

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

March 7, 2006

11:11 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Bob Lynn
Representative Bill Thomas

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Nancy Dahlstrom
Representative Berta Gardner

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

Early Childhood Development Presentation

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

STEFFANIE CLOTHIER, Program Director
Children and Families Program
National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL)
Denver, Colorado

POSITION STATEMENT: As an NCSL representative, provided information on other states' efforts at improving early childhood education.

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR MARK NEUMAN called the House Special Committee on Education meeting to order at 11:11:00 AM. Representatives

Gara, Gatto, Salmon, and Neuman were present at the call to order. Representative Wilson arrived as the meeting was in progress. Representatives Dahlstrom and Gardner were also in attendance.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PRESENTATION

11:11:25 AM

CHAIR NEUMAN announced that the only order of business would be a follow-up presentation to the one given the previous week by the Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Alaska Taskforce chair, Nancy Murkowski. He said that today's presentation would include information regarding other states' efforts to improve early childhood education.

11:13:07 AM

STEFFANIE CLOTHIER, Program Director, Children and Families Program, National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL), informed the committee that her presentation would focus primarily on pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) programs. She listed the reading material available in the committee packets which includes topics on teachers, community providers, and model program research in addition to early education information published in the National Conference of State Legislatures Legisbrief. She explained that the primary mission of NCSL is to help states with policy innovation and encouraged committee members to use NCSL resources for research or development of policy ideas.

CHAIR NEUMAN interjected to inform the committee that Ms. Clothier is very familiar with Alaska statutes.

11:16:12 AM

MS. CLOTHIER notified the committee that Bob Boerner is the NCSL liaison for the state of Alaska. Then in response to Representative Gatto, she said that her presentation would not only highlight the benefits of early childhood education, but would include policy options as well. Through a PowerPoint slide presentation, she listed several factors motivating state legislatures to address early childhood education: low third grade test scores and the realization that holding back those students who perform poorly is an unwanted expense; lack of school readiness when entering kindergarten; the achievement gap in kindergarten and the finding that those "children who arrive

at kindergarten behind, generally stay behind"; and access to new brain research and economic data. The next slide, she explained, compares the test scores to family income of those entering kindergarten. She relayed that this has resulted in states trying to determine whether or not to implement targeted or non-targeted programs.

[11:20:54 AM](#)

CHAIR NEUMAN asked Ms. Clothier to explain why the test scores on the chart, for reading, math, and general knowledge, are all very close. He expressed his belief that this is not typical for the variety of student levels.

MS. CLOTHIER said she does not have an answer to this and was also surprised by the results, particularly for the math scores which typically are not as high as the literacy scores. She said she would investigate.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER, Alaska State Legislature, noted that there are many parents who believe that children are not mature enough to be in school until approximately age seven. Given this, she inquired as to why kids should start school even sooner than kindergarten.

MS. CLOTHIER stated her belief that preschool is not the only answer and that family experiences and parental training are also key factors in preparing a child for school. She also clarified that although some of the children who lag behind can "catch up," it is important to determine and address those skills needed to ready children for school.

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CHAIR NEUMAN interjected to say that because research has found that the capacity of learning in the younger years is greater, this explains the importance placed on targeting early education.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER suggested that attending preschool to help prepare kids for kindergarten makes sense for some but not others. In response to Ms. Clothier, she clarified that those kids who are struggling or unready, might simply be forced to do so at a younger age in a classroom with kids who are ready to learn. She offered her belief that preschool programs solely designed to meet the needs of those who are struggling, could be more effective.

MS. CLOTHIER said that determining whether or not to target a program is part of the big debate. She also relayed that at this point in time, most states target their programs to those most at risk. However, she opined that those children in upper income families who are also struggling should have their needs addressed as well.

[11:25:31 AM](#)

MS. CLOTHIER, returning to her slide presentation, listed several outcomes from preschool programs: higher test scores, increased social skills, better classroom behavior, less grade repetition and special education, higher graduation rates, increased productivity, less crime, and better health behavior. She showed the committee a series of graphs comparing the different results of those students enrolled in the Perry Preschool "program group" to those in the "no-program group." Those in the former group, she highlighted, had fewer numbers in special education, higher test scores at age 14, and more graduating from high school on time. She continued to show more charts indicating a higher percentage of successes for this same group as adults: higher earnings, more homeowners, fewer on welfare, greater numbers employed, and more with savings accounts.

CHAIR NEUMAN inquired as to how today's trends compare to those at the time the Perry Preschool study was done.

MS. CLOTHIER said that when considering the Perry Preschool data which came from a very expensive, high-quality program, states might question whether it can be replicated in today's world. She opined that the "model" programs have the greatest gains and that some of the programs being offered by states today fall somewhat short of this. She went on to list effective results of the Abecedarian project in North Carolina and noted how this can show both short-run and long-run savings to states.

[11:28:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARA asked what the high-income kids are doing differently compared to low-income kids.

MS. CLOTHIER explained that there is broad participation in preschool programs by all incomes regardless of the level of cost. In further response, she said with the parents being the child's "first and best teacher, ... the experience happening in

the home is obviously the other factor [determining readiness for school]." Returning to her slide presentation, she said that unlike the two aforementioned preschool studies, the Chicago Child-Parent Center study involved a much larger sample size yet had similar results with a higher percentage of successes for those children in the program group: greater numbers graduating from high school, fewer in special education, fewer likely to repeat a grade, and fewer juvenile arrests. She highlighted that some of the greatest savings are those pertaining to criminal justice. She also relayed her interest in seeing economists enter the discussion on early education, interpreting the latest data from the aforementioned model program studies from an economic standpoint, and confirming that there are economic gains to be made by investing in early education. She then spoke of Jim Heckman, a Nobel Prize winner from the University of Chicago, as someone who has provided another "interesting approach to the economic argument" and whose career has focused on the development of workforce skills in human capital. She said he has identified motivation, persistence, and self-control as keys to workforce development and the sooner this is developed in a child's life, the greater likelihood of having a better economic return.

[11:34:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARA asked whether brain development potential not realized by age five is irreversible.

MS. CLOTHIER indicated that this is not her specialty and that most of the focus on this topic has been on things harmful to kids and hard to reverse. Given this, she explained that additional focus involves determining what kind of positive environment is needed to promote learning.

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON expressed her understanding of recent brain research findings which is that if the pathways in a young child's brain are not stimulated, they will recede and begin to disappear - something that is irreversible.

[11:36:41 AM](#)

MS. CLOTHIER listed several different ways states have approached implementing pre-kindergarten programs which include: those generally aimed at three- and four-year-old children, those that vary in length of time per day and per school year, and those that are sometimes targeted to low-income children or low-performing schools. In response to Representative Wilson,

she agreed that these programs can be targeted to those schools that don't meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as done in Arkansas and New Jersey.

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CHAIR NEUMAN inquired as to whether there might be a chance of an equity argument or potential lawsuit with these programs being targeted to some and not others.

MS. CLOTHIER said that this is a good question but one that has not yet become an issue. She stated her belief that preschools are seen as potential remedies to some of the lawsuits as they are one way states can make up for deficiencies. She provided an example of the New Jersey lawsuit in which the development of a preschool was a result of a kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) lawsuit requiring the state to establish preschools.

[11:39:15 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GARA asked whether some schools have offered preschool programs during the summer months to address the problem of not having enough space in schools even though this would mean a much shorter school year for the preschoolers.

MS. CLOTHIER informed the committee that Florida has allowed its districts to choose whether to do a school year or summer program, but only receive funding for the one. She added that "generally states have not limited their preschool programs to schools" and as long as the required service is provided and standards met, anybody can provide the service.

CHAIR NEUMAN stated his belief that the discussion of early education in Alaska needs to be between both the Department of Education and Early Development (EED) and the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS).

REPRESENTATIVE GARA said it's unlikely that grant money can be given to a private organization because of the Alaska constitution which does not allow spending of public funds on private education. He noted that although federal regulations allow this with the Head Start programs, funding for other programs might involve "something that's chartered through a governmental body in order to meet the constitutional requirement."

CHAIR NEUMAN requested the Ms. Clothier investigate and provide the committee with information as to how other states are addressing this.

MS. CLOTHIER said she would and noted that this same constitutional issue came up in New Mexico which resulted in the restructuring of its state departments.

[11:42:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON, in noting the challenge Alaska has faced in funding early education, asked whether many of the states have [successfully] channeled their budgets such that K-12 funding might be managed by education departments and Pre-K funding managed by health and social services departments.

CHAIR NEUMAN noted that "Alaska is in quite a predicament" because EED has said it does not have sufficient personnel to deal with this.

MS. CLOTHIER opined that "each of the agencies needs to take responsibility." She relayed that historically the focus on childcare versus preschool education has been divided. She provided an example of where some states decided to create a joint governance between two departments and where others assigned the management to one department with a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with another. In regard to funding, she said that sometimes a grant program is managed by the education department to be directly applied for by providers or possibly distributed to school districts that then contract out to providers.

[11:44:37 AM](#)

MS. CLOTHIER, returning to the slide presentation, highlighted that 26 states and the District of Columbia (DC) expanded their Pre-K programs last year. In response to Chair Neuman, she said that 40 states currently provide funding to preschool programs. She then provided the committee with examples of how three states have structured their preschool programs: Oklahoma, Arkansas, and New Jersey. She said in Oklahoma incentives are given for full-day programs and teachers are required to have a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree with a certification in early childhood. "These are big cost items if ... done this way," she said. In response to Chair Neuman's inquiry regarding the expense, she said the issue of qualified teachers is the most expensive and most challenging for states. However, she noted

that research has determined the more qualified a teacher is, the better the outcomes for kids.

11:47:40 AM

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON inquired as to whether "quite extensive in-service" for teachers and aides would be less expensive and just as effective.

MS. CLOTHIER remarked that current research is insufficient in determining the answer to this. She opined that "there's a lot to be said about state experience" on this topic. She also noted the question of compensation is "a big one because the early childhood field has consistently paid ... very low wages." If states are going to require more education for teachers, she said, then the compensation issue comes into play as well.

CHAIR NEUMAN, referring to the tier system currently proposed by EED commissioner, Roger Sampson, questioned how this might be affected by the requirement that early education teachers be more qualified.

MS. CLOTHIER said that some of the states have created a "P-3 certification" to qualify teachers to instruct preschool as well as third grade. Returning to the preschool study done in Oklahoma, she relayed that gains were made for all income levels and all populations.

11:50:10 AM

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON inquired as to whether the gains made for those children furthest behind was sufficient enough to raise them to the same level [as the more advanced children].

MS. CLOTHIER said she doesn't know the answer to this but doesn't think so.

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON stated her belief that those children "still behind" do not gain the self-esteem needed to feel good about themselves.

MS. CLOTHIER explained that even though research has shown there is some "cognitive fade-out" for all kids and their I.Q. test scores don't remain as high as they once were, those who feel better about themselves and have more confidence are still more likely to graduate. "I think what people have discovered is that it's probably not about [intelligence quotient (IQ)]

anymore; it has a lot more to do with some of the social and emotional skills that children gain as well," she said. She went on to highlight other aspects of the preschool studies done in Arkansas and New Jersey. In response to Representative Gardner's request to compare results of these states' programs, she said that Arkansas has not yet done a study as to the effectiveness of its recently expanded preschool program. New Jersey does have data for its program, she explained; however, it is not in the same format as the one done for the Oklahoma study and so not as easy to compare.

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON inquired as to whether any data existed that could provide a nationwide comparison of the effectiveness of programs in all states.

MS. CLOTHIER noted that many of the state studies are too new at this point in time. In further response to Representative Wilson, she said she agreed that this comparison of data should be made available.

[11:57:14 AM](#)

MS. CLOTHIER informed the committee that given the variety of choices to be made, in regard to establishing early education programs, NCSL is available to help states with research and to help think through the available options.

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON said she would like to review the early education program challenges faced by those western states with similar distance delivery issues as Alaska.

MS. CLOTHIER opined that the "rural issue" is an important one and suggested that Oklahoma might have experience with this. In response to Chair Neuman, she confirmed that legislators interested in obtaining assistance or information on this issue could contact her at NCSL.

CHAIR NEUMAN stated his belief that Alaska is "on the cusp of changing education" and yet faces challenges such as: limitations with funding, location of schools, division between EED and DHSS, and cultural differences.

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON added her interest in learning how to educate other legislators enough so that they share the same concern and willingness to find ways to fund early childhood education.

MS. CLOTHIER said that one effective route would be to enlist involvement from other interested parties such as: major CEOs, chambers of commerce, and sheriffs.

12:01:50 PM

CHAIR NEUMAN acknowledged the presence of other legislators not on this committee "in trying to make sure that education is better for all Alaskans."

MS. CLOTHIER, in response to Representative Gara, said her PowerPoint presentation is available for use [by committee members]. In further response, she explained that "generally NCSL doesn't take a position on individual bills."

CHAIR NEUMAN thanked Ms. Clothier for her presentation.

12:03:33 PM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Education meeting was adjourned at 12:03 p.m.