

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

March 14, 2006

11:10 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Mark Neuman, Chair
Representative Carl Gatto
Representative Bob Lynn
Representative Bill Thomas
Representative Peggy Wilson
Representative Les Gara

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Woodie Salmon

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 247

"An Act establishing a grant program to support voluntary class size reduction."

- HEARD AND HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 247

SHORT TITLE: CLASS SIZE REDUCTION GRANTS

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) CROFT

04/04/05	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/04/05	(H)	EDU, HES, FIN
05/03/05	(H)	EDU AT 11:00 AM CAPITOL 106
05/03/05	(H)	-- Meeting Canceled --
03/14/06	(H)	EDU AT 11:00 AM CAPITOL 106

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE ERIC CROFT

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as the sponsor of HB 247.

CAROL COMEAU, Superintendent

Anchorage School District

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed the pros and cons of HB 247.

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR MARK NEUMAN called the House Special Committee on Education meeting to order at [11:10:40 AM](#). Representatives Neuman, Wilson, Gatto, and Lynn were present at the call to order. Representatives Thomas and Gara arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 247-CLASS SIZE REDUCTION GRANTS

[Contains brief mention of HB 228.]

[11:10:57 AM](#)

CHAIR NEUMAN announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 247, "An Act establishing a grant program to support voluntary class size reduction." He informed the committee that it was his intent to hold the bill because he would like the committee to first hear and compare similar proposed legislation, HB 228, sponsored by Representative Jim Holm.

[11:11:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ERIC CROFT, Alaska State Legislature, as sponsor of HB 247, opined that given a small enough class size, teachers are allowed sufficient time to teach which is one of the most important aspects of public education. He highlighted that data has shown that a class size of 30 pupils makes it difficult to effectively teach. Furthermore, he relayed that reductions in class size to 15 to 18 students has shown "dramatic results in terms of student achievement." He then directed the committee's attention to the attached fiscal note of \$120 million. He expressed his belief that this amount and more is well worth the improvement it will make to education. He explained that this is not a "typical" class size [reduction] bill because unlike other state mandates, this one would provide the needed funding. He then referred to the [Tennessee Department of Education Student Teacher Achievement Ratio study (Project STAR)] on class size reduction. He said 6,000 Tennessee students were placed in three different classes: a reduced class of 17 or 18 students, a "normal" class size, and a normal class size with a teacher aide.

11:17:36 AM

CHAIR NEUMAN inquired as to the cost per student in Tennessee and how it compares to the amount Alaska spends per student.

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT replied that he did not have this information but would find out. He said that although Project STAR was implemented as a study and determined that class size reduction made significant improvements to education, he was not certain whether the study went any further than that. He suggested that "the cost to implement this may have scared Tennessee off." A class size reduction study was done in Florida as well, he relayed, however funding any changes to class sizes was determined too costly. He suggested that this committee first "prove to ourselves ... that it has significant results and then let's talk about whether we're willing to spend the money to achieve those results."

11:19:13 AM

REPRESENTATIVE LYNN opined that it would be like "going to lot of trouble to prove the obvious" and that one could even say having a private tutor would be ideal. He referred to his former years as a teacher for a class of 43 students with no teacher aides and expressed his belief that effective education is more a matter of the kinds of students in a class than the total number.

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON offered her belief that lowering numbers of classroom students might be "a nightmare for schools." She asked what would happen to the extra kids per classroom, or with the kids in combined-grade classrooms, and whether there would be enough classrooms to accommodate the change.

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT, returning to the statement made by Representative Lynn, said he agreed that the benefits to class size reduction is "proving the obvious" yet how much of a reduction or how big an effect is information he would like to share with the committee. Additionally, he expressed his hope that HB 247 provides "the maximum flexibility and incentive for districts to [implement class size reduction] without mandating exactly how they do it" He returned to the Project STAR study and highlighted that dramatic results were seen for those class sizes reduced to 15 to 18 students. Other studies have shown that solely lowering class size closer to 20 students is not as effective. He said that "there's a magic sort of sweet spot around the 15 to 18 [students per classroom]" where the

disruptive influence of unruly students is dramatically reduced, where time spent with the teacher is dramatically increased, and when the "feedback loop" is shortened. This latter, he explained, is the time it takes for a student to learn from the teacher whether his or her answer is correct or not. He relayed that "it's vital to have that [feedback loop] be a fairly quick turnaround - the more they sit with the wrong answer, or right answer they don't know is right, the less they're learning." He directed the committee's attention to the chart on page 154 of the report on Project Star entitled, "The Enduring Effects of Small Classes," showing the "SAT grade equivalents" from kindergarten through third grade. He noted that those kindergartners participating in Project STAR tested .5 months ahead in reading and word skills, and over 1.5 months ahead in math skills by the end of the year. These results, he said, are "significant but fairly modest gains" compared to the third grade students who tested 4.5 months ahead of those students in a class size of 25 students, 5.5 months ahead in word study skills, and 2.6 months ahead in math skills. He then directed the committee's attention to the graphs on page [156] which show the increased benefit to those students enrolled more years in the smaller class sizes. He noted an example of the gains for second graders up to 5.8, or "essentially half a year ahead of [those students in fuller classes]."

[11:28:19 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE THOMAS inquired as to whether there are any comparative studies on those students who are home schooled versus those taught in a large classroom setting.

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT said that the superintendent of Delta/Greeley School District conveyed to him that those who home school and follow a curriculum tend to do very well. He opined that "home schooling can be tremendously effective if the parents are truly involved in teaching and not very effective if they're not doing much."

REPRESENTATIVE THOMAS expressed his belief that the attached fiscal note is lacking in that it does not include capital construction. This expense, he explained, would derive from the need to build more classrooms to house the overflow of students resulting from decreasing the number of students per classroom.

[11:30:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT announced that before he addressed how to implement smaller class sizes, he had one additional benefit to highlight for the committee. He relayed that not only were [Project STAR] students tested in earlier grades, but also in later grades to determine whether the benefits of being in smaller class sizes "fade away" upon returning to larger class sizes. "The short answer is 'no'," he said.

REPRESENTATIVE GARA inquired as to whether reducing the class size could be limited to core classes in order to help lower the expense.

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT relayed that in some states, limits have been applied to Title I schools. He then turned the discussion to the failed attempts by other states to reduce class size. He referred to the State of Georgia which mandated that class sizes be reduced statewide until it was realized there were not sufficient funds to back the project. He explained that [HB 247] is a voluntary grant program and not mandated. "No school district in the state has to reduce [its] class size if [it] doesn't want to," he said. He relayed that those schools which choose to participate would receive financial assistance.

CHAIR NEUMAN interjected that he could "not imagine why any school district in the state would not say, 'You bet I'll take that money'" He then sought confirmation of this from Carol Comeau, superintendent of the Anchorage School District.

[11:33:58 AM](#)

CAROL COMEAU, Superintendent, Anchorage School District (ASD), expressed her belief that school districts would take advantage of the program if assured of high-quality teachers. Additionally, she opined that having an [adequate number] of facilities is a real concern and that a school might be faced with the question of where to place a possible sixteenth student when its class sizes are set at a maximum of 15 students. She opined that establishing a 5-year period for the project is a good commitment. However, she remarked that the language in the bill regarding the possibility of a parent "going to court ... to compel a district to honor their commitment" is unclear to her. She repeated her concern in how a very mobile, transient district like ASD would deal with "the sixteenth or even the seventeenth student" once committed to a 15:1 class size [ratio].

[11:35:33 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GATTO, in regard to building new space, suggested there may not be a need to do so by simply dividing the space with a curtain. [The real expense], he opined, might be the need to hire additional teachers. He noted that smaller size classes already exist in the bush and larger class sizes in urban areas.

MS. COMEAU explained that depending on the school and the mobility factor, ASD does have classroom sizes of 15 to 16 students through the aid of federal, class-size reduction funds. Given that these classes are taught by highly qualified teachers, she expressed the effectiveness of having a [smaller class size].

REPRESENTATIVE THOMAS, in regard to possible abuse of the program, asked whether those rural schools that currently have smaller class sizes of 15 students wouldn't already qualify to receive the \$8,000 [per student].

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT added that many of these rural classrooms contain mixed grades. However, he explained that regardless of the existing mix or number, whether a rural or urban school, any school with kindergarten through third grade students enrolled in a small class size, and furthermore guarantees they will maintain that small class size, would receive the additional funding. He said that although capital construction may be significant, he suggested that decisions regarding construction might be ones the districts would prefer to make themselves [rather than at the state level]. He relayed that given the way the bill is structured, there will likely be as many different "solutions to this" as there are school districts.

CHAIR NEUMAN informed the committee that all 53 Alaska school districts were invited to participate in this discussion.

[11:40:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON remarked that although this is a fantastic bill, she wondered how school districts could tackle the project given all the existing challenges they face: increased heating costs, teacher turnover, increased insurance rates, and the funding of retirement benefits. She expressed her belief that the districts "would like [the funding] to come in a different way." She relayed that the primary concern of the schools in her district are the school cost-differentials.

11:42:10 AM

CHAIR NEUMAN referred to earlier presentations on early childhood education opportunities and the cost of running such programs. He noted the similar goals to providing earlier education and creating smaller class sizes: "teaching kids to learn how to learn." Determining the best means to accomplish this goal is an on-going question among the school districts, he said, and a challenge given all the other obligations districts face.

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT relayed that he has been "fighting for increases in the foundation formula for 10 years" and opined that "nothing significant" has happened in regard to increasing education funding. He suggested that simply announcing possible monetary increases is not sufficient and that a new approach is needed to convey how to achieve the goals to improve education. He expressed his belief that his goal of reducing class size is tangible, understandable, and one to which Alaskans would be willing to commit.

CHAIR NEUMAN asked Ms. Comeau where she believed "we get the best bang for our buck": funding early childhood education or [reducing class size] from kindergarten through third grade.

MS. COMEAU expressed her belief that more should be invested in prekindergarten (Pre-K) through third grade. In response to Chair Neuman, she said she could not [easily] make the distinction as to which age group, Pre-K or grades K-3, should be addressed first. She relayed that if she had to choose one over the other, it "would be grades K-3 because it's in the system already." However, she remarked that in addressing K-3 alone "we would be missing the boat" because many of the kids entering kindergarten are not ready to learn. "Lower class size will help them immeasurably ... but they would do so much better if they'd had some help before [entering school]," she said. She highlighted that what she likes most about HB 247 is that it gives the local school districts the power to decide whether or not they wish to participate in the class size reduction program.

11:50:27 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GARA referred to the different amounts of oil revenue that would be generated at the 25 percent tax rate [as opposed to the 20 percent rate] and suggested this as a possible source for funding early childhood education. He then said that

every year the implementation of small class sizes is delayed, more schools are built that cannot accommodate this change. He asked Representative Croft how he would feel about adding a provision that requires new school construction be done in such a way as to ensure it can accommodate the change to small class sizes.

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT said that he agreed with this idea. He informed the committee that he has already approached Eddy Jeans, the director of School Finance at the Department of Education and Early Development and that an amendment to the facility specs addresses this. Returning to questions regarding "what do you do with that 16th kid," he relayed that he had considered including waiver language that would allow more than 15 students "for a brief period of time" yet decided against it. He explained that he wanted parents to have the guarantee that their child would be in a classroom of no more than 15 students. He opined that the grant would provide sufficient funds to shift class numbers as needed without exceeding 15 students. However, he suggested the committee include waiver language if it wished.

CHAIR NEUMAN stated his preference that Representative Croft provide the committee with suggestions on how to word this.

[11:55:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE THOMAS, referring to the large number of school districts he represents, opined that the rural students are the ones being "choked in by school sizes and money not being there." He expressed his belief that the [focus should be] on fixing the cost-differential and that Senate Bill 36 [from the Twentieth Alaska State Legislature] "was wrong."

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT informed the committee that he was the only legislator from Anchorage or Fairbanks to vote against Senate Bill 36 and relayed that his concerns were similar to those of Representative Thomas's.

CHAIR NEUMAN said that through conversations he's had with rural school districts, it was conveyed to him that they don't believe they will benefit from [HB 247] because they don't have the required class sizes. He relayed that these districts think the money would be better spent on increasing the base student allocation (BSA).

REPRESENTATIVE CROFT expressed his belief that the opposite is true. According to the information he has received, he said

that there are a "fair amount of rural schools that ... have already made the sacrifices to have [smaller class sizes], so they would qualify already."

REPRESENTATIVE WILSON opined that the rural schools have been underfunded for so long that "they would love to apply for something like this," however, would not be able to do so because they are financially so far behind.

[11:58:14 AM](#)

CHAIR NEUMAN remarked on the variety of education issues requiring funding: early education, smaller class sizes, cost-differential studies, and different educational delivery systems. He announced that HB 247 would be held over.

[11:58:59 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Education meeting was adjourned at 11:58 a.m.