

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
**SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION & SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE**

March 7, 2001  
1:32 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Lyda Green, Chair  
Senator Loren Leman, Vice Chair  
Senator Jerry Ward (via teleconference)  
Senator Gary Wilken  
Senator Bettye Davis

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

CAREER PATHWAYS PRESENTATION by Kris Forrester, Mat-Su Borough  
School District

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION QUALIFYING EXAM

SENATE BILL NO. 120

"An Act relating to a public school student high school graduation  
examination; and providing for an effective date."

HEARD AND HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 128

"An Act relating to a two-year transition for implementation of the  
public high school competency examination as a graduation  
requirement; and providing for an effective date."

HEARD AND HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

High School Graduation Qualifying Exam Discussions - See Senate  
HESS minutes dated 1/27/01, 1/31/01, 2/12/01, 2/14/01, 2/21/01,  
2/24/01 and 2/26/01.

SB 120 - No previous Senate committee action.

SB 128 - No previous Senate committee action.

**WITNESS REGISTER**

Sandy Altland  
Staff to Senator Ward  
Alaska State Capitol  
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified for the sponsor of SB 120

Carol Comeau  
Anchorage School District  
PO Box 196650  
Anchorage, AK 99519

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Expressed concern that issues regarding the implementation of the exit exam remain and must be resolved in the next two years.

Steve Cathers  
PO Box 398  
Valdez, AK 99686

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Supports SB 128 and listed continuing issues.

Kenny Bryant  
2021 Oxbow Circle  
Anchorage, AK 99516

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Would prefer student scores be published rather than to use a pass/fail system regarding the exam.

Amy Bollenbach  
PO Box 3429  
Homer, AK 99603

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Prefers the elimination of the exit exam or SB 120 proposal.

Doug Wesson  
Alaska School Psychologists Association  
City and Borough of Juneau School District  
Crazy Horse Drive  
Juneau, AK 99801

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Supports delaying the implementation of the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam.

Dr. Ed McLain  
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District  
210 Fidalgo Ave.  
Kenai, AK 99611

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Supports the essential skills exam and special education provisions on the proposed Senate HESS Committee bill [SB 133].

Carl Rose  
Association of Alaska School Boards  
316 W 11th St.

Juneau, AK 99801

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Qualifying exam legislation must be simple and pass this session.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

**TAPE 01-16, SIDE A**

Number 001

**CHAIRWOMAN LYDA GREEN** called the Senate Health, Education & Social Services Committee meeting to order at 1:32 p.m. Present were Senators Leman, Wilken and Green. The first order of business to come before the committee was the Career Pathways presentation.

**CAREER PATHWAYS**

MS. KRIS FORRESTER, Career Pathways, Mat-Su School District, informed the committee that industries in Alaska have expressed concern that they are not getting the employees they need from existing programs. Career Pathways began to look at high school programs and found that a lot of students are majoring in high school graduation and not education because high school is a time-based system to acquire 21 credits. Students were looking at acquiring credits, not workplace skills. For example, two credits of math are required but nowhere does it say what type of math is needed. Students were grazing across the curriculum and, in many cases, the curriculum has shortcomings. In a Career Pathways system, teachers grade with intention. Another finding was that many seniors were wasting that year because the rigor is in earlier years.

MS. FORRESTER said 80 percent of the new jobs in the next 10 years will be the result of expanding technology. Most of those jobs will not require a four-year college degree but they will require special technical education. However, higher level skills are now required to function in entry level positions. She noted that students who want to become heavy equipment operators will need algebra and higher level math because a lot of electronics is involved in the equipment, which is not computer controlled. Students need to be taught in ways that might not be traditional.

MS. FORRESTER pointed out about 50 percent of high school graduates enroll in college but only half complete a four-year degree within 10 years. That means the typical high school curriculum is designed to meet the needs of only 25 percent of the students. About 25 percent of students that start high school do not finish. About 66 percent of students are reading below grade level.

MS. FORRESTER said one of the things that started the national goals movement is a commission study on employability skills. DOEED put those standards in the curriculum but employers are saying even though students may have the math skills, they may not have the employability skills. Employers have said that students have little or no career focus. It is very hard for students to choose a career or to know what skills they need because they have not been able to look at what it takes to do a certain type of work. There is not enough interaction between the community, business and the industry, and parents.

MS. FORRESTER believes high schools have not done a good job with the "theme of transition" so that a seamless transition occurs between high school and the work world.

MS. FORRESTER explained that Career Pathways is a system that creates a well-marked path, a sequence of courses which provides focus and direction to a student's learning experience. People question whether this is a system of tracking what students take. She believes high schools have a system of tracking already: the track to college and the track to nowhere. Career Pathways contains six broad career pathways with a variety of options within each pathway. The broad categories are:

- Arts and communications
- Business, management and technology
- Human services
- Natural resources
- Industrial and engineering
- Health services

Following this system makes the student's education relative to him or her. She pointed out that what Career Pathways is all about is making education relevant. When students can see how something they are learning relates to the real world, they learn it.

MS. FORRESTER said the Alaska Business Education Compact and all of the consortiums have given their blessing to the Career Pathways plan. It contains the Quality Schools Initiative and the content standards because students need basic skills. It also includes employability skills, which are honesty, punctuality, problem solving ability, integrity and teamwork. After that, students spend time doing career exploration and then career development. It is at that point the path opens to the six broad categories of interest.

The Career Pathways approach to learning is to integrate high

academic standards and relevant, context-based learning. The second piece is career awareness and instruction in all aspects of an industry. The last piece is a linkage between secondary and postsecondary education. That means students might already be getting college credit or entry into an apprenticeship and will ensure the students have the skills necessary for transition. Career Pathways opens up more choices and possibilities. It is designed for all students so that all students can enter and exit the school system and find training opportunities to advance up the career ladder. It is not for educators to approach alone; it involves employers and provides transferable knowledge. Partners can act as conduits to the outside world. Career Pathways can ignore traditional boundaries so that, for example, math can be learned outside of the classroom. Many industry certification programs are offered at the high school level.

Number 1714

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN thanked Ms. Forrester and said she would encourage the Department of Education and Early Development (DOEED) and school districts to use this information to evaluate students and curricula. She announced that Senators Davis and Ward had joined the committee and that the committee would not be hearing SB 94 today. The committee would take up SB 120, SB 128, and a draft version of a Senate HESS Committee bill [SB 133]. Copies of those bills have been distributed to the Legislative Information Offices so that participants at the Saturday meeting can respond to them.

#SB120

**SB 120-PUBLIC SCHOOL EXIT EXAM**

MS. SANDY ALTLAND, staff to Senator Ward, sponsor of SB 120, explained that SB 120 looks at whether a single test should be the sole determining factor in granting a high school diploma. Under SB 120, students would continue to take the exit exam but the test would determine whether the student receives an endorsement on their diploma, not whether the student would get a diploma. SB 120 also establishes a uniform statewide standard for awarding an endorsement on the diploma.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN noted the uniform standard would be determined by DOEED through regulation. She asked if SB 120 would provide for an endorsement for any student who exhibits proficiency in reading, writing or math. Students who are not eligible or the endorsement would receive an imprint of the Alaska flag on their diplomas.

MS. ALTLAND presented a proposed amendment to SB 120 [Amendment 1] to resolve some controversy over the word "proficiency." The

amendment reads:

**A M E N D M E N T 1**

OFFERED IN THE SENATE

BY SENATOR WARD

TO: SB 120

Page 2, line 2:

Delete "exhibits proficiency"

Insert "meets graduation examination requirements"

Page 2, line 4:

Delete "exhibits proficiency"

Insert "meets graduation examination requirements"

Page 2, line 6:

Delete "exhibits proficiency"

Insert "meets graduation examination requirements"

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN asked if the graduation requirements would be determined by DOEED and the local school districts.

MS. ALTLAND said that it is correct and that is the status quo.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN said SB 120 would be set aside and SB 128 would be taken up.

#

#SB 128

**SB 128-PUBLIC SCHOOL EXIT EXAM TRANSITION PERIOD**

SENATOR LEMAN, sponsor of SB 128, said he believes that competency testing is appropriate. When he voted in favor of the exit exam requirement, he believed the five years of preparation time was adequate. He believes the DOEED and others who established standards for the state did a commendable job. The results from the first and follow up round for the exam have been less than spectacular with a few exceptions. He has looked at the school districts that were the exceptions and learned a few things. He believes the test should be a standard for passage and the test results should be placed on the transcript and the diploma. SB 128 buys two years of time. This approach accomplishes several things. School systems will have more time to align their curricula and bring what is taught in the schools up to a level that Alaskans believe is appropriate for high school students to achieve. It will also give students additional time to learn the material. It also gives parents additional time to get involved in the learning

of their children. He purposely did not address the issue surrounding special education because he is not an expert on that subject and the bill will provide two years to tackle that issue. SB 128 provides legal defensibility. He spoke with the past superintendent of the Unalaska School District who is now in Valdez, Carol Comeau with the Anchorage School District, and Carl Rose, with the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB). All three indicated their willingness to comment on SB 128.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN said she would now take up the draft proposal for committee legislation [SB 133]. The committee's proposal would do much of what Senator Ward's, Senator Leman's and the Governor's bills do. She has tried to find a solution for every student who might be required to take the exit exam. The committee proposal contains intent language that encourages school districts to develop additional endorsements, above and beyond what the bill requires, to develop a better picture of each student. The bill requires the exit exam to focus on essential and foundational skills in the areas of reading, English, and mathematics that the general community would expect the student to have or to know in order to function at an introductory level in our society. The transitional language for the time period between now and 2003 is similar to that provision in Senator Leman's bill. The committee proposal also contains language prohibiting the exit exam from being administered during a day when school is in session, the purpose being to avoid having half of the school non-functioning while the exam is being given. She noted she is open to suggestions on that language.

TAPE 01-17, SIDE B

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN said that the draft bill has a 2004 effective date. At that time, a student will be required to pass a high school essential skills examination to receive a high school diploma, unless the student receives a waiver from DOEED. She explained that a waiver might be given if a student transferred in during his or her senior year or to a student who has passed all classes and done well but for some reason failed the exam. She noted the draft bill contains re-examination language that she is unsure about. That language was left open so that DOEED can work on it. Section 3 contains permissive language for children with disabilities and conditions for granting diplomas to children who do not receive a passing score on the exam. Special education students have a very wide range of abilities and skills therefore different approaches will be necessary. Some students will never be required to take an exam. She intends to add oversight language that says when a school is in the process of providing an alternative assessment for a student, a report of explanation must

be done. It is not her intention that the bill contain a loophole so that any student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) will not have to take the test. The fact that a student passed the exam will be noted on the diploma and the scores will be placed on the student's transcript. She asked Carol Comeau to testify.

Number 2189

MS. CAROL COMEAU, Anchorage School District, thanked Senators Leman, Ward and Green for considering the concerns the Anchorage School District has been bringing forward. The Anchorage School District is not interested in stepping back from the exam requirement or from the accountability aspect. However, the district is still concerned about special education, bilingual and military transfer students. She is aware the committee has recognized these issues so she hopes they can be worked through during the next two years.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN said she thinks the waiver language will give DOEED room to make provisions for military students in particular and any other anomalies that occur.

MS. COMEAU asked if DOEED has given its perspective on the essential skills issue.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN said she cannot speak for the Commissioner, but she noted Commissioner Holloway is relieved the committee is moving forward. She then took public testimony.

MR. STEVE CATHERS, Superintendent of the Valdez City School District, said he was speaking on his own behalf. The legislation on the exit exam has had a positive effect on schools and students in the state: it has provided an incentive for students to try harder and for schools to be focused. At this point, the accountability system needs to be made part of a statewide school improvement process, which is in danger of becoming discredited by unresolved issues of fairness and undesired results. The worst case scenario will be that the group of students denied diplomas will correlate closely to the group of students already identified as handicapped, bilingual or economically disadvantaged. Another result, which could discredit the process, could be found in numerous anecdotal cases of students who become successful in the business world but were previously found inadequate by the State of Alaska because of the qualifying exam. He supports Senator Leman's bill (SB 128) in its effort to allow time to resolve these issues yet maintain accountability. The following other fixes must take place during the two-year delay.

- The appropriate education for students with special needs guaranteed by federal law is not yet provided for in any bill. The Valdez school district will be sued over this issue. Senator Green's idea of separate and multiple diplomas has merit and should be explored further.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN clarified that the previous language she discussed regarding separate diplomas is not in the draft proposal.

MR. CATHERS continued.

- The math portion of the exam needs to be adjusted, as with any standardized test, to ensure its validity.
- An honest inquiry must take place regarding whether all students have had equal access to quality education. If a school is identified as needing improvements, will the students be punished by withholding their diplomas? This study should take place using data that just became available at the education summit.
- A further step is needed to increase graduation requirements so that passing the minimal standards of the qualifying exam is not the only measure of student success. Bright students might be "dumbed" down by this system if they are not challenged more. He proposes that different kinds of diplomas be offered, sometimes called Career Pathways diplomas. The day of the generic pass/fail diploma is passed; the world is now specialized. An academic diploma could represent college-readiness and a technical diploma could represent preparedness for a skilled labor career. Graduation standards for each should be different but equally rigorous. This change would prepare students for the world of work and not reject a portion of our students who are not college bound but are very much career bound.
- Remediation needs to be supported through increased funding. Summer school and after school tutoring must become commonplace around the state.
- Student behaviors and student discipline must continue to be addressed to prevent failure due to interference and disruption by other students.

MR. KENNY BRYANT, Operations Business Manager for the Western North Slope Business Unit for Phillips Alaska, said he was speaking on his own behalf. He was asked to testify by virtue of his involvement on the Content Review Committee. He was involved in reviewing the math portion of the exam. His group looked at each question and asked whether it required essential knowledge for a student to graduate from high school. He noted that the business

community would much prefer to have the test scores on the diploma or transcripts. He does not believe the exit exam is a high risk exam. He asked whether the endorsements would be based on a pass/fail system or whether they will contain a score. A score will be a lot more valuable for a future employer to know.

Number 1732

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN explained that the scores will be on the transcript.

MS. AMY BOLLENBACH, testifying from Homer, asked if the committee has extensive studies on states that use exit exams regarding drop out and suicide rates and other possible effects of the exit exam.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN said she has seen several comparison pieces on different things states have gone through to conform and improve their tests. She said she does not know whether the information Ms. Bollenbach referred to is available but she will ask DOEED.

MS. BOLLENBACH asked that the committee get that information before taking action on the legislation. She noted an article in the Peninsula Clarion reported that several students have already dropped out of high school in the Kenai Peninsula because of the exit exam. If that is true, it is important to think about where those students are going. Ms. Bollenbach said she prefers Senator Ward's bill because it takes into consideration that people want accountability and information on students. That bill does not make the diploma contingent upon a certain score but instead would state whether the student has competencies in reading, writing, and math. She believes society should be very careful when doing things that might make children feel like failures.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN asked Ms. Bollenbach if she favors canceling the exit exam.

MS. BOLLENBACH said she would prefer that it be canceled or to use Senator Ward's method of listing levels of competency.

Number 1445

MR. DOUG WESSON, President of the Alaska School Psychologists Association (ASPA), said the ASPA favors delaying the exit exam. Its areas of concern are:

- In many schools, the curriculum has not been aligned with current standards;
- Reasonable accommodations are insufficient for students with

identified disabilities;

- The high school qualifying exam alone has questionable reliability and validity; and
- Alternatives need to be developed for students who may not be able to pass the exit exam.

The ASPA does not propose a date by which the exam should be delayed but believes it should not go into effect until the above concerns are addressed. ASPA believes it would be best to delay or phase in the exam so that its flaws and difficulties can be addressed.

ASPA supports standards and accountability. It is important that teachers have the tools and resources required for students to meet the standards: smaller class size, upgraded facilities, after school tutoring and summer school available for all. ASPA supports the National Association of School Psychologists' position to ensure that the use of tests is fair and that they accurately measure achievement. Tests should not be the sole measure to determine passage for graduation. The test can only provide a sample of skills and it must be valid in order to be useful. The profession of school psychology's ethical guidelines warn that test scores alone should never be used to make a determination on a student. Additional measures of student achievement should be considered, such as teacher evaluations. The National Association of Test Directors has gone on record to delay the implementation of the exit exam because of substantial performance differences between male and female students, students from more or less affluent families, students from urban and rural schools, and students with differences in racial and ethnic heritage. One aim of this test is to provide accountability in instruction but teachers do not control the socio-economic make-up of the communities nor the transience of the population. Neither do teachers control the salary levels they receive or the extent of parental involvement in education. Additionally, this outcome seems to punish the child rather than improve factors highly related to academic success.

MR. WESSON said testing is a tool; it should not be a policy. Testing can sometimes limit a teacher's ability to accommodate students with diverse learning styles. The use of test scores alone can misrepresent actual student achievement and increase drop out rates. Testing should not be used to punish but rather to diagnose. Not all schools in Alaska have aligned their curricula with the exit exam and many have just begun needed remedial help - a reflection of the short period of time between the first test results indicating the areas in need of improvement. The ASPA supports the accommodations being made for students with

disabilities in the draft proposal. Students need to be able to demonstrate mastery of the performance standards and not just the mastery of taking the test.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN asked Mr. Wesson if he thinks the language she discussed provides the leeway to do that.

MR. WESSON said he thinks the committee is heading in the right direction and the ASPA supports that movement. He added that the US District Court in Portland, Oregon recently heard a case in which a group of parents filed a lawsuit against the State of Oregon because their children were denied the use of accommodations. Under the settlement, students with learning disabilities would be allowed accommodations. ASPA feels there needs to be alternatives for students who may not be able to pass the exit exam. It would like to see alternatives used, such as portfolios, verification of standards, grades, and attendance to determine whether a student receives a high school diploma. Students with disabilities could have their IEP teams provide data and information to help determine whether the students are eligible for a diploma. He also noted a policy for students who transfer into the state needs to be looked at. He cautioned there are huge consequences for students who do not pass the exit exam and for those who may miss the exam date because of family or other emergencies.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN noted that she has asked DOEED to craft language to address emergency situations. She asked him to address the legislation before the committee in future testimony.

DR. ED MCLAIN, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, thanked Chairwoman Green for her leadership in this area. The Kenai District strongly favors refocusing on the essential skills aspect of the test, the provisions for students with special skills needs, the provision for transfer students, and the timing of the test. His district is now identifying the skills and knowledge that a high school graduate needs to have to participate on a structured level in society. Those skills are a subset of the skills that are included in the Kenai District's curriculum. He offered to provide assistance to the committee in crafting out specific regulations for the special education student provisions.

MR. CARL ROSE, Alaska Association of School Boards (AASB), said the AASB has identified areas of concern that the committee has been trying to deal with. He noted the issue is one of time and simplicity at this point. Failure to pass legislation this session will leave school districts up against a wall in 2002. He applauded the committee for working on the concerns that are of importance.

He stated the qualifying benchmark exams have created positive changes in education. He would hate to compromise that progress by not having legislation passed this year.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN announced the committee would meet on Saturday, March 11, at 10:30 a.m., to review SB 120, SB 128 and the draft language of the proposed Senate HESS Committee bill [SB 133]. She noted the committee would like to hear from parents and students at that meeting.

Number 559

SENATOR WARD asked if he could have some amendments incorporated into the proposed committee bill.

CHAIRWOMAN GREEN said that would be fine.

SENATOR DAVIS informed the committee that she will be passing out draft legislation at Saturday's meeting for public comment.

SENATOR WILKEN noted that he would not be able to attend Saturday's meeting and that his staff will be present.

There being no further business to come before the committee, CHAIRWOMAN GREEN adjourned the meeting at 3:00 p.m.