

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

January 29, 2010
8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Kevin Meyer, Co-Chair
Senator Joe Thomas, Co-Chair
Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair
Senator Gary Stevens

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Charlie Huggins
Senator Donald Olson

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 221

"An Act establishing an advisory task force on higher education in the legislative branch of government; and providing for an effective date."

MOVED SB 221 OUT OF COMMITTEE

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 221

SHORT TITLE: LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE ON HIGHER ED

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) STEVENS

01/19/10	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/19/10	(S)	EDC, FIN
01/27/10	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM FAHRENKAMP 203
01/27/10	(S)	Heard & Held
01/27/10	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
01/29/10	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM FAHRENKAMP 203

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
04/01/09	(S)	Heard & Held
04/01/09	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
10/23/09	(S)	EDC AT 3:00 PM Anch LIO Rm 220
10/23/09	(S)	Heard & Held
10/23/09	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
01/29/10	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM FAHRENKAMP 203

WITNESS REGISTER

TIM LAMKIN, staff to Senator Stevens
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Explained changes in the CS for SB 221.

TOM OBERMEYER, staff to Senator Davis
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sponsor statement for SB 109.

TERESA HOLT
Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (GCDSE)
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 109.

DEBORAH KITELINGER
Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education
North Pole, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 109.

JULIE BROYLES
Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 109.

LAUREL VORACHEK, Executive Director
Assessment and Evaluation
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 109.

ALANA GREER
Representing herself
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 109.

ERIC WADE
LINKS Matsu Parent Resource Center
Palmer, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 109.

JANET LONG
Representing herself
Anchorage AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 109.

JENNIFER DOUNAY ZINTH
Education Commission of the States
Denver, CO

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided an overview of trends in high school testing.

MARK MITCHELL, Teacher
Representing himself
King Cove, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 109.

DAVID KOHLER, Department Chair
Special Education Services
Service High School
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 109.

EDDY JEANS, Director
School Finance and Facilities Section,
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Opposed SB 109.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:32 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR KEVIN MEYER called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens, Davis, Thomas and Meyer.

SB 221-LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE ON HIGHER ED

8:03:38 AM

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced consideration of SB 221 "An Act establishing an advisory task force on higher education in the legislative branch of government," sponsored by Senate President Gary Stevens.

8:04:23 AM

CO-CHAIR THOMAS moved to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) to SB 221, labeled 26-LS1309\P, as the working document of the committee. There being no objection, version P was before the committee.

SENATOR STEVENS introduced his aide, Tim Lamkin, to go through the changes that were made in the committee substitute.

8:05:04 AM

TIM LAMKIN, staff to Senator Stevens, said he has highlighted the changes on members' copies of the CS for clarification. They broadened the scope of the bill to focus not only on higher education, but on career-readiness with a focus on vocational or technical training. That change is reflected in the new title by the insertion of the words "and career readiness" on page 1, line 1 and on lines 7, 8 and 10. The number of members on the task force was increased to 18 on line 11; page 2, line 3 specifies that one member appointed by the governor will represent vocational, technical or apprenticeship programs; lines 5 through 8 provide for two student members, one secondary and one postsecondary representative; line 12 adds the executive director of the Alaska Association of School Administrators (AASA), and line 16 adds the president of the Alaska Federation of Natives or the president's designee.

MR. LAMKIN continued; line 26 in the CS includes the phrase "at least," referring to faculty experienced in education remediation and making it clear that one or more of these three members must reside outside of Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau.

Page 3, lines 13 and 14, and page 4, lines 4 and 5, 8 and 9, place added emphasis on those who may choose not go to college with the inclusion of the phrase "and postsecondary vocational or technical training programs" after the phrase "colleges, universities."

[8:08:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said he appreciates the changes.

SENATOR THOMAS agreed.

CO-CHAIR MEYER presumed that the larger size of the task force could necessitate a change to the fiscal note.

[8:09:30 AM](#)

TIM LAMKIN said each agency will pay its own way, so the fiscal note will not change.

CO-CHAIR MEYER advised that he would entertain a motion to move the bill.

[8:10:03 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS moved to report committee substitute (CS) for SB 221, labeled 26-LS1309\P, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s). There being no objection, CSSB 221(EDC) moved from committee.

[8:10:40 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER called a brief at ease.

SB 109-REPEAL SECONDARY SCHOOL EXIT EXAM

[8:11:31 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced consideration of SB 109.

[8:12:51 AM](#)

TOM OBERMEYER, staff to Senator Davis, said SB 109 is an Act repealing the secondary student competency exam and related requirements and providing for an effective date. The exam is also called the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE) or exit exam. This exam was initiated in 2001 and effective in 2004 following the trend for more assessment in the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB). It was never clear that Alaska's high school graduation exam would improve performance or measure whether students are better prepared for college, much less determine conclusively whether students are receiving diplomas but lacking basic skills. This particular exam has become a high-stakes hurdle, the only one of the assessments now used in Alaska that can prevent students from receiving diplomas. It has made it very difficult for some students, excluded many others, and exacerbated a court finding in 2007 that the state was violating students' constitutional rights to an education

without providing proper assistance and direction. He referred the members to their materials on the Moore vs State case. He added that he believes Les Morse of the Department of Social and Health Services has provided the committee with information indicating they are taking remedial action to address those court matters.

MR. OBERMEYER mentioned that Miss Dounay, an expert from the Education Commission of the States (ECS), is on line. She has observed that more and more states are going to end-of-course exams and other methods of bringing kids up-to-date instead of using exit exams. The HSGQE is a very expensive exam; it is currently on a seven-year, one-year-renewable contract for \$48 million dollars, which runs into 2015.

MR. OBERMEYER noted that the fiscal note in members' packets is from March 2009 and has not been updated; it indicates that the state would save about \$1.5 million per year by discontinuing the use of this exam.

[8:16:14 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if Mr. Obermeyer would prefer he ask the Department of Health and Social Services about those numbers.

MR. OBERMEYER agreed that he would.

CO-CHAIR MEYER commented that there is also a cost to individual schools for administering the exam.

CO-CHAIR MEYER opened public testimony.

[8:17:04 AM](#)

TERESA HOLT, Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (GCDSE), Anchorage, Alaska, said the council works on issues that effect change in the system for people who have disabilities. Their primary focus is on system issues around people who have developmental disabilities, including early intervention services and education of individuals with developmental disabilities.

GCDSE has a broad stakeholder group. Two-thirds of the committee is made up of individuals with disabilities and parents of persons with disabilities; it also includes Art Arnold, Director of the Office of Special Education in the Alaska Department of Education, a member of the Alaska State Board of Education, university professors, a university student, a representative from the Department of Corrections, advocates, and someone who

works with disabled persons seeking employment. It supports removal of the requirement to pass the exit exam to receive a diploma, both in this bill and in HB 205.

There are two reasons for their support; the first has to do with opportunity and the second with accountability. When students graduate without a diploma, their opportunities for success in their post-high-school life are severely limited. It is difficult to get into the military; it is difficult to get into a university or vocational school; and it is difficult to get employment that provides a living wage. The unemployment rate in Alaska for individuals with disabilities is 26 percent. Resources follow accountability, she stated, and that can be seen with the exit exam. More resources in schools are dedicated to those eleventh and twelfth graders who haven't passed the exam, but GCDSE feels it is too late. By eleventh grade those students have most likely been failing for several years. Educators should know from testing in the third grade and up which students need help in reading, writing, or math. To put all of the schools' resources at the end of the system seems a bit inefficient.

MS. HOLT challenged the committee to find a way to put that accountability at the beginning of the system. Alaska needs some kind of accountability early in the system, in order to prevent students from failing year after year. Students have a lot fewer gaps to fill at beginning of their school careers than they do by eleventh grade.

[8:21:49 AM](#)

MS. HOLT communicated that one of her own children was not quite ready to read in kindergarten despite all of her efforts as a parent. He was still behind in first grade and in second grade was placed in special education. When he had not caught up by the fifth grade, they pulled him out of special education and put him in a reading clinic. In one summer he was up to grade-level, so she knows it is possible. The resources have to be allocated differently; instead of asking teachers to work harder, which is what the exit exam does, the state needs to provide resources and different types of instruction in the beginning, to reach students who aren't performing at their grade-level.

She said she had worked with many families that have disabled kids and has seen a child in eleventh grade actually learn to read in two years, but it took 6 hours per day of one-on-one tutoring. That isn't realistic in a public school. GCDSE has the

opportunity each year to sponsor students with disabilities to work in their office for a day, to see what they do and to observe individuals with disabilities being successful. One young man they sponsored did everything a person could ask to earn a scholarship; he volunteered at the Boys' And Girls' Club; he took all of the regular education classes, even though he has a significant learning disability. He earned a scholarship but is going to lose it because he can't pass the exit exam.

[8:24:29 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER agreed that the state does a real disservice to kids in that situation, who have worked hard for twelve years and end up with a certificate rather than a diploma.

[8:25:02 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS thanked Ms. Holt for her testimony and asked if the Governor's Council has arrived at any recommendations they would be willing to put forth. He said he also believes they need to be testing to determine where kids are as they go along and whether remediation is needed, rather than waiting and pouring resources in at the end, when the efforts are less likely to be successful.

MS. HOLT said, from talking with various members of the Governor's Council, she has come to believe that there is no one system that is going to work across all communities. She conjectured that they might have to start with a basic curriculum and, if that isn't working for an individual student, do an assessment of that child's needs and use the information to create a data-driven program for that individual. Experts around the nation who have tried to implement this type of data-driven instruction, say that each school really needs to choose a system that will work for it. One state provides the schools with guidelines and resources but holds each school accountable to increase students' reading skills. She said she thinks that is similar to what Les Morse is working on in his pilot program.

She closed by saying that Alaska shouldn't have to create anything new; there are a lot of resources out there to choose from.

[8:28:02 AM](#)

DEBORAH KITELINGER, Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education, North Pole, Alaska, said she is the mother of nine children, two of whom have learning disabilities. Her eldest is 19 and has gone through the exit exam process; it took him six tries and an additional year of high school to pass it.

When he graduated, he had 30 credits and a GPA of 3.24. He had the grades; he had the credits; but he had difficulty passing the writing and math portions of the exam due to dyslexia. He has more than a basic skill-set to go out into the workplace. He has held three jobs since he was 16 years old and all of his employers have told her they are very pleased with his performance. It is amazing to her that had he been less determined, he would never have gotten his diploma. Her 10-year old has cognitive impairments that make it unlikely he will ever pass the exit exam, and she fears the impact of his failure may be devastating. It is not just her children she is concerned about however; many kids give up before they make it past this hurdle. She is on-board with testing, but believes the test should not be tied to getting a diploma. She would rather see them adopt something like the WorkKeys.

8:32:25 AM

JULIE BROYLES, Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education, Anchorage, Alaska, said she is the product of Alaska public schools and universities and the mother of three children; the oldest has Down syndrome. She was speaking to the committee however, as a high school special education teacher who teaches students with learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, cognitive impairments, emotional disorders and visual impairments such as ADD and ADHD [attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactive disorder]. These students qualify for special education services because they are at least two grade-levels below their peers in one or more academic areas.

She gave an account of a tenth-grade student in her high school special education reading class who was reading at the fifth grade level. He could read the newspapers, most of which are written at the fifth-grade level; he could read a job application; he could apply for a job by filling out a job application. His testing record indicated that he was far below proficient on every benchmark throughout his school career to that point, but what those tests didn't show is that he was progressing all of those years. He was simply not able to progress at the same level as his non-disabled peers. For every test, the student was provided with testing accommodations such as taking the test in a separate location with minimal distractions, having the instructions read to him, being allowed to take frequent breaks and cetera. When the student did not pass the reading tests he was placed in an additional reading class. When he fails to pass next year he might be offered another reading class, one that is designed strictly to help him pass the HSGQE. It goes against everything she knows of good

teaching practices, teaching with the sole intention of passing a test. When the student fails again he might be offered a modified exit exam. A modified test means the person administering the test reads the directions and questions on the reading test to the student. He might pass, but he will not have gained four or five years of reading levels.

MS. BROYLES also spoke about a twelfth grader with an average cognitive ability and severe dyslexia, who cannot pass the writing test. He has been receiving special education services since first grade; in high school he takes mostly general education classes. He is hard-working and turns in every assignment, but his Standards Based Assessment (SBA) scores have always been far below the proficient range. He passed the math test on his first try, but failed the HSGQE reading and writing tests. In his junior year he took a HSGQE writing class to practice writing the kind of responses that are most likely to earn enough points for a passing grade. She applied for a modified HSGQE that allowed him to use a word processor with spell check and grammar check during the test. If he were to fail again she would apply for the modified HSGQE with voice recognition software as well. This student not only lost valuable instruction time to the testing days, he missed out on opportunities to take classes that might be more relevant to his interests and possible career options. Testing students at what is often the end of their academic careers, especially for students with disabilities, does not improve their learning or increase the likelihood that they will stay in school and pursue a postsecondary education. On behalf of her students, she asked the committee to support the repeal of the exit exam requirement.

[8:39:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked Ms. Broyles where she teaches special education.

MS. BROYLES replied that she teaches in Anchorage.

[8:40:01 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if Ms. Broyles believes the state has the wherewithal in place now to increase the abilities of those disabled kids to their maximum potential, but that it is not placing the right emphasis on it or starting early enough.

MS. BROYLES responded no, not as long as it is spending so much money, time and energy on this test. She analogized that she wouldn't want someone to build her a house and wait until the

week before inspection to determine whether the foundation is strong enough to support the structure.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if she believes the state would be better off if it redirected those resources.

MS. BROYLES answered "Yes."

[8:41:17 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if she could support end-of-course exams instead of the high-stakes exit exam.

MS BROYLES said it is more valuable for teachers to know how kids are doing at the moment in order to guide their instruction. As a parent, early assessments to determine her children's strengths and how those align to various careers would help her to guide their course work.

[8:42:30 AM](#)

LAUREL VORACHEK, Executive Director, Assessment and Evaluation, Anchorage School District, said the school district supports SB 109. They are struggling with managing and integrating all of the mandated assessments into their instruction. If they cannot be integrated into instruction, they have no meaning for the student, the family or the educational process. Some of these exams currently include the HSGQE, the re-tested HSGQE, the Terra Nova, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the English Language Proficiency Assessment, and Revised Developmental Profile. All of these are state or federally mandated assessments.

In response to the committee's comments regarding the need for interventions and assessments early on, she said the Anchorage School District has its own assessments that it feels are absolutely necessary to measure progress toward mastery of standards and individual student progress on curriculum-based measures. These are by far the most important assessment measures because they can occur during instruction, giving educators the ability to adjust instruction based on the data. They are working on how to set up that system district-wide, but it is difficult to manage that in addition to everything else that is required. The SBAs and HSGQE are not instructionally sensitive enough to really intervene at various points during the year; they need more than the one data point the SBA's currently give them. The WIN Curriculum and WorkKeys Assessment have been added for next year so there is significant cost to

the state in managing additional assessments, especially if districts integrate them into their instruction.

MS. VORACHEK said her response to why the legislature should repeal the HSGQE is that it is outside of the NCLB requirement, and is an essential, basic skills test. On one end, it often has an unintended consequence that educators have observed repeatedly, which is that many students and parents set their sights only toward passing the HSGQE and not toward being college and work-ready. Once students have passed all three parts, it can become a stumbling block to encouraging higher-level course work. On the other end, students who have learning difficulties have to focus their entire high school career on passing that exit exam and really do not have the opportunity to participate in some of the work-force development courses available.

The High School Graduation Qualifying Exam has absolutely no meaning beyond the state of Alaska and provides no information on college or work-readiness.

MS. VORACHEK said that next year they will be required to administer the WorkKeys for all eleventh graders. This came about from the work of the previous Commissioner of Labor. Unlike the HSGQE, the WorkKeys assessment is recognized nationwide, uses a common language between educators and employers, and provides information to students on their college and work-readiness which can motivate them to continue taking courses to improve their skills and fill the gaps in their knowledge.

[8:47:26 AM](#)

WorkKeys allows students to see how their skills compare to the skills necessary to enter the work force. One of the critical elements of education is making it meaningful and real for students. WorkKeys has the ability to do that. It provides valuable information for course planning and students can earn certificates through WorkKeys that are recognized in several industries throughout the country.

MS. VORACHEK said people frequently ask what the HSGQE measures as compared to the WorkKeys. ACT Incorporated's profilers have profiled every job in the country and identified that the top three skills necessary for work readiness are: locating information, reading for information, and applied mathematics. Locating information is an absolutely critical skill in 85 percent of the jobs they profiled, in 81 percent it is reading

for information, and in 75 percent it is applied mathematics. Writing is critical in only 17 percent of jobs; if an employer wants information about a student's writing ability however, it can be found in the tenth grade SBA scores.

If the state's goal is to ensure that students have the essential skills for entry-level jobs, which was the intent behind the HSGQE legislation, WorkKeys provides that. Another advantage of using WorkKeys is that it also provides some indicators of college readiness. ACT has done a statistical concordance that shows the comparability of the ACT® test and WorkKeys and has found that a level 5 in applied mathematics on WorkKeys indicates a student is on track to meet the readiness benchmarks in reading and mathematics on the ACT®.

She said the Anchorage School District would like the committee to look at the impact and cost of all mandated assessments as they consider SB 109 and perhaps consider a differentiated diploma system. If the legislature is going to mandate an assessment, she asked that it be one that provides useful information for course planning and provides a connection educators can use to motivate students to pursue higher-level course work. In summary, she reiterated that Anchorage School District supports SB 109 to repeal the High School Qualifying Exit Exam and thanked the Education Committee for the opportunity to testify.

[8:51:15 AM](#)

ALANA GREER, Homer, Alaska, said she is the parent of a learning-disabled high school student. For the young people she knows, it seems the HSGQE is either a no-brainer they pass as sophomores, or a punitive thing that completely disheartens them and turns them off from education.

She said the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team meetings she has attended since implementation of the High School Qualifying Exit Exam have been distracted from giving her son skills that will actually help him in his life; they focused instead on how to give him the accommodations he would need to pass this test. Her son is taking welding now and doing great on his jobs; he hasn't missed a day of school and isn't a troublemaker. He wants to get on with his life. He isn't going to stay in school until he's 21 and needs to plan, but he took the test in the fall and didn't have the results until December. That was a problem.

They were fortunate that he did pass the test and will get to graduate with his friends and peers. When he goes to get a janitorial job at the hospital, they will know what his diploma is; it's not a certificate of attendance that doesn't mean anything to anybody.

MS. GREER said there is another problem in her community regarding the test. It has to do with the "old-believer" community, another high-risk population for high school graduation. This is a closed society of people who emigrated from Russia and are committed to keeping their old traditions alive. The young girls marry early and it has been a struggle to get them through to graduation. Strides are being made, but this year the test falls on a holy day and those children won't be able to attend. She was told that they have contacted the ACLU about it. This is just one more reason to repeal the test.

[8:56:38 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if she is supportive of some sort of differentiated diploma system.

MS. GREER replied "No." She doesn't think a differentiated diploma will mean anything different out in the real world than a certificate of attendance or a high school diploma. She believes Alaska already has a strong system in place. When she graduated and when her parent's graduated, a diploma meant something. She speculated that maybe there are some problems with the system; maybe there has been grade inflation; maybe teachers are burnt out or principals aren't spending the time to walk through classrooms and see what is going on. They had a system in place when she was in high school though, and it seemed to work. She doesn't quite understand why the state feels it is necessary to keep testing and testing.

MS. GREER said she isn't excited about the WorkKeys for learning-disabled kids; WorkKeys is building a market niche and should be very excited about the money it will make for them. A kid who wants to go to beauty school to be a nail technician doesn't need to take the WorkKeys. A kid who wants to weld might need it, but that decision should be made by the kids with their school counselors and teachers; it should not be up to the state. Kids decide if they want to go to college and take the SAT and the ACT®; let them decide if they want to take the WorkKeys, she said; give them some control over their own lives.

[8:59:39 AM](#)

ERIC WADE, LINKS Matsu Parent Resource Center, Palmer, Alaska, said LINKS provides training opportunities and advocacy support for parents of children with disabilities. He is testifying in favor of SB 109; the exit exam has been controversial since its passage and its effectiveness is doubtful. LINKS believes it is time for this testing requirement to be removed.

MR. WADE said his particular concern regarding the exit exam is that the drop-out rate among Alaska's students has increased since its implementation and has not rebounded to pre-exam levels. Many students drop out in the ninth and tenth grade. These are generally students who reach high school already significantly behind. For some, it is due to their home life; for some it is because of a disability; perhaps some just didn't try very hard. Regardless of the reasons, the exit exam looms in front of them and, either because they realize they won't pass, or because they fail it in tenth grade, they drop out of school. Before implementation of the exam, some of these students would have hung in there, continued to learn and eventually graduated. They would have gone to work and learned many of the skills essential to their positions on the job. As an aside, he supposed that many of the people listening today probably learned how to prepare and give presentations on the job. He has spoken to many carpenters who told him that they really learned fractions and geometry on the job. He ventured that most of the people attending the hearing know someone who fits that description; they may not have been the best high school students, but did get a diploma and are functioning quite well in our society. Many students today however, can't get those jobs because they don't have a diploma. The playing field has changed since the exit exam. He said LINKS supports solutions that improve academic achievement and ways to assess that achievement, but the high-stakes exam is too costly to students and families. They do not support a differential diploma system. He encouraged the legislature to remove the exit exam.

9:03:14 AM

JANET LONG, Anchorage Alaska, thanked Chair Davis for sponsoring SB 109. She is the parent of a child with a mild learning disability, a special education teacher and transition coordinator for students with special needs. She is concerned not only for the children with disabilities who have to face this test, but for the many kids at higher levels who say they don't have to take certain courses because they've already passed the exam.

She asserted that the state's money would be more wisely spent on early intervention instead of supporting remediation and re-testing. She thanked Governor Parnell for supporting removal of this exam. She particularly liked his memo to the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education about the \$1.3 million savings possible in re-testing costs alone. Huge amounts of instructional time are being lost to efforts to ensure that students will pass this exam. She agreed with Ms. Vorachek that testing can be done more expediently in Homer or in Anchorage using district assessments.

MS. LONG said her research indicates that there are 26 states that test and a greater number of states and territories that do not. She was also concerned that Alaska does not have reciprocity with the states that do test; she doesn't understand that. Having such a transient population in Alaska makes it very difficult for many of those students.

In conclusion, she thanked Senator Davis again for her work and thanked Senator Bundy for helping to tighten up teaching and accountability for staff and students. She said she thinks Alaska is moving in a good direction. She supports repealing the HSGQE requirement, but if the state decides to continue with the existing test, she would support a move to differentiated diplomas.

9:10:08 AM

JENNIFER DOUNAY ZINTH, Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colorado, joined the meeting via teleconference. She said she would like to respond to some of the previous testimony, then entertain questions from the committee and provide some comments, followed by a national overview.

She provided copies of a presentation she prepared for a legislative committee in Oklahoma. Oklahoma is one of the last states to have exit exam policy on the books which has not yet gone into effect; the first class subject to their exit exam requirement will be the class of 2012. They established a task force to look at their high school testing policy and national trends in terms of both exit exams and end-of-course exams. Oklahoma's legislation calls for their end-of-course exams to become exit exams effective in 2012.

For clarification, she said, the Education Commission of the States is a non-partisan organization. She said she will not speak for or against Alaska's high school exam but will provide

a perspective on what other states are doing and identify potential avenues for the state to consider.

Referring to previous testimony that tenth and eleventh grade is too late to begin dealing with gaps in students' learning and that they were probably struggling for years before, Ms. Dounay absolutely agreed. She asked if Alaska has done any analyses to consider alignment between the tenth grade graduation qualifying exam and earlier assessments, as some other states have identified misalignments from grade-level to grade-level.

[9:12:54 AM](#)

She opined that one avenue Alaska might want to consider - and one that is a growing trend in other states - is a transition to end-of-course exams. Some states have made them mandatory for high school graduation. If a student chooses to take Algebra I or Algebra II, then there is an end-of-course exam the student should be able to pass upon completing the course. A positive thing about end-of-course exams is that students all know that what is being taught on a day-to-day basis is what will be on the test at the end of the year. In addition, some states are making diagnostic tools available to teachers to identify where students are struggling during the school year so educators can address those long before they get to the end of the school year.

MS. DOUNAY continued that there are many states with end-of-course exams and on-line tools to help teachers align their instruction with the year-end expectations. It is one thing to put a standard out there; but it is extremely helpful to provide some model classroom activities that are aligned to the standard to assist teachers in meeting it.

Regardless of whether Alaska keeps the HSGQE, it is good for the state to consider some areas of state policy that ECS has done research on. One is adolescent literacy. Among states in general, there is a huge focus on literacy in grades K-3; but once students get past third grade there seems to be an unspoken assumption that all of them know how to read. That is certainly not the case. A growing number of states have adopted policies to make sure that teachers who are certified for grades 4 through 12 have the skills they need to help students along in literacy and that there are out-of-classroom supports for those students. Another is remediation at the high school level: What sort of triggers are in place to identify students who are struggling in English, math or other subjects? Do the districts receive funding for providing remediation? Are students required

to attend, or is it optional? Is the remediation program evaluated by the state or by someone else?

[9:16:14 AM](#)

MS. DOUNAY said ECS is seeing a lot of activity in formative assessments during the school year. States often use these assessments in the early years to make sure kids are on track in reading and math; but for whatever reason, they seem to fall away after students enter middle school or high school. A growing number of states are adopting policies to ensure that there are tools in place to help teachers identify student needs and that they have the resources to address those needs during the school year.

She asked if the committee members have any particular questions about what other states are doing.

[9:17:04 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if the trend is to do away with high school exit exams or for more states to require high school exit exams.

MS. DOUNAY replied that the trend now is for states to require exit exams. With the graduating class of 2010, there are 25 states that already have a requirement in place including Arkansas and Oklahoma, where the requirement goes into effect with the graduating class of 2012. Pennsylvania and Oregon recently adopted policies to require an exit exam, but the Pennsylvania policy adopted by the state board still has to undergo legislative approval, and in Oregon implementation has been delayed due to budgetary concerns.

[9:18:23 AM](#)

She underscored that end-of-course exams, regardless of whether or not they serve as exit exams, are more instructionally sensitive than is the HSGQE. She also emphasized the importance of keeping relevance in the high school curriculum so students realize that what they are learning in the classroom has meaning for what they are going to do after high school; certainly a Career and Technical Education (CTE) is one way to ensure that relevance. She added that High School testing need not be mutually exclusive from Career and Technical Education; there are examples toward the end of her presentation to illustrate that.

[9:27:58 AM](#)

MS. DOUNAY advised that Virginia requires that all students to complete six end-of-course exams: two in English, one each in

math, science and social studies and one in an elective subject. The state board is required by legislation to approve assessments they believe have the same level of content in CTE areas. For example, if a student takes a drafting certification course and the level of math required to obtain certification is equal to the level of math that would be in an Algebra or Geometry end-of-course exam, the state board is allowed to approve that as a substitute for the traditional Algebra or Geometry end-of-course exam. The state created a separate division within the Department of Education to assist districts in integrating the content standards into CTE course offerings so that these are not held to watered-down standards. As one of the previous speakers mentioned, Virginia does have very good high school standards.

She confirmed that there are more states looking at differentiated diploma systems, but said a few states have actually moved away from differentiated diplomas and now require all students to take a common core curriculum, believing that putting students on different tracks was setting lower expectations for certain students. Students might not have realized that they were being held to lower expectations by selecting one or another track. Still other states that currently have a one-track system are exploring two or more diploma tracks because they fear that holding all students to the same expectation is not working for some students.

[9:21:41 AM](#)

MS. DOUNAY said any state that adopts an exit exam policy should be clear about the purpose for the exit exam. If Alaska believes the purpose of the competency exam is being met by some other assessment, such as WorkKeys, then repealing the exit exam may be a step in the right direction. By and large, any discussion of high school level assessments needs to take the state to the larger question of what it wants students to know and do once they complete a diploma and whether they are being prepared properly. Pass scores on high school level exams, regardless of whether they are exit exams, should reflect these expectations. If students are getting out of school and finding that they have to take remedial courses when they enter college; or if employers are saying that the graduates they hire aren't prepared for what the employer needs them to do when they enter the work force, then the high school level curriculum, as well as the assessments need to be re-evaluated.

MS. DOUNAY indicated that slide 15 of her presentation shows why other states have implemented exams. One of the most important

bullets on that slide is the third one "sets same statewide expectation for all students." She reflected that sometimes the grade students get in a class is not reflective of how much they learned. The exit exam states what the student is expected to achieve and establishes the common statewide measure for demonstration of that level of achievement.

Speaking briefly to what the research says regarding the impact on students of exit exams, she admitted that the research is truly mixed. Some studies indicate that, although there may be a higher initial failure rate among students with disabilities, after such students take the exit exam two or more times, they tend to pass it at nearly the same rate as regular education students. Other studies say achievement as measured by the National Assessment on Educational Progress or some other measure, is lower in states that have exit exams. So there is no one conclusion in terms of whether student achievement is better or worse if there is an exit exam.

Finally, speaking to a few trends, Ms. Dounay reiterated that states are not dropping exit exams but are largely transitioning from traditional exit exams to end-of-course exams and seeking to better align their high school assessments with post-high school expectations. In Texas, which is one of the states moving away from an exit exam to end-of-course exams scattered through grades nine through eleven, students who get specific items correct on the reading or math end-of-course exams have met a benchmark for college placement and are not required to sit for the college placement exam should they enter a four-year public institution in the state of Texas. Other states are taking slightly different avenues to embed some sort of college-ready measure into high school exit exams.

[9:26:07 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked where Ms. Dounay is calling from.

MS. DOUNAY answered "Denver."

[9:26:24 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said he is interested in the "why" of exit exams and what the critics say, which seems to be much like the testimony they heard today. He pointed out that the result "set same statewide expectation for all students" sounds good, but not all students are the same, and that is the meat of the problem. He asked if Ms. Dounay has information on what other states have done to modify their exit exams to create some incentive for parents and students.

[9:27:58 AM](#)

MS. DOUNAY asked Co-Chair Thomas if by "modify" he means other ways for a student to demonstrate proficiency if he fails the first time, rather than taking the traditional exit exam again.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS clarified that he wants to know what other states are doing earlier, when they recognize that students are struggling.

MS. DOUNAY responded that Virginia is a very good example. They have adopted a program integrating pre-algebra and algebra concepts into the middle school curriculum. They are also providing professional development and recertification programs for teachers if their preparation was not as algebra-driven as a K-8 certification. They've seen significant success with this program. She offered to provide a link to a site with more information on this eighth-grade algebra program.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said he would appreciate that. He commented that the amount of effort a student expends is worth a lot in the end, particularly to employers, and asked if anyone has taken that into consideration to somewhat flatten the curve.

[9:30:32 AM](#)

MS. DOUNAY said in some states, if a student fails the exam on the first try, the alternate avenue is evaluation of course grades. ECS identified seven states that allow students to substitute course work or end-of-course exam results for areas in which they failed on the high school exit exam. A student who got an A in math, for instance, might be able to use the course grade as a substitute. In a different seven states, an alternative is evaluation of classroom evidence. If a student can show that his homework assignments and other projects completed in class meet the standard the state is expecting for passage of that section of the exit exam, the student can substitute that evidence. Yet another seven states allow other criteria such as remediation. If a student fails the English section but regularly attends a remedial program and demonstrates his commitment, then that may substitute for a passing score. Some other states may accept a letter of recommendation or attendance records as a substitute.

[9:32:23 AM](#)

MARK MITCHELL, a science teacher in King Cove, Alaska, testified from his eighth grade classroom. He has been teaching for 20 years, 10 of them in rural Alaska, and believes that the high

school graduation exam is a necessary evil, although he admitted that it causes a lot of stress to families and communities. He said the main difference he has seen between before and after the test is that the high school diploma is now taken as proof of literacy, and it wasn't before. He stated that he is not in favor of test.

In closing, he said the HSGQE has served as a positive influence but it could be much better than it is and requested that if the committee repeals the test, they replace it with something meaningful.

[9:35:07 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER agreed that if they eliminate the exit exam they do need to replace it with some sort of assessment.

[9:35:43 AM](#)

DAVID KOHLER, Department Chair, Special Education Services, Service High School, Anchorage, Alaska, said he has been in the field of special education for 32 years. He has also worked as a school psychologist, teacher and administrator. He said he is the person who has to implement the HSGQE and make daily decisions regarding individual students' education. He agreed that there needs to be an accountability system that includes students with special needs, to ensure those students get their equal share of resources; however, doing this at the high school level is simply too late. A great deal of research has established that addressing academic difficulties early is the best route to future academic success. It is very difficult to close the education gap by the time students get to high school, and doing so is often in direct opposition to an individual student's needs and motivation. Too often, he said, he has to make a decision between classes designed to help a student pass the HSGQE and classes designed to prepare him for life outside of high school. He noted that Service High School requires students to get 22.5 credits in very specific areas in order to get a diploma.

[9:38:37 AM](#)

MR. KOHLER stated that students who have not passed the exam as tenth graders are usually those who don't fit the traditional educational model. Loading them up with more reading, writing and math classes often increases the chance that they will drop out. He also pointed out that, if students don't pass the HSGQE as tenth graders, there are classes available in the eleventh and twelfth grades to support them. Those classes start in August. The test is administered during the first week in

October, but students do not get the results of the exam until December. So from the first week in October until December, they are taking a class designed to help them pass the exam without knowing whether they have already passed. These are often the students who are less motivated than others and have had less success in high school; they are spending time in a class without knowing whether or not they need the information they are being taught.

[9:40:12 AM](#)

Finally, he said that in making a decision about this, the committee needs to consider their individual philosophies about education and what a diploma actually means. The question is whether a diploma indicates a certain level of proficiency in reading, writing or math, or if it means preparation for life outside of high school. He reiterated that while he agrees an accountability system is necessary, one that focuses more on the real-life needs of students would be more appropriate.

[9:40:52 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said he is familiar with Mr. Kohler's special needs program at Service High School and thanked him for all he does.

[9:41:16 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS referred to Jennifer Dounay's discussion of alignment between the grades, in which she implied that in some states there is a lower bar set in the earlier grades, which jumps up in high school making it much harder for students to prepare. He asked Mr. Kohler if that has been his experience.

[9:41:46 AM](#)

MR. KOHLER said he has no statistics on that and is not very familiar with the content of the Standards Based Assessments for the lower levels, but it seems from his own experience that there is a pretty strong correlation between the students' performances on the SBAs and on the HSGQE, which would indicate that the skills are progressing.

[9:42:40 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER closed public testimony. He called on Eddie Jeans to speak for the administration.

[9:43:36 AM](#)

EDDIE JEANS, Director of School Finance, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska said he has delivered the state Board of Education's position on this issue

to both of the Co-Chairs' offices. The state board had a lengthy discussion about this issue at their meeting in January and voiced many of the same concerns he has heard today. They decided they would prefer to keep the exam in place as it is today until such time as an alternative is presented to replace it. The reason they took this position is that the HSGQE is a very key part of the state's accountability system. It is the high-stakes "hammer." As part of that system, there is an expectation at each grade-level; these are aligned to the state standards, which are aligned to the Standards Based Assessment. They start assessing children in third grade, so by the time they reach high school and the high school qualifying exam, it should not be a surprise to anyone that the child will or will not pass. He asserted that end-of-course exams would present the same type of roadblock as does the HSGQE. If students don't pass the end-of-course exams they will not get a diploma.

MR. JEANS agreed that WorkKeys is an excellent tool to provide information about students' abilities in reading, writing and mathematics, but maintained that it is just informational and the existing Standards Based Assessments provide the same information. At this point the state board would like to keep the exit exam. It holds students and parents accountable; it holds the districts accountable; it also holds the state of Alaska accountable. That was made very clear in the Moore vs State case. Because of that accountability, the department was able to get the support of the legislature to intervene in low-performing districts. He also pointed out that there has been an increase in the number of graduates since 2005.

[9:48:08 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said he disagrees with Mr. Jeans regarding the high school exit exam versus the WorkKeys. It was his understanding that if a student fails one part of the HSGQE he will not get a diploma. If a student goes to school all twelve years, gets a diploma and then takes the WorkKeys, an employer will know, for instance, that the student is not good at math. He asked for Mr. Jeans' thoughts on that.

MR. JEANS agreed with the chairman's analysis but said the question is whether the goal is to have an accountability system or to inform parents and children. He contended that the WorkKeys is an excellent source of information but does not provide any guarantee that a student has some basic skills. That is what the high-stakes test does; it guarantees that students have basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics. It is not a tenth-grade test; it is not a test to determine whether

students are ready to go into college; it is a test to measure basic skills and to ensure employers that students can read, write, and do some basic math. It is the only hammer in the system to make sure students have met the state's goals.

9:50:15 AM

SENATOR DAVIS responded that the exit exam is "the hammer" because it precludes Alaska's students from graduating from high school with a diploma. It is the only thing on the books that allows that to happen. The Department of Education is already planning to implement the WorkKeys; it has only delayed implementation for another year. She said she has read the statement given by the Board of Education after their meeting, which states that they want to keep the exam in place until they find out what is going to happen regarding the national standards. This particular bill was brought before the legislature because the state Board of Education sent a memo to the Commissioner of Education several years ago saying the HSGQE wasn't working and needed to be modified or done away with. No one else took any action; they couldn't decide what to do. SB 109 just repeals it effective July 2012. The best thing the legislature can do is to do away with this test; the state is doing a disservice to its children. Passing the exit exam does not guarantee employers that students are skilled for those jobs; it does not. If students don't pass this test, they can't go into the service; they can't get into most universities; many options are closed to them. There are no alternatives to it except for those pertaining to accommodations for special education students; the state needs alternatives.

She reiterated that the Board of Education itself said this isn't working and now, with a different group of people on the board, they are saying they want to keep it because it is the only thing in place to hold students accountable. She disagreed strongly. She reminded the assemblage that the Association of Alaska School Boards is in favor of repealing this requirement and many of the superintendants have come forth to express their support. Every organization except the Board of Education wants it to be removed and the board wants to keep it "until when?" she asked.

9:54:07 AM

MR. JEANS replied that they want to keep it in place until a new accountability measure has been identified to replace it. The high-stakes nature of the high school qualifying exam is the glue that holds the whole system together. Without it, the state might as well go back to "seat time" whereby, if students spend

12 years in school they automatically get a diploma. The HSGQE is the final piece and it's all progressive, he insisted. Schools measure students' abilities in grades 3 through 8. Districts should be taking that information and helping students learn to read, write, and compute so at the end of their educational careers they will be able to pass the high school qualifying exam.

SENATOR DAVIS acceded that they should be able to pass; but Alaska has thousands of students who are not passing and never will. She said the state will continue to test kids in grades 3 through 8; SB 109 does not do away with those assessments. But she was amazed that he would refer to this exam as the "glue that holds the system together!" When the legislature implemented the exit exam, they thought they were doing the right thing and it did do some good; but it has not done what they intended it to do. She added that No Child Left Behind was not in place at that time, and NCLB will continue to provide some accountability.

[9:56:29 AM](#)

MR. JEANS insisted that removing the exit exam weakens the accountability system.

SENATOR DAVIS asked who else agrees with his position; she has heard no other testimony to support it.

[9:57:19 AM](#)

MR. JEANS said he believes the state board's position reflects that.

SENATOR DAVIS countered that she has read their position and it is not that strongly worded.

[9:57:39 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said it appears the committee needs to continue this discussion with the administration.

[9:57:52 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked Mr. Jeans about a comment made in testimony that drop-out rates have increased since implementation of exam. He said he would like to see some specifics on that. He was also surprised to hear testimony that the governor wants to remove the exam and asked Mr. Jeans if that is true.

Another issue the committee just spent time dealing with in a prior bill is the fact that so few kids are finishing college; one of the major responsibilities of the task force will be to find out why. Now they are talking about maybe going to end-of-course exams instead of exit exams and it seems to him they are essentially the same thing. He asked if Mr. Jeans could comment on that sometime in the near future.

[9:59:23 AM](#)

MR. JEANS said he will follow-up with the governor regarding the comment on his position. He referred the committee to Eric McCormick on the question of drop-out rates. As for remediation, he is really looking forward to the task force this summer; that is something they need to talk about and he thinks it feeds right into the governor's proposed scholarship program. That program hopes to increase the expectations of students in high school so they are better prepared and more successful at the university level. Nevertheless, he does not see the state moving toward an exit exam that measures college readiness.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked Mr. Jeans to join them Monday to discuss this further. [SB 109 was held in committee.]

[10:01:24 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Meyer adjourned the meeting at 10:01 p.m.