

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 30, 2009

8:05 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair
Senator Donald Olson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Charlie Huggins
Senator Gary Stevens

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

Presentation: Moore v. State
HEARD

Presentation: Preparing Children for Success in School
HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record.

WITNESS REGISTER

NORMAN ECK, Superintendent
Northwest Arctic Borough School District
POSITION STATEMENT: Commented on Moore v. State.

SUE HULL, Best Beginnings
Early Learning Council Member
POSITION STATEMENT: Offered a presentation on early childhood learning.

MARK LACKEY
Alaska Head Start Association
POSITION STATEMENT: Commented on early learning issues.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:05:41 AM](#)

VICE CHAIR BETTYE DAVIS called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:05 a.m. Present at the call to order was Senator Davis.

Moore v. State

VICE CHAIR DAVIS announced that the first presentation would be Moore v. State by Norman Eck.

8:06:38 AM

NORMAN ECK, Superintendent, Northwest Arctic Borough School District, said he wanted to comment on two issues important to the district. Specifically, he wanted to address some of the findings in Judge Gleason's most recent decision regarding the Moore case and Alaska's appropriation of the federal stimulus money.

He said that five requirements set forth in Judge Gleason's recent decision in the Moore case impact the Department of Education and Early Development's (DEED) plans related to district intervention, and they have a direct impact on his school district.

1. The first is that district intervention plans must include attention to the content subjects that are not tested in the State's standardized testing. This is welcome news, but the narrow focus of the department's intervention plan on language arts and math has been disruptive to his district. This intensive focus has turned teaching and learning these subjects into an unpleasant task. He thought they would improve student learning more by including some of the content subjects that they have already worked so hard to align to state standards.
2. Second, he said the intervention plans to date have not addressed the strengths and weaknesses of each chronically underperforming district. He explained that he worked for a year and a half with John Holst, a coach assigned to his district by the department. As he became familiar with their improvement efforts he recognized they were making every effort to follow the department's directives. Furthermore, he realized that the department's recommendations for improvement failed to include his district's input were frequently off the mark, and at times a hindrance to progress.

He said that Judge Gleason recognized the value in identifying on the talent and strengths within his school district to design and implement an intervention program that will help make needed gains. The decision to allow them to be part of the solution has created new opportunities to work collaboratively with the department to craft lasting solutions.

3. Pre-Kindergarten education and other intensive early learning initiatives need to be addressed. His district needs an early childhood program taught by certified teachers using a standards-based curriculum, and that program needs to be fully funded by the state. This is the single most important action the state can take to help him improve student achievement.

4. Teaching capacity must be addressed as teacher inexperience and unique challenges must be considered if student achievement is to be attained. Despite all efforts so far, teacher turnover in rural districts remains high. He recommended three specific actions:

The Department of Education and Early Development and the legislature should support local initiatives to increase the number of regional residential high schools throughout the state. The evidence is clear that the few they have are far more successful than small rural high schools. Schools that have critical mass and a controlled environment enjoy high levels of student success.

Additional state resources should be directed toward developing the technology infrastructure to improve distance delivery of basic courses to students. Distance delivery is the most cost-effective and efficient method of improving instructional delivery. The public sector and federal-rate subsidies along can't be relied on to get this job done.

Education courses such as response to intervention, formative assessment, classroom management for classrooms with high numbers of intensive needs students should be included in our state's teacher education programs.

5. The Department of Education needs to assess and improve its own capacity to intervene effectively. Judge Gleason said that no evidence was presented that the department has undertaken any effort to assess its capacity to determine what it would require to effectively assist districts and

schools to provide students with a constitutionally adequate education. In fact, he didn't think the department was able to provide the intervention his district requires even though they were willing to try. Rather he felt the department should contract with a company that has the experience and expertise to provide an independent evaluation of its ability to assess intervention districts.

Finally, he recommended the two best ways to improve his district's scores would be to fund the above referenced preschool program, and fund over and above their regular funding formula 2 school psychologists, 3 reading specialists, 3 language-learning specialists and 11 school/village liaisons for the next five years.

[8:13:07 AM](#)

VICE CHAIR DAVIS thanked Mr. Eck for his testimony.

Best Beginnings: Preparing Children for Success in School

CHAIR DAVIS announced the next order of business would be a presentation on best beginnings.

[8:14:19 AM](#)

SUE HULL, Best Beginnings, Early Learning Council Member, offered a brief presentation on early childhood learning. She covered three major topics: What they know about early childhood, a Best Beginnings Update, and their 2009 legislative request.

They know that a big part of synapses develop very early in the brain. They also know that families matter most; they are the most influential figures in a child's life and they set the pattern for things that come later. Longitudinal research showed the greatest gains for children were those that were more about family intervention than more traditional pre-K programs.

Children, families and communities are different especially in Alaska where there is a broad range of needs, she said. Whatever solutions they craft should meet and address that diversity.

They also know early care system for children is fragile. This is important because whatever they do in the area of early childhood shouldn't undermine the existing care system. For example, if the focus is just on four-year old programs, what happens to pre-school programs that presently are able to spread the cost of their program for the highly expensive infants and

toddlers to the four-year olds that are less expensive to handle? If those four-year olds were put into a public system, what would happen to the early care?

MS. HULL said that local control works best when local people are involved in the decision making, and the programs must be high quality.

8:19:28 AM

She reviewed that a few years ago they had "Ready to Read, Ready to Learn." Then Best Beginnings was formed as a public private partnership originally under the auspices of the Alaska Humanities Forum, but now under the Anchorage United Way. Significant private funds were contributed from ConocoPhillips, the CIRI Foundation, BP and other private sources. Best Beginnings has formed multiple work groups in the last few years to discuss early childhood and what solutions might work best for Alaska. The governor held an early childhood summit and Best Beginnings received a Smart Start Technical Assistance Grant, which is key to their work going forward. The Education Summit that was held recently had an early childhood component to it.

MS. HULL said Best Beginnings is a public private partnership that mobilizes people and resources to insure Alaska children begin school ready to succeed. The model has been used in other states quite successfully for as long as 15-18 years. It is governed by the Early Learning Counsel, a group of business and community leaders including two commissioners of DHSS and DEED. She said that Best Beginnings is the only all-sector statewide entity focused solely on early development and it is called Alaska's Early Childhood Initiative.

MS. HULL explained that Best Beginnings has convened a wide array of Alaskans in various work groups to make recommendations for Alaska's early learning system involving care providers and school districts, parents and business leaders. It developed the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) that will be key in the future; it conducted a public media campaign and funded local statewide projects such as Imagination Library, the Early Learning Guidelines activities guides in different languages, ABC Talk with Me in Anchorage, the Nuniaq campaign, and other similar programs. One of the projects they developed in Fairbanks is a website called Fairbanksfamilies.org that is one-stop shopping for families with activities and resources.

She explained that Best Beginnings is currently involved with developing an early learning system based on Alaskan

recommendations with assistance from Smart Start's technical assistance center. They are working to coordinate the development of a statewide Imagination Library Program that is an early literacy program run by the Dolly Parton Foundation where for \$30/yr. young children get books in the mail every month starting at birth until five years old. Ms. Parton insists that enrollment should not be tied to payment. It's such a cost effective way to serve children and Fairbanks now serves 2,700 after just one year. Best Beginnings is working to coordinate a statewide program and is convening a business summit this fall with the partnership for America's Economic Success. They are also participating in developing the departments' Pre-K pilot.

MS. HULL said that field testing the service delivery model and quality rating system are key for the future as well as encouraging a variety of small effective, support activities to address the needs of young children by thinking outside the box. They want to increase collaboration between service providers, state agencies, employers, school districts and others.

8:26:51 AM

She provided a list of a few providers in the arena of early childhood learning that can have input: Head Start, the Pilot Pre-K, Child Care, Title I Preschools, Infant learning program, Parents as Teachers, Imagination Library, private preschools, parent Co-ops, Parent Resource Centers, Play Groups. This could also include health providers as it does in some states. She showed an organizational flow chart of the model starting with Alaska's Early Childhood Initiative going down to the topical work groups at the local level.

She explained that dollars would flow to local partnerships in local communities who would then distribute dollars and coordinate services among the various providers and possibilities within a community. This model has worked in a number of states; it gives a lot of flexibility. Both Commissioners are looking at how to formalize the relationship between state government and Best Beginnings if need be.

8:29:01 AM

She summarized that the notion is to change the mindset, to strengthen families instead of just fixing kids, to serve kids where they are (not just get them into a program), to think broadly about early learning (from birth to 5), to have more options and choices for families, to look at ways of giving people access to a diversity of things rather than one-size fits all solutions, to think about having locals making the decisions

about what their children need most, and to partner for success and have long-term gains.

MS. HULL said that three programs showed long term gains over 40 years: the High School Perry Project, the Chicago Parent Child Project, and Ava Sidarian from North Carolina. All three populations were significantly at risk and the focus for two of them, even though they were preschool programs, was family intervention (at around four years old). Ava Sidarian's average entrance age was four months, not four years. So Best Beginnings is trying to get people to think about early learning in a variety of ways.

Next Ms. Hull went to their legislative requests either from the general fund or stimulus dollars; the first of which is \$200,000 matching with private dollars to expand Imagination Library to approximately 13,000 children statewide; second is \$150,000 to field test the local partnerships because they are such a key component to the early learning system; and third, \$50,000 for a public engagement campaign to help get the word out to everyone the importance of early learning and the activities and that can be done to help young children develop. The future is a question that children will answer.

8:32:36 AM

MARK LACKEY, Alaska Head Start Association, Anchorage, AK, said last summer they worked closely with Department of Education and Early Development, to come up with a two-year plan on what additional Head Start services could be provided and what grantees had the capacity to serve children. This plan was presented to the legislature prior to the beginning of session. He said the governor had proposed an increase to Head Start funding, the House approved, the Senate increased it to \$1.6 million; so they are very encouraged about the emphasis on early childhood education, and they have a huge waiting list.

MR. LACKEY said that with this discussion comes additional challenges that need to be addressed. One big challenge is professional development; another is creating a coordinated system that allows providers to work together toward serving more children. Another area of need is Denali Kid Care; he knows legislation is pending, and he is hopeful. He offered to answer questions.

VICE CHAIR DAVIS asked what the total amount of requested funds to field test the rating system.

MS. HULL replied they originally asked for just over \$1 million.

VICE CHAIR DAVIS asked what other system they wanted to field test.

MS. HULL answered that they wanted to field test the local partnerships where Best Beginnings would provide funds.

[8:37:58 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON joined the meeting.

VICE CHAIR DAVIS asked the number of students statewide in the Imagination Library.

MS. Hull replied that they just started the program in March and registered 500 kids at the Home Show alone, then 500 more a couple of weeks later at the Women's Show at the Carlson Center, and then more at the State Fair. It's really taken off. It is a national project for the Kiwanis, Rotary, and lots of other community service groups.

SENATOR OLSON asked how much federal participation they are getting.

MS. HULL answered none that she is aware of.

[8:40:06 AM](#)

VICE CHAIR DAVIS agreed that she is not aware of any federal funds for Best Beginnings. She stated that the House and Senate have passed resolutions to accept stimulus money and the Governor has allowed her commissioners to fill out the applications.

[8:41:46 AM](#)

MR. ECK said the Northwest Arctic School District has 12 schools in 11 villages with no roads in between, so the stimulus money is very important to them. Everything has to be flown in. The money can be used also to purchase materials for students who are academically performing below grade level as well as for improving their technology infrastructure and better distance delivery programs. The fact that it is one-time money is great because they can do things that will help them leap forward.

[8:43:17 AM](#)

VICE CHAIR DAVIS said she knows people are concerned about funding for schools, fuel and transportation and she thinks they will come out pretty well in terms of the stimulus money.

8:44:06 AM

SENATOR OLSON said he has heard consideration of Power Cost Equalization and how to make villages eligible (bill by Senator Hoffman).

8:44:39 AM

MR. ECK commented that his district had to purchase its fuel at \$145/barrel last summer before freeze-up and are still paying for that; their district expenses are about \$1.5 million higher than the year before. That is an additional \$1.5 million that does not go to children and classrooms.

8:45:46 AM

VICE CHAIR DAVIS thanked everyone for their testimony and adjourned the meeting at 8:45 a.m.