

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE HEALTH, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 2, 2006

3:51 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Peggy Wilson, Chair  
Representative Paul Seaton, Vice Chair  
Representative Carl Gatto

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Tom Anderson  
Representative Vic Kohring  
Representative Sharon Cissna  
Representative Berta Gardner

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

OVERVIEW(S): EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT TASK FORCE

HOUSE BILL NO. 356

"An Act relating to consent for medical and dental services, including bone marrow donation, for a minor."

- BILL HEARING CANCELED

HOUSE BILL NO. 430

"An Act making an appropriation for the construction of the Palmer Senior Citizen Center; and providing for an effective date."

- BILL HEARING CANCELED

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

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

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

ROB GRUNEWALD, Associate Economist  
Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis  
Minnesota

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

BRIDGETT CHANDLER

Washington State Governor's Early Learning Council  
Washington

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented brain research data.

### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

**CHAIR PEGGY WILSON** called the House Health, Education and Social  
Services Standing Committee meeting to order at [3:51:05 PM](#).  
Representatives Gatto, Seaton, and Wilson were present at the  
call to order.

#### OVERVIEW: EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT TASK FORCE

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CHAIR WILSON announced that the only order of business would be  
an overview of the child development task force.

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IRA PERMAN, President & CEO, Alaska Humanities Forum; Member,  
Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Task Force, explained that the  
task force is a broad coalition with members from across the  
state to help children across the state enter school ready to  
read and learn. He then introduced Rob Grunewald and Bridgett  
Chandler, who will present a PowerPoint to the committee.

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ROB GRUNEWALD, Associate Economist, Federal Reserve Bank of  
Minneapolis, informed the committee that he has been  
investigating the research on early childhood development, which  
clearly illustrates that investments made in children before  
they reach kindergarten has an impact on the economy. The  
aforementioned is based on research, including that of James J.  
Heckman, Nobel laureate economist at the University of Chicago.  
What has been discovered is that because of the sensitive period  
from birth to age five, whatever happens during that time

establishes the trajectory for kids. On average, by the time a child reaches kindergarten, his/her course toward success or failure in school is established. One of the key longitudinal studies was the Perry Preschool study in Ypsilanti, Michigan, a very socioeconomically distressed community. Children were selected to participate in the study and randomly assigned to the Perry Preschool program or the control group. The children in the program had a daily classroom session and the teacher visited the families' homes to work on parenting skills. The children in both groups were tracked until they were 40 years old. The researchers found significant effects in regard to the children's achievement scores, whether they graduated from high school on time, and whether they required special education requirements as illustrated by slides presented by Mr. Grunewald.

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MR. GRUNEWALD explained that at age 40, the researchers found significant economic effects, including the percent of children who later own their own homes and made more money in the workforce. Furthermore, crime rates were essentially cut in half [in the group that participated in the Perry Preschool]. He further explained that a number of benefits from the study can be converted to dollars in order to evaluate the relative benefits of the program as compared to the cost of the program. The cost of the program in today's dollars is about \$10,000 per child on average. He noted that the participants of the [Perry Preschool] program were three- and four-year-olds who attended [the preschool] for about a year-and-a-half. Savings to the K-12 system were found due to reductions in special education and grade retention. There were also higher participant earnings, most of which is a private benefit to the participant, although some returns to the public in the form of higher tax revenue. For the Perry Preschool program there were strong savings due to the reduced needs of the criminal justice system and the cost of crimes to victims. Once all the benefits of the program are summed and evaluated relative to the cost, the benefit-cost ratio is \$17:\$1. To better compare the return on this program, the benefit-cost ratio was converted into an annual interest rate, which amounts to 18 percent. Most of the benefits accrue to the public; the public rate of return is estimated to be 16 percent. Further, the returns on investments to the stock market for the last 25-30 years, adjusted for inflation, were 5-7 percent.

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MR. GRUNEWALD related that there are three other longitudinal studies with cost-benefit ratios over \$1. All of the programs show significant savings and range from 7-20 percent. Mr. Grunewald concluded by relating that some of the lessons learned from the research was the importance of investing in quality; reaching at-risk populations results in the strongest savings; focusing on both numeracy and literacy skills as well as the social and emotional components of the child's learning; and bringing the programs to scale to reach large numbers of children. Mr. Grunewald recalled that about a year ago in Minnesota, a group of business and community leaders came to the legislature representing about 100 different organizations and requested that the legislature join them in a partnership in identifying those practices and programs that can most cost effectively provide early education to the children in Minnesota, which is what he views is occurring today in Alaska.

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CHAIR WILSON mentioned that she and Representatives Gatto and Seaton are members of the House Finance Education Budget Subcommittee. She noted her excitement with regard to the many ways in which the state can save money in education.

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REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked if Minnesota has expanded this pilot program.

MR. GRUNEWALD answered that the community and business leader group along with the State of Minnesota has pooled money to fund pilot projects in order to determine the best path. In response to Representative Gatto, Mr. Grunewald clarified that the Perry Preschool program study was a 40-year study that began in the early 1960s. Of the other three programs mentioned, one surveyed the children at age 15 and the other two surveyed the children at about age 21.

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BRIDGETT CHANDLER, Washington State Governor's Early Learning Council, began by relating that this new brain data is showing what is going on inside of the brain and confirming what educators and parents have known and observed for years: "the higher the quality of the relationship that children are in, the more likely they are to learn and to remember and to thrive."

Therefore, it's all about parents and caregivers who set the trajectory for a child's school and life success. She opined that Alaska has an incredible opportunity with the task force. She then presented images of brains to show how capable and vulnerable young children are and how the early brain is growing so dramatically quickly. She highlighted that there is a difference in brain growth with regard to its actual physical size versus development. In the last 10 years technology has allowed one to observe operating brains in order to obtain a sense as to how rapidly the connections form, how early learning circuits are there for life, and how later learning builds on top of those circuits.

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MS. CHANDLER said that neuroscience further relates that people have an innate drive to discover the world. The human brain, as compared to other brains, is hugely undifferentiated at birth and thus most of a human's brain development occurs after birth since humans are so adaptive. The old debate over whether nature or nurture determines who a human will be can be put to rest because it's the inextricable combination of the two.

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MS. CHANDLER related that learning is taking place in utero and at birth. Furthermore, humans are adapting as they develop, especially in the early years. With regard to the notion that one has all the brain cells he/she will have at birth, Ms. Chandler pointed out that there is new evidence that the brain can recruit cells from other parts of the body and grow new brain cells in response to damage, disease, and injury. All this data illustrates that there is a healthy pattern in which the proliferation of connections peaks early in life and tapers as the brain becomes more selective and reinforces what experience says is important to master. By nature one looks to others to determine how to act, what is and isn't safe, and what is and isn't rewarded and thus by our genetic structure humans are very good at learning via imitation.

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MS. CHANDLER reiterated that humans are very adaptive and at a certain point every brain is unique due to the unique combination of genes and experiences by an individual. Still, there are things that are known to be necessary for optimal development of children. For instance, the physical body of the

child needs to be safe and in a situation of adequate nutrition and health care. There needs to be a certain amount of predictableness in the routine, particularly in regard to the caregivers. Without the aforementioned, the body goes into an automatic physiologic response in which the body is told its survival is at stake. It is important to respond to the child's basic need for care even if it is difficult to ascertain what is needed.

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MS. CHANDLER, in response to Representative Gatto, highlighted the importance in recognizing the difference between every day stress such as not having a need met right away or being told no or to share and manageable but large stress such as the death of a pet or loved one, or a natural disaster versus chronic ongoing stress resulting from abuse, neglect, substance abuse, or depression. The nurturing relationships buffer children, she noted. She then related research from Meghan Gunner (ph) who reviewed what happens to children in terms of their external behavior and their internal physiological response when they experience a stressful event such as receiving a shot. For instance, when a child with his/her mother present receives a shot at two months of age, the cortical response skyrockets. Two months later, at four months old the child, with the mother present again, receives a shot, but this time the cortical response is half what it was two months prior. The child has learned that his/her mother will comfort him/her. Ms. Chandler informed the committee that there is very compelling evidence that when children are left to manage stress on their own, the brain goes into survival mode and the child's learning is compromised because the body is told that it's not safe.

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REPRESENTATIVE GATTO inquired as to when the fight or flight response comes into play.

MS. CHANDLER said that the fight or flight response can be seen in even a two-month-old as it's an innate response. If the fight or flight response is triggered too often and early on, the brain sets its "stress response thermostat" at a much lower level than is optimal and thus such a child will be triggered into a stress response more readily than a child in a nurturing relationship. She noted that it doesn't mean that the child can't learn good techniques to manage stress, it means that the child has to work much harder to respond to normal stresses.

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CHAIR WILSON inquired as to the things that a parent can do that will make a difference when the child goes to school.

MS. CHANDLER emphasized that everything matters and thus there is a wide menu of things from which to choose. She opined that public investment will do the most good when done early and will result in the most dramatic gains when focusing high quality resources where the need is the most vulnerable. Therefore, resources can be invested across a broad population and send generalized messages regarding the importance of the nurturing bond for parents to provide to their children and to have information with regard to early childhood development. Another important role that government can play is to help parents be wise consumers of child care and other learning opportunities. She noted that in the State of Washington she is leading the effort of its task force to develop a quality rating and improvement system.

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REPRESENTATIVE GATTO remarked that it seems Ms. Chandler is asking parents to know where to draw the line as far as stimulating children enough without over stimulating them.

MS. CHANDLER said that over stimulation is a huge issue for very well-intentioned parents. In further response to Representative Gatto, Ms. Chandler reminded the committee that genes are half the equation and experience is the other half.

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REPRESENTATIVE SEATON stated that it would be helpful to receive input from the presenters as to what would be helpful in moving programs forward. He encouraged the presenters to provide the committee with an outline of specifics, such as specific positions or tasks, so that it could be utilized when considering funding for the budget. He indicated that the information is needed within the next two weeks.

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**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at [4:29:01 PM](#).