

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 25, 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. 6

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

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 6

SHORT TITLE: PREKINDERGARTEN SCHOOL PROGRAMS/PLANS

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) DAVIS, FRENCH

01/19/11	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/7/11
01/19/11	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/19/11	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/28/11	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/28/11	(S)	Scheduled But Not Heard
03/14/11	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/14/11	(S)	Scheduled But Not Heard
03/25/11	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented SB 6 and answered questions on behalf of the co-sponsor.

CYNTHIA CURRAN, Director
Division of Teaching and Learning Support
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Summarized The Alaska Pilot Pre-Kindergarten Project (AP3) and answered questions of the committee.

PAUL SUGAR, Education Specialist
Division of Teaching and Learning Support
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions of the committee regarding the Alaska pilot pre-kindergarten project.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:03:09 AM](#)

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

SB 6-PREKINDERGARTEN SCHOOL PROGRAMS/PLANS

[8:03:36 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS announced the consideration of SB 6.

He reminded the committee of the presentation given by Bill Millet on March 9, 2011, which addressed the economic impact of early childhood education. He noted that much of the testimony that the Senate Education Standing Committee has heard over the last few years has been about the importance of early education.

[8:04:49 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS, co-sponsor of SB 6, said this is an important bill that needs to be addressed. SB 6 is here solely to begin the process of providing prekindergarten to all schools in the state. She noted that the bill does not imply that districts will have to provide all of the services that will be provided, since there are some programs that are currently working in small towns and villages. She stressed that SB 6 is not trying to get rid of Head Start, Best Beginnings, or Parents as Teachers; the intention of the bill is to put prekindergarten into statute as part of the foundational formula. The money

addressed in the attached fiscal note, which is based off of the number of children the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) believes would be in the program, is not needed for the first year to begin planning. She emphasized that prekindergarten works and Alaska is one of the only states that doesn't have a pre-K program in school districts.

8:06:46 AM

SENATOR FRENCH, co-sponsor of SB 6, said that there is very strong public support for prekindergarten. He informed the committee that the number three item mentioned from individuals who called in to comment on the operating budget was for requests to add funds for early learning and Best Beginnings. Another item that was frequently commented on by the public was an increase in funding to Head Start. He said "if you add those two together they come out ahead of every other single item mentioned by the public in talking about the operating budget." He said that he believes there is no better way to "bend the curve" on the outcome of a young child's life than to give them early learning opportunities.

He read the following quote from a pamphlet put out by the National Scientific Council Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, entitled The Science of Early Childhood Development:

The basic principles of neuroscience and the technology of human skill formation indicate that later remediation for highly vulnerable children will produce less favorable outcomes and cost more than appropriate intervention at a younger age.

He continued by discussing some facts that were put out by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota [fact sheet located in the document folder for the March 9, 2011 Joint Education Committee meeting]. One of the facts included was that children who go to preschool are more likely to graduate from high school. He said "what are we planning to do about the horrific drop-out rates that we have in Alaska?" He noted that he has not seen a concrete way to increase the state's level of high school graduates. Other facts included were that children who go to preschool are more likely to earn a higher degree later in life, are less likely to commit a violent crime, and are more likely to be self-reliant as adults. He reminded the committee of the presentation given by the university's Board of Regents [during the Joint Education Committee meeting on February 23, 2011] when the regents discussed the amount of time and money that is being

spent on remedial education. He suggested that this money be spent on early learning so that the need for remedial education can possibly be eliminated.

[8:11:40 AM](#)

At ease from 8:11 a.m. to 8:13 a.m.

[8:13:49 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER moved to adopt CSSB 6(), labeled 27-LS0058\B, as the working document. Hearing no objection version B was before the committee.

[8:14:28 AM](#)

THOMAS OBERMEYER, staff to Senator Davis, co-sponsor of SB 6, read the following sponsor statement:

Pre-K programs are growing in popularity across the country. Developmental research, neuroscience, and program evaluations have found that a child's experiences from birth to age five shape the brain's architecture and influence later life outcomes. SB 6 provides for a prekindergarten (Pre-K) program within Alaska school districts for students four and five years of age. Parents are not required to enroll their children in a Pre-K program. School districts are not required to initiate Pre-K programs but they must be supported in funding and development if they do. Students who are enrolled in a prekindergarten program will be counted in the "average daily membership" count for foundation formula funding.

Early education programs are one of the best public investments available to states. Over 40 states and the District of Columbia offer state-funded prekindergarten and at least 17 states have provided funding supplements to Head Start. Early childhood policies vary from state to state, as well as program options, such as private child care, preschools, federally funded Head Start, and state prekindergarten programs. State leaders are responding to the realities of today's working families, federal and state policy pressures, and demands of the No Child Left Behind Act. More women with young children are in the workforce than in previous decades, and many children spend full workday hours in the care of others. For every dollar invested in Pre-K, there is an estimated \$4 to \$9 return to society in higher

graduation and employment rates, higher earnings, less crime, less need for special education services, less use of a public welfare systems, and better health.

Alaska not only has the benefit of building on a long history of successful early education programs for the last decade, but it now has the experience and results of the Alaska Pilot Prekindergarten Project (AP3) funded by the Legislature in 2009. Year one of the Pilot Pre-K Project found high numbers of children exceeding expected growth. While there is still extremely high need for the majority of children coming to the Pilot Pre-K Project behind typically-developing peers, this program shows what can be done with unprecedented levels of cooperation, coordination, and collaboration between Head Start programs and the school districts which helped in alignment, transition, common planning and training. SB 6 expands on the \$2 million start up funding in the Pilot Prekindergarten Project in an effort to make prekindergarten a reality and available to all Alaska children statewide.

[8:18:14 AM](#)

MR. OBERMEYER explained that there were districts that were concerned about whether this program would be required. Version B clarifies the optional nature of the prekindergarten program, which was not explicit within the original bill. Further, the drafter, in drafting this bill, found inconsistencies to the existing statutes that were passed in 2008. Version B amended AS 14.03.060(e) by deleting the prohibition on including pre-elementary students in the count under AS14.17; this would provide for part time inclusion of these students for funding purposes. He explained that decisions pertaining to program curriculum, teacher qualifications, and part-time funding status for prekindergarten are all delegated to DEED under version B.

[8:21:38 AM](#)

MR. OBERMEYER walked the committee through a brief sectional analysis of version B.

Section 1 was a description of an elementary school to include a prekindergarten program.

Section 2 established that an elementary school would consist of an optional prekindergarten program.

Section 3 amended the age requirement to include four- and five-year-olds who attend a prekindergarten program.

Section 4 added a new subsection which reads:

(g) A child who is four or five years of age on or before September 1 following the beginning of the school year and who is under school age may enter a public school prekindergarten program.

Section 5 indicated that DEED would exercise general supervision over public schools: page 3, lines 17-18 added "and district prekindergarten programs" to include prekindergarten programs under the department's supervision.

Section 6 included a minor change on page four, line 31, which added "of age." Page 5, lines 1-2 added ", and a prekindergarten program for children four to five years of age that is provided by a school district." He explained that this indicates, he believes, that it is not mandatory for a school district to have a prekindergarten program.

Section 7 provided regulations for the implementation of a prekindergarten program by a district, using the model curriculum developed by DEED under AS 14.07.030(13).

Section 8, page 5, lines 29-31 added ", and except as provided in (c) of this section, a prekindergarten program provided by a school district for students four and five years of age". He noted that subsection (c) is located on page 6, lines 8-10.

MR. OBERMEYER reiterated that the bill in its original form did not include the prekindergarten children in the average daily membership. The changes made in version B made sure that this age group would be recognized in statute.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked for confirmation that the prekindergarten program is optional, not mandatory for districts. In regards to the funding in Section 9, line 10, he asked whether this funding is referring to state and federal money.

MR. OBERMEYER replied that he is unsure whether the funding in this section is referring to private school or federally chartered schools. He said that DEED could answer this question better than he could.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if the committee would be hearing from the various superintendents.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS replied not today, but it is his intention to hear from them.

CO-CHAIR MEYER explained that the reason he asked is because most schools are overcrowded. He said he does not know what this bill would do by opening up the school for 3 to 5 year-olds.

MR. OBERMEYER noted that he spoke with Superintendent Carol Comeau with the Anchorage School District, who indicated that she will be in Juneau through next Tuesday and might be able to answer some of the committee's questions.

[8:29:43 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS added that many of the schools may be maxed out in numbers, but it would be left up to the various school districts to decide what programs would be implemented and how this would be done. She noted that not all of these programs need to take place within the school facilities as long as the requirements laid out by DEED are met. She said that there are some school districts that have the space and would like to have this program; SB 6 gives districts the option.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said he is not concerned with that, but it may be a concern to some of the superintendents. He explained that he wants to make sure that the bill works in conjunction with the superintendents. He noted that there are some public schools, he believes, that already offer some pre-K programs.

SENATOR DAVIS said some of the Title I schools have a pre-K program.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said that he would like to hear from superintendents about any current prekindergarten programs currently available in schools. He asked for confirmation that Head Start would still continue under this bill.

SENATOR DAVIS replied yes.

CO-CHAIR MEYER said that he thinks this is a good program and he wants to make sure that all of the existing programs can be coordinated with this one.

[8:33:23 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said it seems, to him, that the curriculum of the program is extremely important and he would like to hear about what is being covered from the experts. For example, he heard that there was a prekindergarten Athabaskan immersion program and he questioned whether this takes students forward. He noted that the assumption is prekindergarten prepares children step-by-step for success in life. He asked where the committee can get this type of information and how school districts will pay for the program.

8:35:25 AM

CYNTHIA CURRAN, Director, Division of Teaching and Learning Support, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), said with regard to preschools that already exist in the state, under special education law (IDEA) schools are required to have programs for special needs children.

She explained that in regards to the Athabaskan culture course Senator Stevens referred to, one of the districts used this course as an add-on to the curriculum, Open Court. The Open Court curriculum is in use throughout the state for reading and literacy for prekindergarten through sixth grade.

8:37:33 AM

MS. CURRAN turned to a summary of the report, The Alaska Pilot Pre-Kindergarten (AP3) Project. [The summary and the full report are located in the document packet.] She reminded the committee that the legislature provided DEED \$2 million for the preschool pilot project and there has been a lot of success with it. Students came into the project substantially lower in skill ability compared to their peers nationally. She said "we have seen great growth, but we also know we have a lot more to do in order to close all of the gaps." One of the caveats in applying for the funding, she explained, was the district needed to partner with the entities that were already providing services within the district area.

She noted that within the Division of Teaching and Learning Support it is believed that more students will graduate from high school when programs work together and all students come to school ready to learn.

She explained that the districts and programs used the funding from AP3 in a variety of ways. Some districts added new classrooms with certified teachers and others enhanced existing programs. She added that some of the districts were able to hire early childhood experts with some of the funding as well.

Page 2 included a list of where the programs were located in the state. She explained that DEED also granted money to an outside entity to perform the pre- and post-assessments using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS). She noted that the results of these assessments can be located in the document. ECERS assessed not only child outcomes, but program outcomes. The child outcomes were measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), which provides information on vocabulary and receptive language development. The Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL-3) was also used and gave information on three areas of school readiness: motor development, concept development, and language development.

She continued that the first chart [titled PPVT Expected Growth] on page 3 showed that 72 percent of the children assessed had more months of growth than the number of months between the assessments. The second chart on page 3 [titled PVT Age Equivalent Growth] showed that 31 percent of the children ended the project at or above a typically developing peer on a national level.

[8:41:36 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked for clarification on what the 72 percent statistic included.

MS. CURRAN replied the orange color in the first chart shows the percentage of children that showed less growth than was expected.

SENATOR STEVENS asked for confirmation that the rest of the children showed more growth.

[8:42:19 AM](#)

PAUL SUGAR, Education Specialist, Division of Teaching and Learning Support, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), replied that 25 percent of the children showed lower growth than expected, 3 percent showed the expected amount of growth, and the remaining 72 percent of the children showed greater growth for the time between the two assessments.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if the programs were developed by or in conjunction with DEED or if the individual districts developed the programs.

MS. CURRAN replied that each district was allowed to choose a curriculum to use, however it needed to align with the Early Learning Guidelines.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked, with regard to the first chart on page 3, whether an assessment was done for each individual program in order to figure out which one was the most effective.

MS. CURRAN replied that DEED has that information and can provide it to the committee.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked if the individual curriculums used by each program could be included with this information as well.

MS. CURRAN answered yes.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked how districts were chosen to participate in the pilot prekindergarten project.

MS. CURRAN replied that a request for applications (RFA) was issued and districts were required to meet certain criteria. At the beginning of the process 24 districts showed interest in applying and 12 districts ended up applying. She explained that early childhood experts from DEED and the University of Alaska read the applications, scored them against a rubric, and determined which applications met the criteria.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS noted that more information on the application process would also be helpful.

[8:46:11 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said when doing a pilot project it is important to see what worked and what didn't. He said that this is a topic that he hopes will be discussed.

MS. CURRAN noted that the report would provide the committee with a lot of that information and DEED can also provide a more succinct form of the data. She explained that the department is looking into things that did work and if the pilot program continues to be funded the department will be helping districts make different choices if its current program is not working. She added that as more districts apply for the program, the criteria would be different due to the knowledge that has been gained from the project thus far.

She continued with the report summary. The first two charts on the top of page 4 showed that 17 percent of the children moved

from the bottom two quartiles to the top two quartiles in overall percentages of growth. She reminded the committee that students came into the program with significant needs. She said "we know we are closing the gaps. We know there is more to do."

She referred to the "State Dial-3 Total Score Percentages" charts on the bottom of page 4. She explained that, when compared nationally, the total scores showed, once again, that a vast amount of the children entered the project in the bottom half of the assessment [see the graph titled AP3 Dial 3 Total Score Percentages (Fall)]. By the end of the year 52 percent finished scoring in the top half [see the graph titled AP3 Dial 3 Total Score Percentages (Spring)].

[8:49:04 AM](#)

SENATOR FRENCH said that, to his understanding, both sets of graphs on page 4 compare how the children looked at the beginning of the program in the fall and at the conclusion of the program in the spring. He said that these are troubling graphs to look at, with 72 percent of the children beginning the project in the fourth quartile. He said "that's three-quarters of our kids coming into a program that are at the bottom of the scale as far as their abilities..." He noted that it is important to recognize that the program has moved an enormous amount of children out of the bottom quartile by the spring. He explained that it was these numbers that was encouraging for him in regards to the pilot project.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS referred to the chart on the bottom of page 3, which states "The following chart illustrates the students' growth in relation to an age-equivalent typically-developing child on a national level." He asked if this caveat can be assumed for the graphs referred to on page 4.

MS. CURRAN replied yes.

SENATOR FRENCH asked what the pie graphs on the top of page 4 are measuring in comparison to the bottom of the page 4.

MS. CURRAN replied that, with regard to the pie graphs on the top of the page, PPVT measures the child's receptive and vocabulary development.

SENATOR FRENCH asked what receptive means.

MS. CURRAN replied what a child understands versus what a child produces or, in other words, the thinking process. She gave an example of how this might be determined and evaluated.

SENATOR FRENCH asked what the Dial-3 results measured in the bottom pie charts.

MS. CURRAN answered areas of school-readiness. This included motor development, concept development, and language development.

She noted that Alaska's children scored highest in motor development during the pre- and post-assessment [shown in the two pie graphs at the top of page 5, titled State Dial-3 Motor Score Percentages].

She said in regards to concept and language development [see the graphs titled State Dial-3 Concept Score Percentages], 60 percent of the children began the program in the bottom quartile. She noted that there was a significant amount of movement by the end of the year, with only 38 percent of the children remaining in the fourth quartile.

She continued on page 6 regarding the language scores. She pointed out that 87 percent of the children entered the program in the bottom two quartiles and 35 percent finished the program in the top two quartiles.

[8:54:28 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN explained that the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) on page 7 measured what the program's environment was like for the children and for the adults. The top part of the table included space and furnishings, language-reasoning, activities, interaction, program structure, and parents and staff. She explained that all of these things relate to the quality of a program. The bottom table noted the improvement that was made in the state; the project showed almost one full point of growth in the first year. She noted that this is highly significant with regard to this measurement.

She continued that DEED also looked at outcomes for the state. She explained that through this program the department has been able to help districts develop its capacity to work together, so that there is a concerted effort in the area of early childhood. She explained that ECERS has been used in the past, but it has been on a voluntary basis and used mostly in urban areas. Through the Pilot Pre-Kindergarten Project the department was

able to broaden the use of ECERS and found out that it can be used in a variety of areas. The information DEED has gathered will help move early childhood education forward in the state.

8:57:33 AM

SENATOR STEVENS asked how many hours a day a child spends in preschool.

MR. SUGAR replied that DEED provided a series of standards that were set during the RFA, which allowed communities flexibility in making that decision. The general guideline was that preschool should be no less than 14 hours per week and no more than 5 hours per day. He noted that most of the programs are around three hours per day.

SENATOR FRENCH said one of the constant themes that will be brought up and where resistance will be met during the prekindergarten discussion will be cost. He said that with the pilot prekindergarten project the cost per child is about \$6,200. He asked if there are economy of scales to be had and where the financial pitfalls and benefits are.

MR. SUGAR replied that the cost varies from place to place. He explained that the largest number of classroom proposals that DEED received came from the most remote sites, so that the economy of scale was lost. He noted that the cost of the pilot program correlates closely with schools in that it varies depending on the location and he would not expect the cost per child to differ greatly with a larger population of students.

SENATOR FRENCH asked if the pilot programs hired new teachers.

MR. SUGAR replied that it was a mix, some hired new individuals, while others incorporated existing staff.

9:01:18 AM

SENATOR FRENCH asked if these costs are similar to what Head Start costs per student.

MR. SUGAR answered that the cost is similar and possibly slightly less. He explained that through a partnership and collaboration approach DEED was able to leverage a larger number of groups and dollars from each group.

SENATOR DAVIS asked if DEED could make a chart for the committee that shows the amount a school district participating in the

prekindergarten program would receive if program was part of the foundation formula.

MS. CURRAN replied yes.

SENATOR DAVIS asked what "Thread" is.

MS. CURRAN replied Thread is the state's child care resource and referral.

SENATOR DAVIS asked for confirmation that this is the organization called Thread.

MS. CURRAN replied yes. She explained that DEED contracted through Thread to do the assessments.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked for confirmation that Thread used to be the Child Care Connection.

MS. CURRAN replied yes.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked what the difference is between Thread and Best Beginnings and whether the two groups are providing different services. He said his question can wait until next week to be answered.

[SB 6 was held in committee.]

[9:04:38 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Thomas adjourned the meeting at 9:04 a.m.