

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 1, 2010
8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Kevin Meyer, Co-Chair
Senator Joe Thomas, Co-Chair
Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair
Senator Donald Olson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Charlie Huggins
Senator Gary Stevens

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 237

"An Act extending the deadline for authorizing school construction debt reimbursed by the state."

- MOVED SB 237 OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL NO. 109

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

- MOVED SB 109 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 237

SHORT TITLE: SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION DEBT REIMBURSEMENT

SPONSOR(S): EDUCATION

01/22/10	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/10	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/01/10	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 109

SHORT TITLE: REPEAL SECONDARY SCHOOL EXIT EXAM

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) DAVIS

02/17/09	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
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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
01/29/10	(S)	Heard & Held
01/29/10	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/01/10	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105

WITNESS REGISTER

SAM S. KITO III, P.E., Technical Engineer and Architect
Facilities Engineer
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on SB 237.

LES MORSE, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information on student assessments and remediation for SB 109.

ERIK McCORMICK, Director
Assessment and Accountability
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information on high school graduation rates for SB 109.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:04:55 AM

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

SB 237-SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION DEBT REIMBURSEMENT

CO-CHAIR THOMAS announced consideration of SB 237, sponsored by the Education Committee.

8:06:33 AM

CO-CHAIR MEYER stated that SB 237 is a housekeeping measure extending the sunset on the school construction debt reimbursement program for three years, from November 30, 2010 to November 30, 2013. The state of Alaska school bond debt reimbursement is open to any municipality that has the capacity to bond, and is an important partnership between the local communities and the state. It allows the projects on the Department of Education and Early Development's approved list to be reimbursed up to 70 percent. Local governments share in the cost of construction projects which they might not be able to do without state matching funds.

He said it is difficult to say for sure how much it is going to cost the state because it depends upon the local municipalities' ability to get school bonds passed, but a spreadsheet in the committee members' packets provides a history of education debt reimbursements from fiscal year 1976 through 2009.

In closing, he observed that this has been a very successful program and the sunset has been extended many times.

8:09:06 AM

SAM S. KITO III, P.E., Technical Engineer and Architect, Facilities Engineer, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, said he administers approval for debt projects under the grant debt reimbursement program. He explained that the program before the committee provides for two levels of reimbursement for school districts that have the ability to issue bonds. The 70-percent reimbursement program is for school districts that are building facilities that fall within the department's space guidelines. If a school district has a project that does not meet the department's space guidelines, it can still bond for the project at a 60 percent reimbursement level.

He said the current program was authorized originally under HB 13, extended under HB 373 and has been going on for about six years. Under that program the DEED has authorized a total of approximately \$300 million worth of projects at both 70 and 60 percent.

MR. KITO said the fiscal note reflects an anticipated increase in the debt service. He provided the members with a graph detailing the legislature's payment on debt service for all of the debt programs that have been in place; the total debt service includes the projects on that graph as well as those authorized under HB 13 and HB 373.

[8:11:28 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON asked what might be brought up in opposition to this bill.

MR. KITO responded that the debt program is only available to districts that have access to municipal bonding capability. Some districts do not, such as the Regional Education Attendance Areas (REAA) and smaller municipal school districts that don't have a large enough tax base to take advantage of the debt program.

SENATOR OLSON asked what provisions are being made for the REAA and smaller districts.

MR. KITO said he does not know specifically, but does know that the Department of Education and Early Development has been working with the governor's office to try and address the issue of school construction projects on the department's school construction grant list.

[8:13:11 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS moved to report SB 237 out of committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s). There being no objection, SB 237 moved from committee.

SB 109-REPEAL SECONDARY SCHOOL EXIT EXAM

[8:13:57 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS announced consideration of SB 109.

[8:14:44 AM](#)

LES MORSE, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, spoke to the comprehensiveness of the state's assessment program and the remediation requirement under regulation for students who take the High School Qualifying Exit Exam (HSGQE). He then shared some statistics on student attendance since the exam has been in place.

He stated that testimony heard during the previous meeting, which indicated the governor is supporting this bill, is not correct. There was a misunderstanding regarding a statement issued by the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education stating their position, and while it is on state letterhead, it is clearly not the governor's position.

MR. MORSE said he would agree that tenth grade is too late to begin assessing students' progress, but the Department of Education and Early Development does not do that. Schools administer an assessment called "The Developmental Profile" in kindergarten. They don't do another statewide standardized test until third grade, but do administer the Standards-based Assessment (SBA) annually from third through tenth grades. It is almost statistically impossible for a student who is proficient on that assessment in all of those years not to be proficient on the high school qualifying exam.

He conceded that more frequent in-classroom assessments based on the curriculum would be more effective to improve student learning, but the state cannot hold students accountable with that type of assessment. A statewide end-of-year assessment is necessary for accountability. Under the existing statute the individual student accountability component is the HSGQE. The rest of the accountability system comprises primarily consequences applied to schools because of the Title 1 requirement "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB). Most of Alaska's comprehensive high schools are not Title 1 schools and don't deal with the heavier consequences of NCLB.

[8:18:53 AM](#)

MR. MORSE went on to address remediation plans. The state Board of Education passed a regulatory requirement that the school districts place students who do not pass the exam on the first try on remediation plans. A remediation plan was further defined by a judge in Moore vs. State as one designed for each individual student. The department monitors the plans in any district where the state has intervened. He added that the state has intervened in five districts; last year the department asked each of them to turn in every individual student remediation plan for review, to make sure they met the requirements. This year any district that was late turning in those plans or that did not have comprehensive remediation plans, has to turn in all of their plans. The department will have people on the ground to make sure teachers are following through.

[8:20:28 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON asked Mr. Morse how the judge's ruling differed from what was in place.

MR. MORSE said that prior to 2007, the department asked the districts to have general remediation plans for all students, but those did not address individual students. The judge clarified that districts must have plans that specifically identify where individual students need help and what is being done for them.

[8:21:34 AM](#)

ERIK McCORMICK, Director, Assessment and Accountability, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, said that 6 percent, or just about 3800 kids between seventh and twelfth grades, dropped out between July 1 and June 30, 2005. In 2009 it was 5.2 percent or 3100 kids, a reduction of 645 kids or 0.8 percent statewide. The dropout rate actually increased in the special education population between 2005 and 2008, but decreased in 2009. It was 5 percent among special education students in 2005; it rose to 6.4 percent in 2008, and dropped to 5.9 percent in 2009.

The graduation rate, which is the percentage of kids graduating in four years, was 6900 students or 61 percent in 2005; in 2009 8000 students or 67.5 percent graduated even though enrollments were declining. That means there were 1100 more diplomas issued than in 2005. Also in 2005, the graduation rate for the special education population was 39 percent, or 426 children with disabilities; that was up to 43.6 percent or 549 children in 2009, a 38 percent increase.

MR. MCCORMICK said that of the 1500 seniors in 2008 who did not receive a diploma but did complete the school year, over two thirds had passed the HSGQE. That leaves about 500 kids who did not receive a diploma and did not pass all three parts of the HSGQE.

He explained that the department followed a cohort of students through all four years of high school starting in their freshman year and found that they had a cumulative pass rate of over 90 percent. In other words, of the kids who took the test for the first time in the spring of their sophomore year, 90 percent of those who stayed in school through their senior year eventually passed all three parts of the HSGQE.

[8:25:26 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS requested that Mr. McCormick provide the committee with a copy of his statistics. She contended that the progress Mr. McCormick cited can continue even without the exit exam; not all of that improvement can be tied directly to the test.

MR. McCORMICK agreed.

MR. MORSE added that they can speculate, but he is confident there must be an accountability system in place that provides some consequence in case of failure.

SENATOR DAVIS said it would be up to the department to decide what other assessments they would use; she does not intend to get rid of assessments, just this exam. She reminded them that most states are moving away from a high-stakes test to other types of assessment tools.

[8:28:43 AM](#)

MR. MORSE answered that a number of states are going away from a single exit exam and toward end-of-course exams. Some of those states are requiring that students pass a certain number of end-of-course exams in order to obtain a diploma, so more testing is required and students still might not receive a diploma.

[8:30:12 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS disagreed.

MR. MORSE asserted that those states generally test in multiple courses at the end of each semester.

[8:30:20 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER questioned how many students attended school for all 12 years and did not obtain a diploma.

MR. MCCORMICK responded that he does not have the 2009 numbers with him but the vast majority of the 8000 graduates in 2009 would have made it through in four years.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked whether all of them passed the exit exam.

MR. MCCORMICK confirmed that they had to pass all three parts of the HSGQE in order to get a diploma.

CO-CHAIR MEYER repeated that he wants to know how many students went to school all four years and did not pass the exit exam.

MR. MCCORMICK replied that number was about 500 in 2008.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if those 500 kids finished school without a diploma.

MR. MCCORMICK replied that was correct.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if the state tracks what happens to those kids.

MR. MCCORMICK answered that the Department of Education cannot track individual students at this point, but has just entered into a memorandum of agreement with the Department of Labor (DOL) in cooperation with the University and is starting to do that analysis.

[8:32:25 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said that is one reason he favors the WorkKeys over the high school exit exam; some kids may not be able to pass the exit exam but certainly have competence in welding, mechanics, or other areas that don't necessarily require the same level of academic skill.

[8:33:12 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS assured Mr. McCormick that it is not the intent of the committee to lower any standards, but to prevent a situation that stigmatizes students who are more inclined to vocational or technical education. He stressed that the department needs to assess students earlier and remediate any problems in a timely manner.

[8:36:09 AM](#)

MR. MORSE clarified that the fiscal note laid out the cost of the exit exam as it was bid by the contractor. That contract covers the HSGQE and all of the standards-based assessments, so some cost-efficiencies may be lost in changing it. He was not sure what the savings would be. He also pointed out that under state regulation, a person can re-take the test indefinitely if he holds a certificate of achievement.

SENATOR DAVIS asked if students can come to the district after age 21.

MR. MORSE answered that students can come on campus to test but have to register with the district in advance. Most districts administer the test someplace separate from the other students; Anchorage has an adult testing center.

He reiterated that the department feels the exam should remain in place at least until it has a better picture of what is going on nationally with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is being renewed year-by-year.

In closing Mr. Morse emphasized that the HSGQE is a basic skills exam and includes very little algebra and geometry. He asserted that statistics show more students graduating today than before the exam requirement.

[8:40:04 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS asked Mr. McCormick to comment on the impact this test has on the school districts.

[8:40:24 AM](#)

MR. MORSE could not provide the costs, but said schools have to make significant changes to their high school programs for at least half a day on each of six days per year to accommodate the testing. Teachers have to be available in a ratio of 30:1 to administer the exam. The districts have to prepare and deliver the materials to all of their schools, and there is significant time involved in putting those materials back together for pickup by the contractor after testing.

[8:41:58 AM](#)

JOHN ALCANTRA, Government Relations Director, National Education Association (NEA) Alaska, said NEA continues to support SB 109. NEA represents 13,000 educators from Metlakatla to Barrow and all points in between. He agreed with previous testimony regarding the high cost of the test and pointed to the negative impact on students of days of instruction lost.

Regarding problems addressed in Moore vs. State of Alaska, he recalled that about 23 percent of schools at that time did not offer all of the algebra and geometry covered on the exit exam. He conceded that the problem had been addressed in part by distance learning, but said he still saw areas of concern.

In conclusion, he said that many students believe they no longer have to work as hard in school after passing the exit exam.

[8:45:12 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON asked what percentage of NEA Alaska's members support SB 109.

MR. ALCANTRA answered that support for the bill is unanimous among the 400 elected NEA delegates.

SENATOR OLSON was concerned that the State Board of Education has come out on one side of the issue and NEA-Alaska on the other.

MR. ALCANTRA admitted that he does not attend the State Board meetings and could not explain that at this time.

SENATOR OLSON asked how many of the 13,000 NEA members are teachers in the state of Alaska.

MR. ALCANTRA replied that NEA Alaska represents the vast majority of the 8500 teachers in the state. Valdez has about 75 teachers who are not members. Of its 13,000 members, about 8200 are teachers; 3000 are education support professionals such as secretaries, nurse's aides and others, and about 1500 are dues-paying members of NEA-Alaska's retired program. About 75 percent of NEA-Alaska's retired members are teachers and 25 percent are retired education support professionals.

SENATOR OLSON assumed the members include teachers in private institutions.

MR. ALCANTRA said they represent K-12 public school teachers only.

SENATOR OLSON re-stated that Alaska Pacific University (APU) professors are not included.

MR. ALCANTRA clarified that no university professors are members; they are represented by Alaska Public Employees Association / American Federation of Teachers (APEA/AFT).

[8:48:02 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if NEA-Alaska has looked at what might be used to replace the HSGQE.

[8:48:56 AM](#)

MR. ALCANTRA said NEA hasn't spent time on what would replace the test, but pointed out that the Standards-based Assessment, the adequate yearly progress goal required by NCLB, and the ESEA are already in place to help gauge how students are doing. He said NEA can look at what other states are doing and get the committee some information on other cost-effective alternatives.

[8:50:37 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON said he understands that this bill was introduced, in part, because employers complained that some of the students graduating with diplomas were not proficient in basic calculations or communication.

[8:51:17 AM](#)

MR. ALCANTRA said he does not think the exam has improved that; it results in teaching to the test. He believes the answer is having the best, most qualified teacher in front of every classroom.

[8:53:04 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON commented that support for repealing the exit exam seems to be widespread, even among parents of high-performing students. He asked Mr. Alcantra if that is correct.

MR. ALCANTRA said he has no polling data to offer, but he has always opposed the exam because of the amount of time it takes away from instruction.

[8:55:08 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER concluded that all of the testimony the committee heard from parents on Friday and earlier supports SB 109. Even the administration does not seem to be averse to the bill; they just want to be sure there is an efficient alternative in place. He saw no reason to hold the bill in committee.

[8:57:03 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS ended by saying that she does not see a need to wait for the federal government to decide what it will do; education is a local concern.

[9:00:43 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER moved to report SB 109 from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s). There being no objection, SB 109 was moved from committee.

[9:01:17 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Thomas adjourned the meeting at 9:01 p.m.