

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 25, 2011
8:01 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Kevin Meyer, Co-Chair
Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair
Senator Hollis French
Senator Gary Stevens

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Joe Thomas, Co-Chair

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Senator Cathy Giessel

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 8

"An Act relating to questionnaires and surveys administered in the public schools."

- HEARD AND HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 8

SHORT TITLE: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES AND SURVEYS

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) DAVIS

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|----------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| 01/19/11 | (S) | PREFILE RELEASED 1/7/11 |
| 01/19/11 | (S) | READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS |
| 01/19/11 | (S) | EDC, HSS |
| 02/16/11 | (S) | EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |
| 02/16/11 | (S) | Scheduled But Not Heard |
| 02/21/11 | (S) | EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |
| 02/21/11 | (S) | Heard & Held |
| 02/21/11 | (S) | MINUTE(EDC) |
| 02/25/11 | (S) | EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |

WITNESS REGISTER

THOMAS OBERMEYER, Staff

Senator Bettye Davis
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions related to SB 8 on behalf of the sponsor.

MICHAEL KEROSKY, Supervisor
Safe and Drug Free Schools
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

BRUCE JOHNSON, Executive Director
Alaska Association of School Administrators (AASA)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

WENDY HAMILTON, representing herself
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

BECKY JUDD, representing herself
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

JUNE SOBOCINSKI, Vice President
Community Action
United Way-Anchorage
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 8.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:01:33 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 Stevens, French, Davis, and Co-Chair Meyer.

SB 8-STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES AND SURVEYS

[8:02:04 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced the consideration of SB 8.

SENATOR DAVIS, sponsor of SB 8, said this bill has been around for quite awhile. It is an important piece of legislation because there are many agencies that use the information that is gathered from the [Youth Risk Behavior Survey]. SB 8 would make the survey more accessible to students.

8:04:12 AM

THOMAS OBERMEYER, staff to Senator Bettye Davis, sponsor of SB 8, introduced himself.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked for confirmation that a 60 percent participation rate was necessary for this survey.

MR. OBERMEYER replied yes. A 60 percent participation rate of the entire state is required to qualify for being included in the national statistics. This would allow Alaska to be compared to other states for youth risk behaviors. He stressed the importance of the state meeting that level of participation.

SENATOR STEVENS asked if there are other states that do not participate in this survey.

MR. OBERMEYER replied that he did not believe so.

SENATOR FRENCH said he had three questions. He asked what the level of participation across the nation is and where Alaska falls within this spectrum. Next, he asked if, by going from a passive to an active survey distribution, there is evidence of a higher rate of return.

SENATOR DAVIS replied that participation will increase if the way the survey is administered changes. She said that prior to the previous change, which changed the survey to require active parental consent, the participation rate was higher.

SENATOR FRENCH asked what year the state shifted to active parental consent.

MR. OBERMEYER answered around 1999.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked what the consequences are for not getting a 60 percent participation rate back on the survey.

MR. OBERMEYER replied that the consequences are significant. School districts will lack the information needed to help deal with certain youth risk behaviors. The agencies that can best

address these issues and allocate its resources to correcting risk behaviors need these statistics in order to get grants and continue with its operations.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if these agencies help in educating parents and students about the survey.

MR. OBERMEYER answered that the results and analysis from these agencies are very useful and are made accessible to both parents and schools.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said that one argument he has heard is that it costs the school districts a lot of money to inform parents about these surveys. He asked, since many agencies benefit from this information, whether the agencies could help the school districts in getting participation.

SENATOR DAVIS replied that these agencies are often non-profit organizations that don't have a lot of money. Some school districts do not have any trouble getting students to participate in this survey, others do. The goal of the bill is to make this survey equally available in all districts.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said in the past there has been a lot of resistance in forcing parents to participate.

SENATOR DAVIS explained that this bill does not force parents to participate or force children to take the survey. She added that on the day of the survey, a student could refuse to take it.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked for confirmation that this bill would require parents to opt out.

SENATOR DAVIS replied that the student can also opt out of the survey.

MR. OBERMEYER said that if a parent does not want their child to take the survey they can notify the school in writing. They are also given a number of notifications before the survey is administered. Also, on the day of the survey, students are told they do not have to take the survey or answer questions they might find objectionable. He added that the results of this survey have been used for years and there is no other means for getting this kind of information.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said that this information helps significantly. He asked for confirmation that even if the parent has not opted out, the student can still do so at any time.

MR. OBERMEYER replied yes.

[8:13:55 AM](#)

MICHAEL KEROSKY, Supervisor, Safe and Drug Free Schools, Anchorage School District, stated support for SB 8. He said he has coordinated the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) for the last 15 years in Anchorage. Because of the size of the Anchorage School District (ASD) student population it is incumbent that the district finds effective ways for students to participate and take this survey. He explained that ASD must successfully complete the YRBS in order for Alaska to get a valid sample.

He said he would like to focus on the process of gathering permission forms. He explained that, in his understanding, there are only two or three other states that require active parental consent in order to administer this survey. Of those states, Alaska is the only one that has been able to successfully complete the YRBS. The YRBS is administered every two years. In the fall of the year it will be administered, participation consent forms are distributed to students' parents. The survey is administered during second-period classes, and four or five classes from each high school are selected at random to take the survey. About 1,200 students are surveyed in the district, which is statistically a good representative sample of its 13,000 students. After the second-period classes have been selected the district goes through the list of parents that have said "yes" or "no" to the survey. The parents that have not replied to the letter of permission become the district's "target audience." These parents are sent another letter which asks for permission to distribute the survey to their child and includes information on the survey. The letter also includes a self-addressed envelope with a stamp on it.

[8:19:56 AM](#)

MR. KEROSKY said that this year about half of the students' parents, or about 600, had not responded to the letter of permission. He explained that ASD receives a relatively low response rate when something is requested by mail. Following the second letter of permission, only 10 percent of parents replied.

At this point students and school coordinators are given incentives to "hound" parents about getting the form back to the school. The arrangement is that those selected classes will

receive a pizza party if they get 100 percent of the forms returned. Coordinators will often receive a \$100 bonus as well. He reiterated that it does not matter what the form says, the district just wants to get the form. About 80 percent of these returned forms have been marked "yes." He explained that this has been the most effective way of getting these forms returned.

The entire system of trying to get a piece of paper back from parents is very difficult. He explained that ASD spends about \$30,000 every year the survey is distributed in order to get these permission slips back. With passive consent there would be no need for this elaborate infrastructure that has been created and it would be much cheaper to distribute the survey.

[8:25:14 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if he has used e-mail in order to send permission slips and reminders.

MR. KEROSKY replied that ASD is not using electronic methods because it is unsure whether it would be a legal form of receiving permissions. He explained that even calling parents and asking them to return the form does not work.

SENATOR STEVENS asked, in his experience, what the reasons are behind the percentage of parents who say no to this survey.

MR. KEROSKY answered that he isn't sure. He guessed that it was because some parents do not want their children thinking about this material. Suicide has been the most frequently addressed concern.

[8:28:17 AM](#)

CARL ROSE, Lobbyist, Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB), stated support for SB 8. He said he wanted to give the committee an example of how the data from the survey can be used and the positive impact it can have. He turned to the 2010 Alaska Initiative for Community Engagement AASB progress report. He said it is important to look beyond the problems that face young people and find out what makes them successful. This is done most successfully by creating healthy relationships with adults, which is a shared responsibility. In order to do this it is important to find out what the current status of youth is, and where it might be headed. This is done through the collection of data.

He turned to page 3 of the report, which included 40 behavioral developmental assets, which encourage positive decision making

in youth. He explained that many of Alaska's communities and families possess a number of these assets. However, data has shown that the average student has about 18 of the 40 assets readily available. He stressed that this is a strength-based effort, which focuses on healthy behavior and good decisions, not deficits.

Page 8 explained how change is measured in communities, organizations and schools. He said the evaluation results show higher proficiency rates in reading, writing and math and fewer risk behaviors occur in positive school environments. He said that policy makers, like this body, expect results and want research based programs for measuring change. This takes data.

MR. ROSE said AASB's mission is to advocate for youth. However, in order to do this the board has to know what students are thinking. He said that "the very best and the very worst of our society are in our schools." The results of the YRBS help identify what some of the risk behaviors for youth are and what some of the strength based remedies can be.

8:37:08 AM

SENATOR STEVENS said sometimes a survey can improve a behavior by making an individual realize that they are not doing what they would like to do. He asked if there is anything that he might add to this.

MR. ROSE answered yes, there is a correlation. He said it is important to understand what Alaska's youth are doing and what alternatives can be offered. He explained that from AASB's view, most kids appreciate when they are treated like an adult, are asked serious questions, and are offered real options. It is better to offer youth options for what they can do, rather than what they can't do.

SENATOR STEVENS noted that this is a counter to the thought that the ideas brought up by the survey will lead to destructive behavior.

MR. ROSE said these issues are pervasive throughout society. He reiterated that it is important to focus on what the strength based opportunities are for children.

8:41:20 AM

BRUCE JOHNSON, Executive Director, Alaska Association of School Administrators (AASA), stated support for SB 8. He said the YRBS survey is one way AASA believes it can secure good data. This

data is important as school districts attempt to make decisions about programs, counseling, and how to interact with kids. He explained that the more data the better, so that programs are not offered out of ignorance. He said that the members he represents at AASA would like to see more surveys filled out in a way that is easy but still protects the rights of parents. He said this bill has done a nice job in moving in that direction.

SENATOR STEVENS said that the cost for the Anchorage School District was about \$30,000. He asked Mr. Johnson what the estimated statewide cost of the current system is.

MR. JOHNSON replied that he did not have that information. He said that many school districts do not do anything about the survey because it is too challenging and costly to get responses back from parents. This occurs especially in some of the smaller districts. The data would be much more robust if they could administer this survey in another way.

[8:45:07 AM](#)

WENDY HAMILTON, representing herself, stated support for SB 8. She noted that she has been involved with social and health issues as a program manager for the Tobacco program and worked as a chemical dependency counselor. She said it is a tremendous cost, both in dollars and man power, to administer this survey. She explained that even after expending all of this man power and dollars the 60 percent participation rate is still not reached. She said CDC [Centers for Disease Control] did research a few years ago in different states and found out that the biggest reason parents did not return this permission form is because they lost the form or did not care. Those parents who do not want their children to take the survey will respond.

CO-CHAIR MEYER agreed that students bring a lot of paper home from school. He suggested that sending notifications out electronically could help.

[8:47:39 AM](#)

BECKY JUDD, representing herself, stated support for SB 8. She said she has worked with youth organizations and some state agencies in the use of the YRBS. Youth Organizations often need to look at, plan, and evaluate its services. It is important to know whether these organizations and programs are effective. The YRBS is one of the tools that have been used for evaluation and the data gathered from this survey is required by state agencies and national organizations in order to make a case for funding needs. She reiterated that the parents who have the most

objections to the survey are the ones that are most involved in their child's lives to begin with.

[8:50:50 AM](#)

JUNE SOBOCINSKI, Vice President, Community Action, United Way-Anchorage, stated support for SB 8. She said that the Community Action Program works with the community to achieve better results. She explained that in order to do this it raises private dollars to invest in programs using evidence-based practices that are accountable for results. The program also attracts public funding in order to do this same kind of work. The data from the YRBS is used to create a gauge on the need of an organization in order to attract important funds.

She explained that United Way of Anchorage, as a funder, distributes millions of dollars each year. This money is directed to non-profits in the context of community plans with specific goals and indicators to track progress. She explained that United Way wants to see substance abuse use go down, but it's not possible to know whether this is happening unless it has the results from the YRBS.

She noted that United Way-Alaska has seen success. From 2005-2009 the current alcohol use has gone down by 6 percentage points and binge drinking was reduced by 5 percentage points in Anchorage. This is the type of data that the YRBS can give organizations in order to become more accountable in how it use its resources. This bill will enable United Way-Alaska to get valid and reliable data.

[8:55:28 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER closed public testimony.

He said that the survey information in the document packet has been very helpful. He added that there is no way for legislators to know if a bill is effective without the use of surveys as well. He said he would like to discuss the survey itself at the following committee meeting.

SENATOR DAVIS reiterated that this bill has been around for a while and she has brought it up again because she recognizes the importance of changing the way the survey is administered. SB 8 does not have any accountability for the survey questions administered; this is done by CDC. She stressed that this bill is not meant to demean parents and encouraged the committee to pass it.

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced he would hold SB 8 in committee.

9:00:42 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Meyer adjourned the meeting at 9:00 a.m.