

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 14, 2011
8:01 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Kevin Meyer, Co-Chair
Senator Joe Thomas, Co-Chair
Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair
Senator Hollis French

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Gary Stevens

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Senator Cathy Giessel

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 9

"An Act relating to compulsory school attendance; and relating to the crime of contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

- HEARD AND HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 43

"An Act renaming the Alaska performance scholarship and relating to the scholarship and tax credits applicable to contributions to the scholarship; establishing the Alaska performance scholarship investment fund and the Alaska performance scholarship award fund and relating to the funds; making conforming amendments; and providing for an effective date."

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

SENATE BILL NO. 83

"An Act providing for payment and loan incentives to public school teachers for national board certification."

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 9

SHORT TITLE: RAISE COMP. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AGE/TRUANCY
SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) DAVIS

01/19/11 (S) PREFILE RELEASED 1/7/11
01/19/11 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/19/11 (S) EDC, JUD, FIN
02/14/11 (S) EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

TOM OBERMEYER, Staff
Senator Bettye Davis
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Read the sponsor statement for SB 9 and answered questions related to the bill on behalf of the sponsor.

LAURY SCANDLING, Assistant Superintendent
Juneau School District
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 9.

CARL ROSE, Lobbyist
Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 9.

CAROL COMEAU, Superintendent
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 9.

BRUCE JOHNSON, Executive Director
Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 9.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:01:23 AM

CO-CHAIR KEVIN MEYER called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:01 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators French, Davis, Co-Chair Thomas, and Co-Chair Meyer.

He explained that the new committee substitute for SB 43 was not ready for the committee meeting and would hopefully be taken up on Wednesday.

SB 9-RAISE COMP. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AGE/TRUANCY

[8:02:56 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced the consideration of SB 9.

SENATOR DAVIS said that this bill was heard during the previous legislative session but did not pass. She explained that lowering and extending the mandatory school age attendance for students has great benefits and it would not be a large hardship on the state for this to happen since 90 percent of children enrolled in school are already in kindergarten. She added that there are also allowances for a student, through parental consent, to stop attending school after the age of 16.

[8:05:04 AM](#)

TOM OBERMEYER, Staff to Senator Bettye Davis, Sponsor of SB 9, read the following sponsor statement:

This bill changes the Alaska compulsory school attendance ages from 7-16 to 6-18. At the same time it necessarily amends the criminal statute of contributing to the delinquency of a minor from the maximum age 16 to 18. The legislative intent of this bill is to require all students to start school earlier when their brains are growing and developing at a dramatic rate from birth to age 7 and to stay in school long enough to graduate. This bill allows earlier identification of children with learning disabilities and more time to take successful corrective action. This bill will not preclude parents from homeschooling children, or using charter or alternative schools, or any other of the twelve enumerated exceptions to compulsory education under AS 14.30.010(b), including completion of grade 12 or graduation from a secondary school before age 18.

The Alaska compulsory school age statute is out of date with modern educational practice and thinking. The law has not changed since territorial days when few children attended school beyond 8th grade or bothered to graduate, because most jobs did not require much education. The majority of Alaskan students today are already in school by age six and

many by the minimum age five. Head Start and prekindergarten programs are growing in popularity. The state already funds a pilot pre-kindergarten program and SB 6 this year proposes funding such a program statewide.

In 1852 Massachusetts became the first state to pass compulsory school attendance laws, and by 1918 all states required children to receive an education. Today every state and territory requires children to enroll in public or private education or to be home-schooled. Thirty-two states require students to begin their education by age 6 or 5 and to remain in school until 16 or older. Twenty-four states and American Samoa set the minimum at age 5. All children are required to continue their education into their high school years, with twenty states setting the compulsory cutoff age at 18; eleven at age 17; and nineteen states including Alaska and the Virgin Islands at age 16.

By increasing the school attendance age to 18, this bill should discourage earlier dropouts and reduce juvenile crime, teen pregnancy and other at risk behaviors. Studies have found that students without a diploma earn less than 75 percent of those with a diploma; they are more likely to live in poverty, go to jail, and have health problems.

The Department of Education and Early Development reported 8,245 students or 67.7 percent graduated in 2010 while 3,186 dropped out. The graduation rate of Alaska Native students was 55.4 percent, a group which experienced twice the dropout rate of all students. These rates remain well below the national average. The National Education Association's first priority two years ago in its "12-Point Action Plan for Reducing the School Dropout Rate" was to "mandate high school graduation or equivalency as compulsory for everyone below the age of 21." It reported:

"Just as we established compulsory attendance to the age of 16 or 17 in the beginning of the 20th century, it is appropriate and critical to eradicate the idea of 'dropping out' before achieving a diploma. To compete in the 21st century, all of our citizens, at minimum, need a high school education."

Opponents to increasing compulsory school age who are concerned about forcing students to be in the classroom against their will argue that these students may become disruptive and require more time and expense on behavior and truancy problems. This bill, however, is directed at more than just "seat time." It is to become part of a larger plan to motivate rather than punish or ignore students. It aims to help students stay in school long enough to graduate and go to college or better-paying jobs. Students will want to come to school, stay in school, and graduate, if academic problems are identified early and they are helped long before they dropout. For those student who want to work or are not as academically inclined, school districts are encouraged to continue accredited alternative schools and work-study programs to help students earn credits toward a diploma if they must work at the same time. Coupled with early efforts to retain, train, and graduate, this bill can bring hope and success to thousands of Alaskan students who otherwise might not stay in school long enough to graduate or develop to the best of their potential.

[8:10:34 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if a student could leave school at the age of 17 for military purposes.

MR. OBERMEYER answered the language of the bill does not address military exceptions. He said if there are exceptions it would be easy to identify for him.

SENATOR DAVIS added that a 17 year old would not be allowed to enter into military service without parental consent and that this would not interfere with the bill.

SENATOR FRENCH asked if the real aim of the bill is to keep children in school until their 18th birthday.

MR. OBERMEYER replied yes. He noted that another intent of the bill is to give support to schools and parents to work with students to remain in school and graduate. He said that there are many states that are currently changing their law to increase the mandatory age of attendance to 18.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if statistics are kept as to why students drop out in the state of Alaska.

MR. OBERMEYER replied that school districts keep track of students after they drop out.

SENATOR DAVIS noted that this question should be addressed to the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED).

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said in the past he has been concerned about students who are forced to stay in school and cause disruptions in the classroom. He noted that he was glad the bill alludes to correcting these issues at an earlier age.

MR. OBERMEYER said many of the students who are a disruption in school will not show up. He added that due to the lack of truant officers in the state, school districts are asked to monitor students who choose to stay at home.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked what the current penalties are for non-compliance.

MR. OBERMEYER referred the question to DEED. He replied that, in his understanding, students with a certain amount of unexcused absences are either suspended or expelled from school.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said that this does not seem like much of a penalty for a student who wants to drop out.

[8:20:04 AM](#)

LAURY SCANDLING, Assistant Superintendent, Juneau School District, stated strong support for SB 9. She said the bill is a "parent empowerment bill." Currently, parents have no backup from the state to encourage their child to continue with school until the age of 18. She questioned whether a 15 year old, on their 16th birthday, can make a decision that will impact the rest of their lives. She said the HSGQE [High School Graduation Qualifying Examination] is not the reason students drop out of school. Students can retake the exam as many times as they'd like, even after they have received their certificate of credit completion.

She said that "if we really care about all students being successful, not only would we raise the age for compulsory attendance to 18 but we would lower it to age 4." Children who enter kindergarten behind their peers have a one in eight chance of ever catching up. She asked the committee to stop giving youth permission to not attend school. This bill would allow students to have more choices after high school.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS agreed with the concept of keeping children in school and beginning at an earlier time. He asked what she has found to be the most successful program in keeping students in school.

MS. SCANDLING answered that there is significant data which shows that students who successfully complete the 9th grade are more likely to graduate from high school. She said that there are three important factors to keeping students in school. The first and most important factor is to create strong relationships with each individual student. She explained that many students, especially those of Alaska Native Heritage, feel disenfranchised or invisible in school. The second factor is to include curriculum that is engaging, relevant, and hands-on. Finally, it is important to have a strong academic advisor who will encourage students to return to school.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if she thought a fairly broad curriculum in high school is still needed.

MS. SCANDLING answered that the discussion should not be "either/or." High school is an opportunity for students to have the chance to explore a number of areas. The hands-on opportunities, which lead to the creation of real projects and products, are critical in keeping students engaged. Vocational-technical education is as rigorous today as one would find in a typical academic classroom.

[8:32:06 AM](#)

SENATOR FRENCH turned to the National High School Center fact sheet on high school dropout, which states: "Research has confirmed that the lowest-performing readers are most at risk of dropping out of high school." [A copy of this handout can be found in the bill packet]. He asked whether the school district has sufficient resources to concentrate on poor readers.

MS. SCANDLING replied that this is not surprising information. She said for students who are behind in reading, by third grade these students have a 1 in 8 chance of catching up. The long term benefits of early childhood education are extremely important. The expectation in high school is that students arrive prepared to learn subject content. However, many students are not. She guessed that, based on local data sets, 20 to 30 percent of students do not arrive in high school ready for 9th grade English or mathematics.

[8:35:18 AM](#)

CARL ROSE, Lobbyist, Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB), testified in support of SB 9. He commended Ms. Scandling on her testimony. He said the current law legitimizes students being able to leave high school. Currently the state is asking the school system to provide a curriculum with more rigor and relevance, yet students are allowed to leave school if they do not "want the rigor." The evidence shows that by 3rd grade if students are not prepared they will struggle throughout the rest of their school experience. He said as a former student who struggled, if he had been allowed to drop out, he might have considered it.

[8:39:22 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if the traditional expectation that a boy must work and support the family after the age of 16 still exists in rural Alaska.

MR. ROSE replied that for some of the young men in rural Alaska the expectation that they can pursue a subsistence life style is very seductive. This life style is very easy to do in the short term. However, those decisions will set these individuals on a trajectory that they may not be able to recover from in the long term. Young people, given the opportunity to take the easy or hard road, will choose the easy option.

[8:42:47 AM](#)

CAROL COMEAU, Superintendent, Anchorage School District (ASD), testified in support of SB 9. She said 16-years-old is too young to make the decision to drop out of school. She noted that the army is no longer accepting students without a high school diploma because there are enough recruits that it doesn't need to accept anyone with just a GED [General Education Diploma]. Many parents have emphasized the importance of having the law as a "backup" when encouraging their child to stay in school. Having students attend school by kindergarten or 1st grade will also make a difference. She emphasized that the district would like to see more children in prekindergarten as well.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked how the existing law is enforced.

MS. COMEAU replied that the school district tries to make a connection at home through home visits and communication with parents. She said ASD have also developed a lot of alternative programs for students. However, the district does not have truant officers and the police do not have time to "collect"

students. The overall strength of SB 9 would be the message it sends to students: that dropping out early is not ok.

SENATOR FRENCH asked if raising the compulsory age has increased graduation rates in other states.

MS. COMEAU answered that she did not know. She said, anecdotally, superintendents in other states have said that it works.

SENATOR DAVIS added that she has some information on this and would be happy to include it at the next hearing.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS noted that not only does the military require a minimum of a GED, apprentice programs also have these same requirements. Further, these programs also require additional testing.

MS. COMEAU concurred.

[8:49:16 AM](#)

BRUCE JOHNSON, Executive Director, Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA), testified in support of SB 9. He said ACSA membership consists of superintendents, principals, and business officials who are all strong supporters of early childhood education and keeping students in school for as long as possible. He spoke of his experience as a superintendent at Mt. Edgecombe High School.

[8:52:11 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER closed public testimony.

SENATOR DAVIS said she would like to give the public another opportunity to testify.

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced he would hold SB 9 in committee.

He said that the intent was to hold public testimony today and if there is anyone else who would like to testify they can do so by invitation.

SENATOR DAVIS said SB 9 will also be heard in the Senate Finance Standing Committee and the Senate Judiciary Standing Committee. She said that community, parental and state involvement is needed as a tool to keep students in school and encourage them to graduate. Some of the worse things that happen to children occur after school when they are unsupervised. She requested

that the committee hear from the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), on SB 9 at the following hearing.

CO-CHAIR MEYER concurred; he would like to hear from the administration on how this bill would be implemented. He also encouraged parents to contact the committee on their views of SB 9.

SENATOR DAVIS agreed. She noted that she has received parental input in the past and she would like to have more.

8:58:54 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Meyer adjourned the meeting at 8:58 a.m.