

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 28, 2011
8:03 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 8

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

- MOVED SB 8 OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL NO. 6

"An Act relating to providing a prekindergarten program within a school district; and providing for an effective date."

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA CHANCELLORS' PRESENTATION

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 8

SHORT TITLE: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES AND SURVEYS

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, 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)
02/25/11	(S)	Heard & Held
02/25/11	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/28/11	(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.

WARD HURLBURT, Director
 Division of Public Health
 Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
 Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Stated concern on SB 8.

TOM CASE, Chancellor
 University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA)
 Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced himself to the committee.

JOHN PUGH, Chancellor
 University of Alaska Southeast (UAS)
 Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Commented on the University of Alaska system and answered questions from the committee.

BRYAN ROGERS, Chancellor
 University of Alaska Fairbanks
 Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Commented on the University of Alaska system and answered questions from the committee.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:03:41 AM

CO-CHAIR KEVIN MEYER called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:03 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators French, Stevens, Davis, Co-Chair Thomas and Co-Chair Meyer.

SB 8-STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES AND SURVEYS

8:05:51 AM

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced the consideration of SB 8.

SENATOR STEVENS said he has received concerns from parents who want to make sure they receive the information about the survey ahead of time so they can write a written denial of participation for their child. He asked for an overview of the opportunities parents will have to receive information on the YRBS [Youth Risk Behavior Survey] and be able to take their children out of the program if they do not want them participating.

8:07:34 AM

THOMAS OBERMEYER, Staff to Senator Bettye Davis, sponsor of SB 8, replied that the notice requirements are located in section 2 of the bill. He explained that parents are first asked for permission in the fall when their child is enrolling for classes. At this time parents will sign a form that will or will not allow their child to participate in questionnaires and surveys.

SENATOR STEVENS asked how the parents get this information.

MR. OBERMEYER answered that there is a form available for parents to sign located at the table where their child is signing up for classes in the fall. He explained that the YRBS is only offered biannually in the spring. For this reason, another notice is given in writing to the parents before the survey is administered. This letter notifies them about the survey and instructs them to go online or contact the school for details. SB 8 expands on the notification requirements to parents. The main difference between the bill and the previous method of administering the survey is that parents who have an objection to the survey are asked to provide a written denial of participation [page 2, lines 14-18]. He noted that the student may also refuse to answer specific questions or participate in the survey itself.

He stressed that neither the teacher nor the school will have an opportunity to review the completed surveys. The surveys are sent directly to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

SENATOR DAVIS said that page 2 of the bill lays out the notification process for parents in detail. She reiterated that

on the day of the survey a student may refuse to take it. She stressed that this method has worked in the past, more so than the current method.

MR. OBERMEYER noted that Section 4 of the bill indicates that the notice of the survey to parents must be given no later than two weeks before the survey is administered.

SENATOR STEVENS said he understands the importance of this survey. He asked if a letter or an e-mail is sent directly to the parent about the survey.

SENATOR DAVIS replied that currently every school district is different in how it notifies parents about this survey. She said the bill will make all of the districts administer the notification in the same way.

MR. OBERMEYER said there is nothing in the bill that indicates whether the notice must be written or if an electronic method will suffice. Currently, the notification method is more or less up to the school districts.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said he feels comfortable with this bill because the student can choose not to take the survey.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said the objection to this bill has always been that the parent has to be pro-active in order to stop their child from taking the YRBS. He agreed that he does not have a serious problem with this bill because students can opt out of the survey.

[8:18:36 AM](#)

WARD HURLBURT, Director, Division of Public Health, Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), stated concern for SB 8. He said he agrees that the proposed law would help obtain important information. However, the survey does get to sensitive and personal information about young people. He explained that Governor Parnell has a deep commitment to strengthening Alaska's families and the current policy does strengthen families and the role of parents more than the opt-out provision contained in SB 8.

SENATOR FRENCH asked if he knows how the survey works.

MR. HULBURT replied that he does not know all of the details, but he is familiar with the survey and has read the background material.

SENATOR FRENCH asked if he listened to the hearing that the committee held last Friday on the subject.

MR. HULBURT answered yes.

SENATOR FRENCH asked if he knew that the survey is filled out anonymously and the information is compiled with complete anonymity.

MR. HULBURT replied yes.

SENATOR FRENCH asked if he knows how important the information obtained from this survey is in order for policy makers to have an idea of what is happening to the youth of Alaska and the nation.

MR. HULBURT replied yes. He agreed that the information from the survey is important to DHSS in regards to both programs in Alaska and obtaining federal grants.

SENATOR FRENCH said the current policy results in low compliance rates. He asked how not knowing what is happening with Alaska's youth strengthens families.

MR. HULBURT answered that concerns about particular questions should be addressed to CDC. He explained that the questions are intrusive and can be read in a way that makes a presumption of certain kinds of activity that could upset parents. He said while there are children that engage in negative activities, there are many young people who do not. He said he respects Governor Parnell's concerns and it is consistent with his support of strong families and the engagement of parents.

[8:23:42 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if there are specific areas of the survey that should be deleted or approached in a different manner.

DR. HULBURT replied he does not want to mislead the committee. The questions have to be of sensitive origin in order to get the information needed. He noted that this is not a part of the bill or the sponsor's intent. However, the way the survey is presented is meant to make students feel comfortable so they will answer questions honestly. He explained that sometimes this can come across with a presumption that they may be engaging in behaviors that many students do not engage in.

SENATOR DAVIS said she appreciates the statement that he has made. She said, as the head of Public Health, this particular survey must be of importance to the department and allows it to receive more federal funds. She asked whether changing the way the survey is administered will be helpful in this light.

DR. HULBURT answered yes. This information is important to the department and to society. He said he has not heard anything from the governor's office which indicates that this information is not important. The difference is that the governor believes the "opt-in" provision ensures parents' engagement in the survey. He stressed that this in no way lessens the importance of the information or obtaining that information.

[8:28:01 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS said, in regards to the testimony heard last Friday, it was stated that this survey is important and the change that this bill offers would be a better way to get the material needed. Not only are school districts putting their own money into this survey, but the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) is also doing so. She said that concerns on what the survey addresses and whether the questions need to be changed should be addressed to CDC. She noted that CDC does review the YRBS and change it from time to time. The issue of "strengthening families" is located in this bill, which allows parents to opt their child out of the survey. She said she would not introduce a bill that would harm families. She emphasized that most parents do not return the permission form because they are too busy, not because they object to the survey itself.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said he voiced his concerns on the survey on Friday in regards to some of the questions. However, there are important questions on the survey that allow law makers to receive feedback on whether their bills addressing these topics are effective. He said that there are several ways out of the survey if people find it offensive and he is comfortable moving the bill.

[8:31:44 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS moved to report SB 8 from the committee with individual recommendations and attached zero fiscal note. There being no objections, SB 8 moved from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

[8:32:04 AM](#)

At ease from 8:32 a.m. to 8:34 a.m.

University of Alaska Chancellors' Presentation

8:34:23 AM

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced the next order of business was to hear a presentation by the chancellors of the University of Alaska (UA) system.

8:35:26 AM

TOM CASE, Chancellor, University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), said through all of his military and university experience he has come to believe how important education is as a pathway for individuals and the future of the state. He said he is delighted to be the incoming chancellor at UAA and to be working with his new colleagues.

8:36:47 AM

JOHN PUGH, Chancellor, University of Alaska Southeast (UAS), thanked the committee for their past support. He said there are some concerns about the state of their university system, especially about graduation rates. He noted that some of the programs that the university system has have made a difference in these rates. There has been a steady increase of Alaskan high school students entering the UA system and postsecondary education in the state. He noted that the UA system also has an improving freshman retention rate and good graduation rates within specific programs. He explained that in the programs where the university has increased its resources, the number of graduates has increased. UA has also expanded its workforce training area.

Finally, UA has improved its distance education program. Last year 40 percent of the students at UAS took at least one electronic learning course and the university continues to make improvements in this area.

He recognized the problem of six year graduation rates in Alaska and the UA system is working on this.

8:40:40 AM

BRYAN ROGERS, Chancellor, University of Alaska Fairbanks, thanked the committee for its support, in particular for two significant investments. First for the largest capital investment in higher education in the state's history, which will improve the facilities for instruction, research, and student life. And, second for approving the merit and needs-based scholarship aid, which will make a significant difference

in the UA system's timely graduation rate. He said the chancellors sit before the committee representing three institutions but one system, which collaborate, cooperate, and sometimes compete.

8:43:13 AM

SENATOR STEVENS thanked them for their years of service to the university system. He said there are three main issues with higher education that the legislature sees: remedial education, advising and counseling, and scholarships. He said that with remedial education many of the issues are within K-12 and students are graduating who are not prepared to compete on a college level. Because the university system is an open university, it falls on the university to prepare these students. He asked how students can be better prepared for college.

MR. PUGH replied that there are a number of things that can be done. First, is to work with the K-12 system. The university system does this through a summer program that helps in remediation and motivates students. UA also provide placement testing to students their sophomore year in high school in order for students and parents to recognize the steps they still need to take in order to be prepared for college. He noted that the required high school exit exam does not tell students they are ready for college, rather that they have met some minimum standards. The scholarship program that the legislature has been working on will make a difference because of the higher expectations it insinuates.

In terms of remediation UAS is going to reintroduce a "bridge program" for students who have to remediate before they can apply to a program at the university. He said that UAS had this program in years past and it should not have been abandoned. All of the institutions have similar programs.

Another aspect is mandatory advising for all freshman students. UAS plans to include this requirement by next fall, which will include not only freshman but any students who are below a 2.0 [Grade Point Average].

MR. ROGERS added that UAF is offering summer enrichment programs that are designed for high school and junior-high school students. The Rural Alaska Honors Institute takes sophomores, juniors, and seniors and gives them the college experience in order to spark their interest and realize what it will take to go to college. He said that the High School Graduation

Qualifying Exam has set a standard for high school graduation. However, there is no level that has been set for college preparedness. The scholarship bill creates a financial incentive for students to work harder. He explained that students respond well to being pushed a little and less remediation is needed.

He noted that for admission into a baccalaureate program at UAF, students are required to be prepared. If they are not, the student is admitted to school and may take courses, but they will not be admitted into a program until they have shown they are successful. He explained that part of the reason the university system has a poor six-year graduation rate is that too many students have to spend the first year or more getting prepared.

8:51:18 AM

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said in looking at the scholarship program the committee found that this is an entire system, beginning in kindergarten or prekindergarten. He said that teacher preparedness or teacher education programs would be important in order to make sure that issues are recognized and remediated early on. He asked, with that in mind, what impact this will have on teacher preparedness and education.

MR. PUGH answered that one of the critical issues is learning to read. UAS has a specialized reading program which brings the latest technologies and theories on reading to new and returning teachers and students through a summer academy. The school district sends elementary and middle school students who are behind in reading to this academy during the summer to work with school district faculty. He noted that, across the university system, it has tried to do the same with math education; though the program is not quite as strong as the reading and literacy program at this point.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said there are a lot of comments from rural legislators regarding the curriculum requirements for high school students to qualify for the new scholarship award. He asked if the university system has given feedback to the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) with regard to this concern and what is being found on the university level.

MR. ROGERS answered that there is a good awareness of this challenge on the department level. He said that the university system can make a difference by looking at ways to extend science and math education via distance courses to rural schools in order to fill that gap.

MR. PUGH agreed. He said there are two critical pillars: advising and counseling and a balance between needs-based and merit-based scholarships. He said that UA is on the right track in having that balance through this scholarship, which is buttressed by a high focus on counseling and advising.

[8:58:30 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said there has been talk of expanding the university system to include a law school or medical school. He explained that one concern he has with this is that there are some schools or colleges in place already that are not fully expanded, for example the engineering program. He asked if petroleum and mechanical engineering is offered at UAF.

MR. ROGERS replied yes. UAF offers petroleum, mining, geological, electrical, computer and civil engineering. UAA offers civil engineering and a bachelor of science in engineering with particular concentrations. He explained that in both cases they have embarked on a six-year plan to double the number of engineering graduates. He said UAF should reach that goal by 2014, but are currently facility constrained. However, thanks to the efforts of the legislature last year, UAF does have the funds for planning the next increment of engineering facilities.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said he is aware of the facility constraints. He said it concerns him that the state is still bringing too many petroleum engineers from outside the state.

CO-CHAIR MEYER noted that the committee will take up SB 6 at the following meeting.

[9:02:29 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Meyer adjourned the meeting at 9:02 a.m.