

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

April 18, 2007

8:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 14

"An Act raising the compulsory school attendance age; relating to the crime of contributing to the delinquency of a minor; relating to duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to truancy; and relating to employment of a minor."

HEARD AND HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 14

SHORT TITLE: RAISE COMP. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AGE

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, JUD, FIN

WITNESS REGISTER

Tom Obermeyer, aide to Senator Davis
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented SB 14

Carol Comeau, superintendent
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: In support of SB 14

PJ Ford-Slack, superintendent
Delta-Greeley School District
Delta Junction, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: In support of SB 14

Peggy Cowen, superintendent
Juneau School District
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: In support of SB 14

Lou Kustin, Director of Student Services
Juneau School District

POSITION STATEMENT: In support of SB 14

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR GARY STEVENS called the Senate Special Committee on Education meeting to order at [8:04:36 AM](#). All members were present at the call to order.

SB 14-RAISE COMP. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AGE

TOM OBERMEYER, aide to Senator Davis, sponsor of SB 14, explained that the bill raises the compulsory school attendance age to 18 and provides measures for truancy officers and a truancy board in each school district. He cited the negative results of dropping out of school, and the numbers of states that require compulsory attendance to the age of 18.

He explained the rates of graduation in different ethnic groups, and said that increasing the compulsory school age will decrease rates of delinquency, teen pregnancy, and demands on the health and social services system. He then outlined the different sections of the bill.

[8:09:22 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS recognized that all committee members were present.

MR. OBERMEYER noted that there were people signed up for testimony, and pointed out several documents before the committee citing related statistics.

CHAIR STEVENS said that there seems to have been misunderstanding on the bill regarding early graduation.

MR. OBERMEYER said that they had planned to use language to the effect that youth could graduate before the age of 18; there is language in the bill that could address that, but it will be further modified. He added that the bill drafter was available for questions.

[8:12:29 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS said that it would be interesting to hear how in different states school districts have more authority on the issues.

MR. OBERMEYER said that the bill will allow flexibility to each different school district; there will be a board in each district, but it will be able to determine its own method of functioning. He talked about school districts across the nation with successful truancy programs.

CHAIR STEVENS asked for clarification on Senator Huggins' question.

[8:14:38 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS said that it's a question of a centralized versus decentralized process. He complimented the idea of the bill, saying that it's been a long time coming.

CHAIR STEVENS said that there needs to be a clear definition of dropout; there doesn't seem to be an across-the-board definition of the associated terms. He pointed out a particular term in the bill that isn't sufficiently defined.

[8:16:32 AM](#)

MR. OBERMEYER said that the definition could certainly be improved, and pointed out language in the bill that currently defines the term. He said that often students who drop out are left on the rolls to increase school funding. This bill is attempting to return kids to school and engage them in the process.

CHAIR STEVENS said that the term he was referring to was unexcused absence.

[8:17:49 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS commented that a standards-based approach for re-integration in school is best.

MR. OBERMEYER said that the issue would have to be addressed by the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED); there are testing options available for determining children's abilities.

[8:19:19 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS commented on a particular school that tries to use standards-based education.

SENATOR DAVIS said that she would like to hear the testimony on the bill so as to know people's concerns.

[8:20:25 AM](#)

CAROL COMEAU, superintendent for the Anchorage School District (ASD), said that the legislation is part of a critical discussion in the state, and she would help the bill along any way she could. Truancy is a big issue in Anchorage; she thought in the past that it would be relatively simple to get community support, but it's become a huge controversy. Lots of different approaches have been tried, and part of the problem is the current compulsory age restriction. She explained how kids refuse to go to school and sometimes parents don't know how to, or don't want to, force them. She said that the school board is in favor of increasing the age to 18 or once the student has possession of a diploma.

She added that the notion of truancy officers and a committee truancy board would need maximum flexibility.

[8:24:23 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said that the issue of a review board and its powers is an important one.

MS. COMEAU said that her school board policy has explicit rules for a truancy board; some extra powers from the state would help. The state allows great latitude to home-schooling and additional rules would help schools deal with the related issues.

[8:25:39 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS asked for examples of programs that address the issues in the bill.

MS. COMEAU said that school improvement grants are hugely important to this; there are programs for kids suspended for drug, alcohol, or non-violent crime issues, and attendance issues. There are online learning programs, alternative learning programs, counselors who spend time tracking truants, and there are state aid programs that target struggling students. Summer school remediation is also an option.

[8:28:18 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS asked for a differentiation between excused and unexcused absences.

MS. COMEAU read a definition of truancy as defined by the Anchorage School District, and said that the problem is that parents want to be able to take their kids out of school if they choose to do so.

SENATOR HUGGINS asked if parents are the ones to determine whether an absence is excused.

MS. COMEAU replied yes, and elaborated on the definition of chronic truancy.

[8:30:23 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS said that the ASD has between a 35 and 40 percent dropout rate, and asked for information on dropouts in different ages and ethnic groups.

[8:31:32 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS acknowledged that home-schooling can be very positive, and asked if there are parents using home-schooling as an excuse for truancy.

MS. COMEAU replied that there is a group of home-schooled students that is not being properly educated; there's a legitimate concern that home-schooled kids could be unfairly penalized by truancy laws, but some home-schooling parents are allowing their kids to wander around inappropriately which leads to eventual remediation back in public school.

SENATOR OLSON asked for elaboration on the number of home-schooled kids who aren't being well educated.

MS. COMEAU said that it's a relatively small percentage of the home-school population, and it's improved recently. However, there aren't any firm statistics because reporting isn't required by the state.

CHAIR STEVENS thanked Ms. Comeau for her work and testimony.

MS. COMEAU said that she is looking forward to working with the legislature, and is concerned about the issue.

[8:34:45 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS clarified an earlier comment.

[8:35:15 AM](#)

PJ FORD-SLACK, superintendent for the Delta-Greeley School District, talked about a conference she attended on drop-outs and offered to make information available to the committee. She said that her rural district shares some of Anchorage's truancy concerns, including parents who don't necessarily make their kids go to school. Alaska doesn't require home-schooling parents to document their teaching, which leaves a hole in the system.

She added that Alaska allows a lot of parent choice in the education system; parents shouldn't be allowed to recuse their students from school as much as they are. Another issue is the lack of aid from the legal system once truancy is identified.

[8:40:22 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked Ms. Ford-Slack to keep in touch on the issue.

SENATOR OLSON asked for more detail on the idea of attaching the possession of a driver's license to attendance.

MS. FORD-SLACK said that a national group had found that strategy to be ineffective, and said she would find and forward the information to the committee.

[8:41:54 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said he believes it was the state of Indiana that implemented that law.

SENATOR HUGGINS said that some people have advocated attaching the Permanent Fund Dividend payment to school attendance, and asked for comment on the idea.

MS. FORD-SLACK said that it's a unique idea; whether it would really help the problem is unknown.

SENATOR HUGGINS clarified that he doesn't support the idea, but simply wanted to hear another opinion.

[8:43:38 AM](#)

PEGGY COWEN, superintendent for the Juneau School District, related the instance of truancy problems in her work experience and said that the bill will help focus attention on the issue. The Juneau Board of Education doesn't have a position on the truancy element of the bill, but supports raising the compulsory attendance age; that will help parents who want to keep their kids in school.

[8:46:34 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked if the bill could cause a negative impact on the educational system by making unwilling and therefore disruptive kids stay in the classroom.

MS. COWEN said that it's up to the districts to adjust for this problem; she cited the ways Juneau has provided for alternative schools and programs. The kids who this bill will affect are not throw-away kids; they generally show the possibility of success, but difficulties in certain areas weight them down.

[8:49:10 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said that he thinks fondly of teachers he had who were very motivating.

SENATOR HUGGINS said that Juneau has a large population of special needs students, and asked if that has any bearing on the issue.

MS. COWEN said that the special needs group has a lower dropout rate than the normal student group, which may be due to a more intensive level of attention from teachers.

She commented that the state system is now set up as standards-based, but the methods of teaching shouldn't necessarily be standardized.

[8:52:19 AM](#)

SENATOR WILKEN asked for comment on how a well-run school district defines a dropout, and how the numbers are tabulated.

MS. COWEN replied that the definition of a dropout has now been standardized across the state.

[8:53:33 AM](#)

LOU KUSTIN, Director of Student Services for the Juneau School District, said that the bill is a positive step on a long-standing issue. He commented that truancy efforts must be system-wide, and need to be monitored. For Juneau, having only one truancy officer is insufficient. There are some situations where more effort is needed to bring a kid back into school; punitive measures aren't necessarily a good thing, though.

He commented that the definition of an unexcused absence has historically been convoluted. He encouraged a state-wide definition. He mentioned his history as a principal in the ASD, and how working with parents who want to be able to excuse their student was a nightmare.

He added that increasing the compulsory attendance age is a positive thing, and the issue is a work in progress.

[8:59:16 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS agreed that defining terms is important, as well as working on the issue of limiting parental power to excuse their children from school. He asked Mr. Obermeyer to make any final comments.

MR. OBERMEYER said that the process has a good start, and he'll confer with the bill's drafters to make any needed changes.

CHAIR STEVENS said that he was shocked at the number of emails he received against the bill. He asked if there's a misunderstanding about the bill.

[9:01:09 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS said that she received many emails from home-schooling parents, and there may be a misunderstanding about the goal of the bill. The regulation is needed in state law to improve consistency, and there are many reasons to increase the compulsory attendance age; there are sufficient exceptions in state law to address home-schooling parents' concerns. She commented on the compulsory age for commencement of public school, which is seven years of age. The truancy and dropout issues start early in education; having a community committee working on these issues will help change the school system for the better. Forcing students to attend regular school isn't a good solution; it needs to be more comprehensive. A diploma is a necessary element of success in life.

She added that she'll be willing to keep working on the bill and change it to make it better for everyone; she wants to hear from as many community voices as possible.

[9:06:15 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS thanked Senator Davis for bringing the issue before the committee, and said that while the committee won't exist between sessions the work will need to continue. He thanked the presenters and, there being no further business he adjourned the meeting at [9:07:10 AM](#).