

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION**

March 2, 2006

12:01 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Mark Neuman, Chair
Representative Carl Gatto
Representative Peggy Wilson
Representative Les Gara

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Bob Lynn
Representative Bill Thomas
Representative Woodie Salmon

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Ethan Berkowitz
Representative Eric Croft
Representative Nancy Dahlstrom
Representative Berta Gardner
Representative Reggie Joule
Representative Mike Kelly
Senator Bettye Davis
Senator Johnny Ellis

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

READY TO READ, READY TO LEARN TASK FORCE PRESENTATION

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

NANCY MURKOWSKI, Chair

Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented speakers and members of the Ready to Read, Ready Learn Alaska Task Force.

ROBERT GRUNEWALD, Associate Economist
Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis
Minneapolis, Minnesota

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on the Perry
Preschool program in Minnesota.

BRIDGETT CHANDLER

Washington State Governor's Early Learning Council
Washington

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented brain research data and the
significance of child brain development.

IRA PERMAN, Member

Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force;
President & CEO, Alaska Humanities Forum
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on the Ready to Read,
Ready to Learn Task Force.

DAVID WIGHT, Member

Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided a private sector perspective on
early childhood education.

EDNA AHGEAK MACLEAN, Ph.D., Member

Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force;
President Emeritus, Ilisagvik College
Barrow, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on early childhood
education issues in Alaska Native rural communities.

CANDACE WINKLER, Member

Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force;
CEO, Child Care Connection
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed the affordability, accessibility,
and quality of early childhood education in Alaska.

JOHN DAVIS, Member

Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force;
Superintendent, Bering Strait School District
Unalakleet, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Requested participation in the effort to
improve early childhood education for all children.

SHARON GAGNON, Ph.D., Member

Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force;
Vice Chair, Cook Inlet Region, Inc. (CIRI) Foundation;
Vice Chair, University of Alaska Foundation
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented ways to improve early childhood literacy within families.

CATHRYN RASMUSON, Member
Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force;
Trustee, Rasmuson Foundation
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a philanthropic perspective and explained three elements that would provide a positive impact on early childhood literacy.

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR MARK NEUMAN called the House Special Committee on Education meeting to order at [12:01:31 PM](#). Representatives Neuman and Wilson were present at the call to order. Representatives Gara and Gatto arrived as the meeting was in progress. Representatives Berkowitz, Croft, Dahlstrom, Gardner, Joule, and Kelly, and Senators Davis and Ellis were also in attendance.

READY TO READ, READY TO LEARN TASK FORCE PRESENTATION

[12:01:56 PM](#)

CHAIR NEUMAN announced that the only order of business would be a presentation given by the Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force with opening remarks by its chair, Nancy Murkowski.

[12:02:50 PM](#)

NANCY MURKOWSKI, Chair, Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force, introduced the task force members and relayed that their mission is to reverse the findings indicating that there are too many Alaskan children entering kindergarten unable to read and learn.

[12:04:04 PM](#)

ROBERT GRUNEWALD, Associate Economist, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, informed the committee that he would be explaining the concepts in an article he co-wrote entitled, "Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public

Return." He relayed that the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis has a diverse research program which examines those ingredients necessary for creating a strong economy at the national, state, and local levels. The quality of the workforce, he opined, is one of the key ingredients to a growing economy. He said that "those states that have a high percent of population with a college degree also tend to be those states that have ... high per capita income." Furthermore, he noted that research has shown that there is a 70 percent difference in wages between workers with a college degree as compared to those with only a high school degree. He then highlighted, through PowerPoint slides, the benefits of the 1960's Perry Preschool study in Michigan in which 123 children from low-income families were randomly selected to participate in either the preschool or in a control group and then tracked over a 40-year span. He explained that those children participating in the preschool not only received a high-quality daily session at school, but also had teachers working with the parents at home on parenting skills. He shared some of the results of the study: significant differences in school achievement scores, graduation rates, and a reduced need for special education. Furthermore, he highlighted that these same students, unlike those in the control group, were more likely to own their own home, earned more money in the workforce, more likely to have a savings account, and were involved in half as many incidences of crime. He shared additional results of the study on slides entitled, "Perry Preschool - Estimated Return on Investment," "Benefit-Cost Ratios for Other Longitudinal Studies," and "Lessons Learned from Research." In conclusion, he listed some of the businesses that have invested in early childhood education, such as the Minnesota Business for Early Learning. He said that this business has partnered with Alaska "to leverage resources from the private sector from community leaders ... to explore how to most cost-effectively help Alaskans with early childhood development."

[12:15:12 PM](#)

MS. MURKOWSKI informed the committee that Alaska is one of 12 states that does not have an early childhood development program.

[12:16:09 PM](#)

BRIDGETT CHANDLER, Washington State Governor's Early Learning Council, acknowledged the "remarkable strides" Alaska has made, in a short period of time, in pulling together a public-private

partnership to address early childhood development. She informed the committee that she is here today as a "bridge from the scientific world" to address the relevancy of neuroscience findings and its pertinence to the world of economy and human capital development. She highlighted new technology allowing one to observe the inside of the brain while it conducts tasks and shows the rapid development of a child's brain in the first couple years of life. "Those early circuits that [are] established are the foundation for all the later learning that we do in our life," she said. She shared other key findings with the committee such as: if development needs are not met in the early years, particularly birth to age one, the child's body will enter a "stress response system" which is "toxic to children's brains"; the quality of learning is driven by the environment and by the key players in a child's life; the emotional climate surrounding the child is the most important aspect of development; and compelling research data shows that infants "can be depressed if not receiving nurturing care and responsive interactions."

[12:25:46 PM](#)

MS. CHANDLER, in response to Chair Neuman, relayed the importance of parents establishing loving relationships with their children and understanding that children have much to communicate long before they learn to speak. She then returned to highlighting another key finding in brain research which is that the brain is plastic throughout life but more critically so in the early years. In conclusion, she informed the committee that in the state of Washington, legislation was drafted to create a new Department of Early Learning in an effort to consolidate childhood programs in a variety of departments.

[12:31:15 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON, in noting the cultural differences [within Alaska], questioned how some parents could be taught to change their methods of communication with their children.

MS. CHANDLER suggested to start by building on the strengths and focusing on the literacy traditions each culture and family has to offer. "It is that phonemic awareness, that knowledge of an experience with sounds in infancy, ... not how many books you've been read, that predicts your later success in school in reading," she said.

[12:34:00 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARA questioned Mr. Grunewald regarding the component of the Perry Preschool program which involved staff visiting parents to encourage their involvement in early childhood education. He asked what the benefits of including this component would be.

MR. GRUNEWALD said studies have shown that a consistent component of successful preschool programs are ones that either have a home-visiting program encouraging parental involvement or ones that have a parent education component at the center. He referred to Ms. Chandler's earlier mention of parents being the child's first teacher and opined that including parents in a child's activities is an important element to early education.

MS. MURKOWSKI, remarked that Headstart has a family-visiting component included in its program; however, only 100 out of 300 villages in Alaska have the Headstart program.

[12:36:56 PM](#)

IRA PERMAN, Member, Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force; President & CEO, Alaska Humanities Forum, informed the committee he and Melinda Myers serve as staff for the task force. Through a PowerPoint slide presentation, he provided the committee with early childhood information pertinent to Alaska. He relayed that there are approximately 55,000 children in Alaska who fall within the early childhood years from birth to roughly five years old. He noted that it's been determined many of these children enter the school system unprepared to read or learn and that kindergarten teachers can usually predict, within the first week of school, where students will "end up" by the time they graduate from high school. He highlighted that beginning in 2002, kindergarten teachers are now required to do developmental profiles of their students within the first week of school to assess desired behaviors of each in specific areas. Profile results, he said, show low percentages in categories such as listening, emergent reading, emergent writing, and problem solving - percentages that are declining each year. He concluded that those kids who come to school behind, tend to stay behind, and those kids ready to read and ready to learn are the ones who succeed in school and in life.

[12:42:39 PM](#)

DAVID WIGHT, Member, Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force, informed the committee that he formerly served as

president and CEO of Alyeska Pipeline Service Company and has had more than 40 years in the energy business. He noted how an effective early learning system could improve three essential ingredients in the business world: effectiveness of employees, retention of those employees, and future replacement of employees by hiring more qualified, educated workers within the state.

[12:45:50 PM](#)

EDNA AHGEAK MACLEAN, Ph.D., Member, Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force; President Emeritus, Ilisagvik College, provided the committee with a PowerPoint slide presentation focusing on four issues of Native Alaska rural communities: lack of meaningful parental involvement in schools; retention of teachers and administrators, largely hired from the Lower 48, who do not have a vested interest in the [Alaska Native] communities; lack of culturally relevant curriculum; and too few Alaska Native students succeeding in schools. She expressed her belief that the number one priority for parents is to see their children succeed in school. She also noted that factors such as rejection of [Alaska Native] language and knowledge, and removal of children from schools "has left a great deal of resentment towards the school by many of our parents and our communities." She said that although many of the parents did not stop this from happening, they are now becoming participants in finding ways to help their children succeed in schools. She also pointed out that many teachers are unsure of how to use parent help in the classroom. Additionally, she explained how honoring the ancestral language in schools can make students feel better toward the schooling process. She described the practices of parents with their young children in Alaska Native homes prior to the introduction of schools - many practices which stopped once parents were encouraged to not speak the native language at home so children might better learn English. She expressed her wish to see the return of these practices and to see involvement of local, state, and federal organizations in providing access to quality, early childhood education in both rural and urban communities.

[12:53:31 PM](#)

CHAIR NEUMAN interjected to recognize and commend those schools in Alaska that do participate in early education opportunities. He asked Dr. MacLean how the [state] could help ensure that parents teach cultural traditions.

DR. MACLEAN explained that in reading to their children and teaching them how to interact with a book, parents might wish to do so in their native language. She opined that development of more culturally relevant materials in that particular language is then needed in homes. Furthermore, she said that for those parents with no access to early childhood learning materials, outside help from experts or resource materials are needed.

12:56:05 PM

CANDACE WINKLER, Member, Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force; CEO, Child Care Connection, informed the committee that the organization has a network of agencies throughout the state that consult and train parents and childcare providers. She discussed three components of early childhood education in Alaska: accessibility, affordability, and quality. In regard to accessibility, she said that there are only 22,000 spaces in licensed or certified programs accessible to about 46,000 children under the age of six, having all parents in the workforce which leaves some of the children in informal, unsafe childcare situations. She then listed the average cost of childcare for infants and four-year olds in Alaska and how it often doubles the cost of college tuition without providing the same scholarship opportunities or years of saving opportunities. On a national level, from a report entitled, "Breaking the Piggy Bank: [Parents and the High Price of Child Care]," she said it was determined that the cost of childcare for two children - one infant and one preschool-aged child - is more than the average rental payment and yet equal to the average mortgage payment for those who own their homes. With regard to the final component of early childhood education, she relayed that the number one factor in determining the quality of a program is teacher training and retention, and a second factor is family involvement. Factors such as low wages contribute to high turnover rates, she explained, and the younger the child, the more impact the turnover has. She suggested that solutions in other states be considered such as implementing a quality rating system and investing in teacher training and retention.

1:03:53 PM

JOHN DAVIS, Member, Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force; Superintendent, Bering Strait School District, and former president of the Alaska Association of School Administrators (AASA), asked for participation in the challenge of how to "educate those who are most in need of education." He opined that the issue is not determining who will do well but rather to

ensure that everyone does well. "We all prosper when that happens," he said. He also expressed his belief that many of the recent efforts at educational reform are misguided and "are not going to lead us to where we want to be." He concluded by reiterating his request for participation in the effort to address early childhood education.

[1:09:36 PM](#)

CHAIR NEUMAN announced that future meetings with committee members and various members of the Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force members would be arranged and welcomed.

[1:10:02 PM](#)

SHARON GAGNON, Ph.D., Member, Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force; Vice Chair, Cook Inlet Region, Inc. (CIRI) Foundation; Vice Chair, University of Alaska Foundation, informed the committee of the former positions she's held: chair of the Alaska Humanities Forum; president of the Board of Regents of the University of Alaska; and president of the Board of Overseers of Harvard. All these positions, in addition to being a grandmother, have contributed to her being "more than interested in the whole concept of early childhood literacy," she said. The family, she opined, has the greatest influence on a child which is why she is most interested in family literacy. She poised the question as to how to promote important literacy skills to those families who need help in interacting with their children. She listed Even Start and Head Start as existing family literacy programs in Alaska. Other states have programs such as Prime Time, which works through the library systems, or the Mother Read/Father Read program which involves training the parents. She expressed her belief that one important role of the Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force would be to work with the state and other entities to explore the variety of available family literacy programs in other states and then determine how to implement them.

[1:14:38 PM](#)

CATHRYN RASMUSON, Member, Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Task Force; Trustee, Rasmuson Foundation, shared with the committee the three elements that would impact early childhood literacy: coordination between business, state, and federal programs; collaboration among businesses and various foundations to help finance projects; and engaging communities. She listed several Alaskan communities that have received grants from the

Rasmuson Foundation to help preschool programs and libraries. She also noted that foundations outside Alaska have, upon invitation, "brought in millions of dollars to various [Alaska] communities and non-profit organizations."

CHAIR NEUMAN expressed his appreciation for all the work done by the Rasmuson Foundation throughout Alaska.

[1:19:39 PM](#)

MS. MURKOWSKI opened the meeting to questions.

CHAIR NEUMAN reminded the committee that the task force would also be presenting at the House Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee later that day. He also announced that Stephanie Clothier, from the National Conference of State Legislators, would be presenting information to the House Special Committee on Education next week on what other states are doing in the early childhood arena.

REPRESENTATIVE DAHLSTROM, Alaska State Legislature, expressed her thanks to the task force for their work.

MS. MURKOWSKI said there is more work to do. She clarified that the task force's mission is to not only ensure that children are ready to read, but ready to learn as well.

CHAIR NEUMAN thanked Ms. Murkowski and the presenters for their involvement in education.

[1:23:35 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Education meeting was adjourned at 12:23 p.m.