantial. For some parents, the income increase might have been \$100 per month while the increase in childcare costs is more. As a result, some parents are taking their children out of childcare and putting them in less safe environments.

Number 1012

SENATOR DAVIS asked Ms. Chase to expand on that last point.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHASE said if a person's income falls at the top of the category that allows for a 97 percent subsidy, a small increase will place them in the next category of eligibility, which provides for an 85 percent subsidy.

CHAIR GREEN asked what age group the child care subsidy covers.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHASE answered birth through 12. After school care is covered for 13 year olds.

SENATOR WARD asked if Ms. Chase had any suggestions to remedy the subsidy problem.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHASE said one possibility is to create another breakout in the eligibility scale so that the subsidy does not decrease from 97 to 85 percent, perhaps a 92 percent subsidy.

SENATOR WARD asked if the subsidy problem is causing anyone to decline additional income.

Number 1167

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHASE said she has heard anecdotal stories but she believes it rarely happens. She thinks the opposite may occur - that is the individual takes the pay increase and removes the children from childcare.

CHAIR GREEN asked who sets the percentages.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHASE said DOEED does so the department can look at the scale.

CHAIR GREEN asked if those rates are set by regulation.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHASE said that is correct.

The committee then turned to the next portion of DOEED's presentation.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY thanked Chair Green for inviting DOEED to have an in-depth discussion with the committee over the next five weeks on the high school qualifying exam. She suggested that DOEED provide an outline to the committee for those discussions.

CHAIR GREEN said that would be fine.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY noted that committee members have a document entitled "History of Alaska School Reform Since 1991" in their packets. She pointed out that from 1990, at the onset of the development of the content standards, until 1998, standards have been voluntary - use was at the discretion of school districts. With the passage of SB 36 and the exit exam legislation in 1998, the standards in reading, writing and math became mandatory.

Number 1313

CHAIR GREEN asked if DOEED or the Board of Education has reviewed the statutory requirements for high school graduation.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BRUCE JOHNSON replied the credit requirements are established through regulation. Currently, 21 credits are required for graduation. Many districts require more and specify particular courses of study. The two issues facing a high school student are meeting the local graduation requirements and passing the qualifying exam.

CHAIR GREEN asked what makes up the 21 credits and who decides what is a reasonable requirement.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY said to her knowledge it has been a long time

since the Board of Education reviewed that. However, she has noticed that districts have raised the bar significantly in relationship to the number of credits required.

CHAIR GREEN said she thinks that is an area that needs to be looked at.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON added that some districts are asking the Board of Education to substitute the credit requirement with standards. The same skills and knowledge would be taught but seat time would not be part of the equation. The Board of Education has granted waivers to two districts and two more will be considered in March.

SENATOR WARD asked which two districts were granted the waiver and which two are pending.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the Chugach and the Iditarod School Districts have been granted waivers and Lake and Peninsula Borough and Southeast Island School Districts are coming before the Board in March.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY explained that a standards based system moves away from seat time and focuses on whether students know and can do what has been identified as essential. Adding credits does not guarantee student results. She said she would look forward to a conversation on that issue.

CHAIR GREEN asked if any of those schools are charter schools.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY pointed out that in the school reform outline, there has been a great deal of process. DOEED has worked with many groups across Alaska on the development of the initial content standards and performance standards that guide the development of the test and benchmarks, and groups of people who continue to work with DOEED on the renewal process of the assessment system. She reminds people that the standards did not come out of the Legislature or the DOEED. They came from people across the state.

Number 1540

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON referred to the "Assessment Overview," which summarizes some of the performance measures to date. Page 1 of that document contains the results of the first benchmark assessments given to students in grades 3, 6, and 8. A number of individuals assisted in the development and review of the standards, which were ultimately adopted by the Board of Education.

The tests were then developed with Alaskans selecting the test questions. About 40 percent of the field test questions were thrown out because they did not work well with all populations in the state. The entire examination program is based around the essential skills in reading, writing and mathematics. A lot of discussion is expected from the Bush Administration about whether or not states should expand beyond that. DOEED is pleased to be initially focusing on these three areas. The core concepts and skills represented in those three areas are common across the state and nation.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON referred to the chart on page 1 and said a number of students are doing quite well in the area of reading. The writing assessment scores are varied and the math scores are strong at the third grade level but drop off at the 6th and 8th grade levels.

CHAIR GREEN asked if 83 percent of the eighth graders were proficient.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied, "Or advanced."

CHAIR GREEN noted that literacy is considered to be at the fifth grade, fifth month level. She asked how that equates.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said it does not equate because the bar that was set for eighth grade reading was based on the skill level considered necessary to master to take the next step in school.

CHAIR GREEN asked if some of the students might be college level readers but that would not be reflected in the scores.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said absolutely. They would be in the advanced group and score very high.

SENATOR WARD said he spoke to a teacher who was on the committee for the math test cut scores who said the math exam was so difficult an ordinary student could not pass it. The teacher told him the committee was supplied a list of questions about scoring from an outside firm. The teachers commented but never heard back or saw any of the comments provided. The teachers felt none of the comments or the committee's analyses of the questions were taken into consideration. He asked whether the committee's input on the math exam score was used.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he attended and actively participated in all meetings to set the passing scores. He thought the teacher may have been referring to two pieces: one was where

the passing score is set; and the second was the feedback system set up by the publishing company. If questions were confusing to the teachers, they were able to comment on those questions through a note card process so those comments could be put in the hopper and considered for correction in future examinations. That was also true of the scoring guides. If teachers felt the scoring guide was confusing or not aligned properly, they could comment. In the actual establishment of the scores, the students had already taken the exam, which was scored in California. The only impact data, besides the standards and test booklet, that committee members had at their disposal was an ordered item booklet. That booklet ranked the exam questions in order from easiest to most difficult, according to the students' scores. Teachers decided individually where to set the scores, then in groups of seven, and finally as one group of 21. At the end of three days, all had to agree on a reasonable place to set the score. Following that process, the publishing company had to take into account standard error measurement. Every test has some error built into it. The publishing company set the score at the low end of the confidence range.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he participated in some of the groups when they actually finished and the facilitator asked the group if they all agreed and could live with the consensus decision.

SENATOR WARD asked if a person on the committee was not in the room when the final consensus was made, whether they missed the meeting or whether something was wrong with the process.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he could not say exactly what happened in that instance. He stated that throughout the spring, DOEED will see if another group of 21 people will come to the same decision. DOEED is bringing six of the original group back and adding 15 new people.

Number 1997

SENATOR WARD said something is very wrong with the perception of what happened. The Legislature assigned the duty of coming up with an Alaska test. Some of the people involved in that process do not believe it is an Alaska test. He indicated he would very much like to know that all members of the original committee were comfortable with the process so that the work done is not lost. He repeated that he wants to know if something was wrong with the process.

CHAIR GREEN said the committee will have time to address that issue in the future.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the next three charts show the full breakout of the content areas. All grade levels are represented with the percentage that scored at each level. The chart on page 3 shows the CAT/5 grade 4 results from 1998 to 2000. Those scores show how Alaska students performed on a nationwide level. Grade 4 students scored at the 58th percentile in reading in 1998. They scored at the 57th percentile in 1999 and again at the 58th percentile in 2000. Alaska's students score slightly above the national average in reading and writing and in the 60th percentile in math.

On page 4, a chart shows the results of the CAT/5 given to 7th graders in 2000. That test is normally given to 8th graders, but because 8th graders took the benchmark exam, 7th graders were given the CAT/5. Those scores are comparable to the scores of the 4th grade students.

CHAIR GREEN asked Mr. Johnson to compare the results on page 1 to the results on the CAT score.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said they are two very different tests. A norm referenced test is a multiple choice exam; a standards based assessment has some multiple choice questions and a fair amount of performance based questions requiring students to explain answers or write short answers, etc.

SENATOR DAVIS noted there was an article in a newspaper this week by someone from the Anchorage School District that said the same thing.

CHAIR GREEN said it is amazing how similar the percentiles are among both tests.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON continued reviewing the Assessment Overview. The chart on page 5 shows the number of students from the Class of 2002 that passed the high school qualifying exam. The law requires that students be provided the opportunity to take the exam for three years beyond their normal date of graduation so that class will have 11 opportunities to take the exam. The exams are "stand alone" so that a student does not have to retake any part of the exam they passed.

SENATOR LEMAN asked if a student would be attending high school for other reasons if that student passed all three parts of the exam as a sophomore.

TAPE 01-6, SIDE B

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said yes, a student does not have to retake any part of the exam once the student passes it. It is recorded on the transcript as a "pass." He noted that the Class of 2002 had 10,217 students in October of 1999 but that number decreased to 9,142 in October of 2000. The decrease is attributable to students dropping out, moving out of state, being held back and dying. The first administration of the qualifying exam for the Class of 2003 will occur on the last two days of February and the first of March. Pages 6, 7, and 8 show how well the school districts are doing across grade levels with the standards based assessments. He noted DOEED will be posting the school report cards electronically next week. The site will contain almost 500 report cards from around the state. In 2003, DOEED will be adding the school designator to the website because by January of 2003 DOEED must rank each of its schools as "in crisis," "deficient," "successful," or "distinguished."

CHAIR GREEN asked how many results will be in by 2003 for high schools.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said six.

CHAIR GREEN said the number of indicators for grades 3, 6, and 8 will not be as high but DOEED will have the CAT scores.

SENATOR LEMAN asked if the school reports will contain information about how each school's students scored on the exam.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said they will.

SENATOR LEMAN said he would like that information to look at high performing schools that he is familiar with to compare them with other schools. He would choose the Alyeska Centralized School of Correspondence as being a high performing school but its math scores do not reflect that.

CHAIR GREEN invited him to Mat-Su to see some strong performance.

SENATOR WARD asked if the data will show how many students who took the test are new to the Alaska school system.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said that information will not be available on the school report card that will be available later this week. DOEED does have a transient or mobility rate but all students who participated are included in the results.

SENATOR WARD asked if there is any way to break that information

out inexpensively.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON stated DOEED is providing school districts with the ability to electronically file. Districts can do those manipulations if they want to. At some future point, DOEED hopes to be able to breakdown that information. Many questions surround the issue of which students the school districts should be held accountable for: those who have been in the school for two years, one year, or from the beginning. DOEED is working on that through the school designator. The scores of new students doesn't necessarily reflect on the learning at that school, they are more reflective of the prior school the student attended.

SENATOR WARD said he is interested in getting the scores of students who are entering Alaska schools from another state or country.

Number 2168

CHAIR GREEN asked if those scores can be broken out in any way.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON pointed out that the data could be disaggregated in several ways at the first entry into the system. DOEED will probably not do that at the state level but the districts are very interested in doing that to guide the work they do. He offered to find out if DOEED has the ability to do that.

SENATOR WARD said he is particularly interested in the data from Anchorage and Kenai.

CHAIR GREEN noted that some areas of the state have had large immigrant groups move in, which could affect the benchmark scores and the exit exam scores.

SENATOR LEMAN noted there has been a significant drop in scores in all high schools. He asked if sufficient data is available to determine the retake success rate.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he can get that information for Senator Leman. That information is not yet available for the examinees that took the test this fall because DOEED is still sorting out how many of those students took that test for the first time. Almost 2,000 sophomores did not take the test last year, even though they were required to do so. They did not take it for a whole host of reasons.

SENATOR LEMAN asked if the chart on page 5 reflects the same group of students that took the test one year later.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said that is correct.

SENATOR LEMAN pointed out that, as the test was developed, the committee of 21 people decided what a graduating senior should know, yet the test was given to sophomores so we need to recognize that sophomores took the senior level exam.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said that is correct. He noted that DOEED does have bar charts that show how far from the passing score students are, in increments of 25 score points. The scaled score ranges from 100 to 600. Therefore, if the passing score is set at 300, it is difficult to determine whether a score of 275 is a long way away yet. It appears, however, that two more years of schooling will be plenty to get that student "over the hump."

SENATOR LEMAN indicated that he took the sample test available on the DOEED website. He asked if that is the only sample test available.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said DOEED contracted with the publishing company to develop a new practice test. It is currently available to teachers only. That test will be available on the website on February 12.

SENATOR WARD asked if there is a reason it will not be available before February 12.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the Board of Education asked DOEED to place an embargo on it to allow teachers to use it in the classroom as a pretest before it became available. Teachers could use it as a diagnostic tool to know what to do in their classes for future exam cycles.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the last chart is a framework for continuous renewal (page 9). DOEED determined early on that the standards will always need to be refined as a result of experience gained, feedback from teachers in the field, and feedback from students and families. The continuous renewal process will involve three content teams of 18 to 21 people. Right now, 15 business people will be working with teachers and administrators. They will begin by examining the performance standards to determine whether they are key to later life success. They will also look at the exam. Their final task will be to re-examine the passing scores. Once that process is completed in June, recommendations will be given to the Board of Education. The recommendations could range from changing the cut score for the math exam to changing the test questions.

CHAIR GREEN referred to her earlier question about what the state requires regarding credits, and said she doesn't see how the exam can go beyond what is required.

SENATOR LEMAN said his education beyond high school required a lot of higher mathematics and the sciences. He noted he was taught at the Ninilchik elementary and high schools and every concept he saw on the sample qualifying exam he learned in grade school.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY gave the following summary of why a delay in the high stakes test is being debated and why DOEED believes a delay is important. It is obvious that a lot of students have a long way to go to reach the proficiency level. The reasons for that can be classified into three areas. The first reason has to do with the opportunity to learn. She suggested the committee hear from representatives of the Department of Law about the legal defensibility of the exam. DOEED has to ensure that every student in this state has had the opportunity to learn the standards that their feet are being held to the fire for. Districts have to align their curriculum to the standards. Some districts have had the technical support and the resources to do that. Other districts have not. Alaska has switched to a standards based teaching system and many educators have not had the opportunity to be prepared to use this new system. In any business, when the way business is done changes, a great investment must be made to help people learn how to work differently.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY reminded committee members that DOEED just received the data from the first test. DOEED knew that whenever a comprehensive, statewide, standards based assessment is first built, it will not be perfect. DOEED needs time to refine, clarify, and improve this assessment. She expressed concern that in the debate about whether the test is too hard or too easy, the focus will be lost. The focus is not the test - the focus is improving student learning. The focus is that young people leave high school with the skills and knowledge to have choices and be successful. The test is one tool to provide data so that schools can change what they are doing. One other aspect is that if the date is delayed until 2006, today's 7th graders will have taken the 6th grade and 8th grade benchmark assessment. Schools will have the time to do the appropriate interventions so that those students can meet the standards. DOEED needs to help districts figure out how to help students who are not proficient in the benchmark exams.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY'S third point was that the Legislature, Board of Education, families and DOEED need to work together to figure out what to do about special needs students, transient students,

students whose first language is not English, and students from military families.

SENATOR WARD said that we don't want to harm anyone in the course of trying to improve the education system. He expressed concern about the original process used to develop the test and scores because he wants to be able to respond to real or perceived problems he has heard about.

Number 1388

CHAIR GREEN asked Senator Ward to meet with Mr. Johnson to discuss that matter.

SENATOR WARD commented that one person who testified previously suggested that every teacher should have to take the qualifying exam.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY stated that all Alaska teachers must take the PRAXIS I test, which is a reading, writing and math test.

SENATOR WARD asked the Commissioner to report back to the committee on the equivalency of the two tests.

COMMISSIONER HOLLOWAY agreed to do that. She also told the committee that DOEED is committed to the school reform effort. If reasonable timelines can be established, DOEED is suggesting that the schools continue to administer the qualifying exam and that the scores be posted on students' transcripts to provide students with an incentive to do well. In addition, the implementation of the school designator program will put accountability pressure on each school, community and staff.

CHAIR GREEN asked Commissioner Holloway to give a report on public school funding at the next committee meeting. She then adjourned the meeting at 3:00 p.m.