

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

March 28, 2007

8:03 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair  
Senator Charlie Huggins, Vice Chair  
Senator Donny Olson  
Senator Gary Wilken  
Senator Bettye Davis

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

SENATE BILL NO. 1

"An Act relating to the base student allocation used in the formula for state funding of public education; and providing for an effective date."

MOVED SB 1 OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL NO. 10

"An Act establishing truancy officer positions for school districts."

HEARD AND HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: SB 1

SHORT TITLE: INCREASE AMT OF BASE STUDENT ALLOCATION

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) WILKEN

01/16/07	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/5/07
01/16/07	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/07	(S)	SED, CRA, FIN
02/09/07	(S)	SED AT 8:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
02/09/07	(S)	Heard & Held
02/09/07	(S)	MINUTE(SED)
03/28/07	(S)	SED AT 8:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

BILL: SB 10

SHORT TITLE: TRUANCY OFFICERS

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) DAVIS

01/16/07 (S) PREFILE RELEASED 1/5/07  
01/16/07 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS  
01/16/07 (S) SED, STA, FIN  
03/28/07 (S) SED AT 8:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

**WITNESS REGISTER**

Tom Obermeyer, aide to Senator Davis  
Juneau, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented SB 10

Carl Rose, Executive Director  
Association of Alaska School Boards  
Juneau, AK 99801

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified on SB 10

Glenn Szymoniak, Assistant Superintendent  
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District  
Soldotna, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** In support of SB 10

Lou Kustin, Director of Student Services  
Juneau School District

**POSITION STATEMENT:** In support of SB 10

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

**CHAIR GARY STEVENS** called the Senate Special Committee on Education meeting to order at [8:03:11 AM](#). Present at the call to order were Senators Davis, Olson, Wilken, Huggins, and Chair Stevens.

**SB 1-INCREASE AMT OF BASE STUDENT ALLOCATION**

CHAIR STEVENS announced SB 1 to be under consideration.

SENATOR WILKEN, sponsor of SB 1, said that the issue of school funding needs to be wrapped up by the end of session and he hopes the bill helps.

CHAIR STEVENS asked Senator Wilken to comment on the amount of the increase and the fiscal note of the bill.

SENATOR WILKEN said that the amount of the bill was decided in November 2006, and it includes inflation costs and money to

reduce class size and improve instruction; the bill essentially mirrors the previous year's increases.

[8:05:49 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS made a motion to move SB 1 from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s). There being no objection, the motion carried.

### **SB 10-TRUANCY OFFICERS**

[8:06:20 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS announced SB 10 to be under consideration.

TOM OBERMEYER, aide to Senator Davis, sponsor of SB 10, said that the committee substitute (CS) before the committee incorporated the provisions of SB 3, a different bill dealing with truancy.

CHAIR STEVENS asked Mr. Obermeyer to talk about SB 10 first, and then discuss the CS.

MR. OBERMEYER said that the purpose of the bill is to employ a truant officer for each school district with an average daily membership of at least 1,000, in order to enforce compulsory attendance. State law and city ordinances can hold both the student and parents responsible for school attendance, imposing fines and other sanctions. Truancy leads to high dropout rates and other social problems, and early intervention is important. Alaska has one of the lowest graduation rates in the nation; the state posted a 63.6 percent graduation rate in 2006, with males and most minorities well below the national average. Current truancy laws have no method of enforcement, and this bill will allow a concerted effort by truancy officers, law enforcement, teachers, and community members to curb truancy and its negative effects.

[8:10:33 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked how badly Alaska's school performance is compared with the rest of the nation.

MR. OBERMEYER replied that dropout rates can be misleading, because they don't reflect the true number of graduates. The Alaska Native group dropout rate is at 14 percent, and overall our graduation rate is one of the lowest in the nation. On of

the biggest resulting problems is that many dropouts enter a downward spiral into worse issues; drugs, teen pregnancy, violence, the prison system, etc.

CHAIR STEVENS said that he was shocked by the numbers of dropouts among prison inmates.

[8:13:00 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS asked for elaboration on the history of truancy officers.

MR. OBERMEYER referenced a document showing that truant officers were present in the state in 1987; he explained how the law language worked, and how it put a state officer in each school authorized to request warrants and compel appearance before a court.

He added that there's been an attempt to keep the fiscal note low in the bill, but it remains substantial; only 13 districts in the state will qualify for truant officers, but the fiscal note will be around \$1 million. However, the large districts that can pay for the officers are the ones that need it most.

CHAIR HUGGINS said that his natural inclination is to blame the approach; maybe the problem is students' motivation, and a truant officer won't necessarily fix this.

MR. OBERMEYER replied that habitual truancy does exacerbate other problems and the bill is a late solution to the problem. The intent of the bill, however, is to create a way of avoiding suspension or expulsion, which are ineffective ways of addressing the problem. Parent and community involvement should be increased as well. Earlier action should be taken, but this approach will, at least, help kids graduate. A truant officer with no authority would be ineffectual; an officer working with the district can help create a solution to the problem.

[8:19:08 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said that the matter is really more comprehensive than just the issue the bill addresses, and the CS would need to address more issues; he then asked if the title of the CS was adequate.

MR. OBERMEYER replied that he'd leave that decision to the committee; the original bill was far narrower, whereas the CS is comprehensive.

CHAIR STEVENS said that a broad title would be good, and asked for the differences in the CS.

[8:20:58 AM](#)

MR. OBERMEYER said that there was an explanation of the CS before the committee, and the CS was requested to incorporate language from SB 31, as well some other additions. There were some areas in which the language of the CS was found to be unclear, but that it was before the committee that day for discussion purposes.

He explained that the purpose of the bill is to engage students and parents in the school system; petitioning in the court should be a last resort, but could serve as a final tool for the truant officer. The intent of the CS is to require each of Alaska's schools to create a plan for truancy and work with other community resources on the issue. It removes the controversial element from SB 31 which would have named a child a delinquent after a certain number of absences.

He added that some of the problems that could come up regarding the bill would be the number of days required before notifying parents or truancy. Juneau is currently the only large district in the state that employs a truant officer.

[8:25:12 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said that the direction of the bill and district policy needs to be clear in the language.

MR. OBERMEYER replied that there are boards that will work in tandem to improve the truancy situation. He added that other states use parent truancy officer programs, employing community resources. The projects have broadened to identify and correct the problem.

CHAIR STEVENS said that family participation is essential, and mentioned a program in another state that appears to be work well against truancy.

[8:27:48 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS commented that bullying is a significant component of some children leaving school.

[8:29:13 AM](#)

CARL ROSE, Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards, said that the issue of truancy is much more than just punishment, and that incentive to remain in school is necessary. The value and relevance of school are not obvious to some kids; officers are important but arresting after the fact is not ideal. Young people need to be engaged; if we know the negative end results of dropping out of school, why wouldn't we try to stop the problem earlier? When kids sit through instruction that's less than engaging, challenging, or relevant, at an early age they start to lose interest and begin pursuing their own interests. It's a struggle to introduce new elements in the curriculum, but that's the best way to encourage attendance and graduation.

He then gave an example of how a practical and challenging curriculum is successful.

[8:34:03 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked Mr. Rose for comments on parent and peer involvement in truancy.

MR. ROSE replied that Initiative for Community Engagement (ICE) program statistics show that the more parents are involved, the more test scores and attendance improve. He gave an example of how encouragement helps students to avoid unhealthy decisions, and said that ICE has worked statewide to help kids during and outside of school hours.

[8:36:33 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS said that there's a number of kids who don't spend any time at home, and asked if there are any ways to approach this group in particular.

MR. ROSE explained that youth centers are helpful in accommodating young people who don't have a normal family experience.

SENATOR HUGGINS commented that Asian students seem to do much better than other racial groups, and perhaps it's because they

don't have time for anything but schoolwork. He asked if there's any way to capitalize on this discipline for all students.

[8:38:54 AM](#)

MR. ROSE said that he is one-quarter Chinese, and that culturally there's a great emphasis on working together in Asian countries. He gave an example of how this works in immigrant communities in the US, and said that family concentration on schooling is the main value that leads to good performance.

SENATOR HUGGINS commented that of all ethnicities in Alaska, the Asian group has the best graduation rates.

[8:41:29 AM](#)

GLENN SZYMONIAK, Assistant Superintendent for the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD), said that the district supports the truant officer legislation; the KPBSD is doing a few things that are effective in curbing truancy and drop-out rates, including alternative performance-based programs and a school in the maximum security prison; putting a greater threat of punishment into the system will help. Home-school programs are sometimes ineffectual, new students in a district can be missed by the school system, and middle-school students become involved in crimes at an early age; these students realize early on that dropping out will let them continue a lifestyle of crime. They all need to be brought back into the system, but room for alternative programs is necessary. Even long-term suspension can be assuaged with lesson plans sent to the student and graded by their teacher.

[8:46:52 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS asked if Mr. Szymoniak had a chance to see the bill.

MR. SZYMONIAK replied that he hasn't had a chance to see the bill yet.

CHAIR STEVENS remarked that the definition of a truant student can be hazy, and hopefully the bill will make it clear. He asked for comment on home-schooling and its effect on truancy.

MR. SZYMONIAK replied that home-schooled students either do very well in public school or have had no schooling whatsoever.

8:48:54 AM

SENATOR HUGGINS said that performance-based schooling can gather up students that are behind and allow them to move through school at a pace that works for them.

MR. SZYMONIAK agreed that dooming students to fail is a bad option. He mentioned another program that works similarly.

SENATOR HUGGINS commented that an alternative school in the Mat-Su district has a day care center, and asked if there are any such centers in Kenai.

MR. SZYMONIAK replied that there's not an in-house daycare system yet, but it's in the works.

CHAIR HUGGINS said that ideally there would be no need for alternative schools; however, one of their keys to success is tailoring the system to the students' needs, which works for a select segment of the population.

MR. SZYMONIAK agreed that the traditional model of school doesn't work for all students.

8:52:11 AM

LOU KUSTIN, Director of Student Services for the Juneau School District, said that Juneau has had a truancy tracker for the last two years and every year the efficacy of the position is questioned; the data, however, is incontrovertible. Truancy is often caused by poverty, neglect, boredom, drugs, etc.; it's the role of the truancy tracker to help determine the true problem behind the absence. Integration with other agencies in the community is important. He added that sometimes peers do play an important role in creating truancy issues.

He said that in Juneau the definition of a truant varies, but after missing four classes the truancy tracker system begins to follow a student. The intervention program has been generally successful.

8:57:16 AM

CHAIR STEVENS thanked Mr. Kustin, and said that one of the problems the legislature is facing is a lack of consistency in the definition of truancy. He asked if Mr. Kustin had had a chance to look at the bill.

MR. KUSTON replied that he had, but not in great detail.

CHAIR STEVENS asked if there's anything in the bill that would adversely affect what Juneau is already doing for truancy.

MR. KUSTIN replied that there isn't, and added that a state-wide system would be very helpful.

CHAIR STEVENS remarked that the problem of kids missing school because they live in poverty should be a solvable issue.

[8:59:55 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS said that the subject is very important, and the problem is ongoing and many school board members have come forward to say that they need help; taking action against the problem is a necessary step. School districts keep saying that they can't fund the program, and that has turned out to be true. This bill could be the beginning of a solution to the problem.

CHAIR STEVENS said that the bills will be brought back before the committee as soon as the schedule allows, and, there being no further business to come before the committee, he adjourned the meeting at [9:02:32 AM](#).