

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 1, 2009

8:02 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair  
Senator Charlie Huggins  
Senator Donald Olson  
Senator Gary Stevens

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

SENATE BILL NO. 109

"An Act repealing the secondary student competency examination and related requirements; and providing for an effective date."

HEARD AND HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: SB 109

SHORT TITLE: REPEAL SECONDARY SCHOOL EXIT EXAM

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) DAVIS

02/17/09	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/17/09	(S)	EDC, CRA, FIN
03/16/09	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 211
03/16/09	(S)	Heard & Held
03/16/09	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/01/09	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 211

**WITNESS REGISTER**

SENATOR BUNDE  
State Capital  
Juneau, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Commented on SB 109 as the author of the original bill.

TOM OBERMEYER, staff to Senator Davis  
State Capital  
Juneau, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Commented on SB 109 for the sponsor.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

8:02:28 AM

**VICE-CHAIR BETTYE DAVIS** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Huggins, Olson and Davis.

**SB 109-REPEAL SECONDARY SCHOOL EXIT EXAM**

8:02:53 AM

**VICE CHAIR DAVIS** announced SB 109 to be up for consideration. She indicated that no one was on line or present from the department.

8:03:12 AM

**SENATOR BUNDE** said he was the author of the original bill and authored it, because the business community and the University had serious concerns about children leaving school with a diploma and being functionally illiterate. The business community found itself in the situation of either having to teach new employees to read and write or to simply let them go - neither a good solution. The University was also very frustrated with getting high school graduates who could not function at the University level spends about \$20 million/yr. in remedial work.

**SENATOR BUNDE** indicated that President Hamilton said that many Alaskan students needed a full year of remediation before starting classes instead of the one or two classes that others in the Lower 48 typically took.

8:05:12 AM

**SENATOR STEVENS** joined the meeting.

**SENATOR BUNDE** continued that they had discussions regarding what a high school diploma should mean, and finally benchmarks were established for minimum proficiency - at about the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level of proficiency. A majority of students do pass- and many of them at the first attempt; some never will pass, and a majority of these are intensive needs students.

He suggested that we ought to keep this benchmark until something better is found. About 80 percent of the public supported it at passage, and it has been his experience that students seem to be attending school more regularly and paying closer attention in class since this test was implemented.

He has heard questions about whether the diagnostic test administered in the 11th grade is given too late to do anything about it if the students are not able to pass and thinks they should discuss an earlier evaluation. He said the high school exit exam costs \$1 million to administer, but it is not a substantial amount of money when compared to the school budget.

8:10:08 AM

SENATOR HUGGINS asked Senator Bunde to stay involved in the process as they work through ways to improve it, and as they review other instruments.

SENATOR BUNDE said he would be happy to. He said that former Senator Gretchen Guess was deeply involved in this project and he encouraged the committee to see if she would be available for comment as well.

8:11:05 AM

SENATOR OLSON asked Senator Bunde if he had gotten any feedback from teachers regarding the efficiency of the exit exam.

8:12:23 AM

In response, Senator Bunde shared an experience. After the exit exam had been in place for about three years, a group of Anchorage principals came to see him. They told him the exit exam was working, students were coming to school more regularly and were paying more attention, but it was very difficult and expensive. They assured him that they would continue to do the substantial list they had created to help remediated unsuccessful students who couldn't pass the exit exam if they the legislature would withdraw taking the exit exam as a requirement. He said the dropout rate has always been a problem in Alaska.

SENATOR OLSON said it is his understanding that the dropout rate increased after the exit exam was put in place, but he didn't know why. He could see how a person would lose hope and drop out if he failed the exam at age 15.

8:14:44 AM

SENATOR BUNDE asked him to remember the exam is 9<sup>th</sup> grade level proficiency. Students start falling behind early in their career and by the time this exam is administered they are already a couple of years behind and often drop out anyhow. He has heard one criticism of the exam that may be valid and that is that students pass all three sections and think they've done all they need to, so they leave school. He does not think that is

actually a problem with the exam, rather with parents' and schools' representation of it.

[8:16:30 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON asked when the bill originally passed, what was the department's position and if it had changed.

SENATOR BUNDE responded that when this passed Dr. Shirley Holloway was the commissioner; and she worked closely with Senator Guess, himself and others. He remembered that Ms. Holloway was supportive of the high school qualifying exam and felt it should continue.

SENATOR OLSON asked if she testified to that on the record.

SENATOR BUNDE replied that this is from a conversation they had in the past couple of weeks. She helped shape the exam; so when it passed he remembered her being supportive. Governor Knowles signed the bill. The recent past commissioner, Roger Samson, supported it as well, and felt Alaska was on the cutting edge of educational reform since it was the only state to have enacted it.

[8:18:42 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON asked how many states have an exit exam.

SENATOR BUNDE replied that he was not sure.

VICE CHAIR DAVIS said she would get that information for him.

[8:18:58 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said last time they discussed this he tried to get the department to take a stand and they "danced around it" and did not. One of their rationales was going to a Work Keys Program and having a level of proficiency indication on the diploma. He didn't think that was quite the same as an exit exam.

SENATOR BUNDE responded that was discussed when they developed the original test. They considered gilt-edged diplomas, barely competent diplomas and attendance diplomas. He worked in special education when he taught; there were blue birds, red birds, and yellow birds. The kids knew slow, average and bright, and that's what the diplomas would come to mean. The legislature has a role in deciding what a diploma means.

He said it is difficult to test competencies and the more categories they have, the more confused the public gets. So, that idea was rejected; but he has not had a direct conversation with the department but staff has, and the enthusiasm in the department for the high school exit exams is tepid at best.

8:21:07 AM

VICE CHAIR DAVIS opined that despite the exit exam, the dropout and graduation rates don't seem to be any better. She asked Senator Bunde if he is aware that there isn't just one test, but two that have been combined.

8:22:22 AM

SENATOR BUNDE replied yes, he is aware of that, and he also knows the NCLB test cannot be dropped.

VICE CHAIR DAVIS said the reason the bill came forward is that the department did not address the recommendation by the Board of Education two years ago. It is her understanding that the present board said it is ready to consider it and that they are looking at Work Keys as one alternative. Many of the people supported the exit exam, but they mostly agree that it now needs to be reviewed. Many of Alaska's young people, even many who are supposed to be honor students, go away to school and have to take remedial courses before they can get to their core program.

She also pointed out that the test has been watered down since it was implemented, and it's now at about the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. She asked if Senator Bunde would be willing to review some of these issues as she would value his input. This is a high stakes test. If you don't come out of school with a diploma, you can't get into many schools and a GED does not qualify as a diploma, which is something that needed review also. Some states have withdrawn the exit exam requirement.

8:26:35 AM

SENATOR BUNDE agreed that they should never stop searching for improvement, but he didn't want to let go of one tool until they had another. He said he appreciated the invitation and would be happy to work with the committee in any way possible.

8:27:00 AM

TOM OBERMEYER, staff to Senator Davis, sponsor of SB 109, wanted to go over some statistics provided by the department. He referenced a document from Eric McCormick dated March 18<sup>th</sup> that gave some graduation statistics. It indicated that in the 2008, there was a 62 percent graduation rate. In summary although the

graduation rate has remained consistent over the last five years, the number of graduates has increased for four consecutive years. This is largely to the efforts of the district to retain those students who may need more than four years to graduate. He pointed out that the graduation rate is calculated unlike the dropout rate, over the cohort group from grades 9-12 using the number of graduates as the denominator. Statistics on the graduation exams are not high, but they do have a 95 percent participation rate. Graduation passage scores tend to drop as they go up higher because those kids who haven't passed before don't improve and then end up dropping out by 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

VICE CHAIR DAVIS said she would rather not discuss these things until the committee has copies of the reports.

MR. OBERMEYER said there packets should already have documents from CEP that indicate movement in other state back to end of course exams rather than one high-stake exam at the end.

VICE-CHAIR DAVIS found no further comments and held SB 109 in committee.

[8:30:59 AM](#)

VICE CHAIR DAVIS adjourned the meeting at 8:30 a.m.