

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

March 5, 2012

8:02 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. 197

"An Act establishing a grant program in the Department of Education and Early Development for achieving excellence in public schools."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 197

SHORT TITLE: GRANT PROGRAM FOR SCHOOLS

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) THOMAS

02/10/12	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/10/12	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/29/12	(S)	EDC WAIVED PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE, RULE 23
03/02/12	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/02/12	(S)	Scheduled But Not Heard

WITNESS REGISTER

MURRAY RICHMOND, Staff
Senator Joe Thomas
Co-Aide
Senate Education Standing Committee
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced SB 197 for the sponsor.

MIKE BRAUNER, Superintendent
Nome Public Schools
Nome, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed reasons for dropouts in school and supported SB 197.

LES MORSE, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Described school district funding streams and did not have a position on SB 197.

CYNTIHIA CURRAN, Director
Teaching and Learning Support
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed reasons for dropping out of school and did not state a position on SB 197.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:46 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR KEVIN MEYER called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators French, Stevens, Davis, Co-Chair Thomas and Co-Chair Meyer.

SB 197-GRANT PROGRAM FOR SCHOOLS

[8:03:19 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced the consideration of SB 197.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS moved to adopt the CS for SB 197, labeled 27-LS1168\I, as the working document.

CO-CHAIR MEYER objected for discussion purposes.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS, sponsor of SB 197, explained that public schools are doing a good job for the most part, but in some schools the student dropout rate still needs to be reduced. SB 197 provides for a competitive grant program for underperforming schools. A school does not automatically get money, rather the district has to designate it as low performing and has to set up a program that is research-based and includes measurable goals and outcomes. The program will be evaluated after two years and

if it shows success the school may receive continued funding. If not, the funding will go away. If a district uses this grant for a pre-K program, that program has to conform to current pilot pre-K standards, so the department doesn't have to monitor different types of pre-K programs. The grant funding is designed to decrease as the dropout rate decreases.

[8:05:57 AM](#)

MURRAY RICHMOND, co-aide for the Senate Education Committee and staff to Senator Thomas, explained that section 1 in SB 197 establishes "excellence grants" that are designed for schools designated by the district as low performing. The amount of the fund is basically equal to the number of dropouts from the previous year multiplied by \$400, the theory being that Alaska would be willing to invest \$400 in every potential dropout to keep them from dropping out. As the dropout rate decreases, the amount that would annually be appropriated would also decrease, on the assumption that it would not be needed any more.

Section (b) mandates a local match of between 10 percent and 40 percent depending on the district's resources and size. The department uses a metric to figure out what the local match should be.

He explained that the grant must first address the known causes of low performance. The grant must be used for research-based purposes and has to apply best practices in the field. It has to have measurable goals for evaluation and it must include a process for regular evaluation and reporting. The district would have to have a financial plan that would show the program is sustainable after the funding the runs out.

MR. RICHMOND said since they know that a lack of early development materials is a major part of low performance for students, especially in rural areas, a grant can be used to set up a pre-K program, but it has to conform to the pilot program standards so the district doesn't have to oversee different types of pre-K programs.

[8:08:45 AM](#)

MR. RICHMOND said that grants are evaluated every two years. If a grant is successful over the two-year period, a grantee can apply for one more extension. If not, the money shuts down. The grants are allocated on a pro rata basis.

He said that section 2 establishes the first year of the grant. The initial \$15 million in funding was established by

multiplying \$4,800 by an average of dropouts over the last 10 years. The calculation starts by providing \$400 for each of the potential 2,500 dropouts in every grade cohort.

[8:12:20 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS explained that even the first grade has a potential of 2,500 to 3,000 dropouts and that number is held consistent all the way through.

[8:13:05 AM](#)

MR. RICHMOND responded that the dropout number is actually closer to 3,000 every year and explained that a student doesn't go through school and then decide in their senior year to drop out. They start having problems in the first grade. So, rather than just dealing with the problem at the top, the grant can be used for remediation all the way down to the first grade level.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said they realize it's just too late to intervene with a student designated by the district as low performing by the time they get into the 10th or 11th grade, so the earlier you start the better off you are.

[8:14:05 AM](#)

MR. RICHMOND clarified that districts don't get incentives for having more dropouts in SB 197.

[8:15:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS added that money put into an early program would probably affect the amount needed in the later grades and asked if that had been figured into the calculation.

MR. RICHMOND answered that the grants are written by school districts that best decide how to use the money to lower dropout rate and raise student performance within their particular district.

[8:16:19 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said trying to address this problem in Alaska is a wonderful idea and asked where one can find the list of known causes.

[8:17:13 AM](#)

MR. RICHMOND answered that the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) might have a better idea of dropout causes.

[8:17:51 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked how bad the dropout rate is in Alaska.

MR. RICHMOND answered that he could get that information for him, but the state's graduation rate has moved up to almost 70 percent over the last 10 years.

[8:18:40 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said he thought this bill repealed an existing grant program.

MR. RICHMOND answered that it did as originally written, but the department did not want it repealed as districts were using it, so the CS was written to not repeal it.

[8:19:21 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if the current grant program is being used for the Moore settlement.

MR. RICHMOND answered he was referring to the Quality Schools Grant Program that allocates \$16 based on average daily membership (ADM) to every district and it is not a rigorous application process.

[8:20:00 AM](#)

SENATOR FRENCH asked why they decided to use the \$400 figure.

MR. RICHMOND answered that it's a fuzzy number and he got it by looking at what it would take to fund different pre-K programs in the lower districts.

SENATOR FRENCH said he appreciated the focus on pre-K programs given what they know about their beneficial effect on graduation rates and asked why not just aim the grant at them.

MR. RICHMOND answered that districts could do that, but they also have the latitude to leverage the money elsewhere. For instance, smaller districts may have a smaller pre-K cohort and a larger bulge elsewhere and it might make more sense to leverage the money on either the upper or the lower grade levels.

[8:21:19 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said many kids in the Kodiak High School drop out because they no longer feel challenged and this bill doesn't seem to address that. Why not just put more money into the Quality Schools Program instead of starting a whole new program?

MR. RICHMOND answered that this grant is offered as an alternative not necessarily a replacement to the Quality Schools Program. It rewards districts that are showing results in staving off the dropout rate in addition to receiving an automatic grant whether they change statistics or not. The hope is that the dropout rate would go so low that the fund wouldn't be needed in the future.

[8:23:33 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said that a zero dropout rate is not attainable, because they aren't able to deal with all causative factors.

[8:23:57 AM](#)

MIKE BRAWNER, Superintendent, Nome Public Schools, supported SB 197, and said that Nome has a 40-student pilot pre-K program identified as a Head Start program, because they have a partnership with the Kawerak Head Start program and that is where the pre-K teachers' classrooms are. Those teachers are following the state's pre-K design. Another preschool program is more of a home-school type program and doesn't have the same guidelines, specific instructions and certified teachers delivering instruction as the pilot pre-K program. Another group is of parent at home where some may have more abilities to teach their own children than others.

[8:26:32 AM](#)

MR. BRAWNER explained that all children in the Nome school district are assessed when they come into kindergarten to ensure delivery of instruction at their academic ability level. During the assessment they are able to identify the pilot pre-K children and those that weren't. Those that don't score high enough to register fall into a "no score group." About 6 percent of the students in the pilot pre-K program were in that bracket and 15 percent of the students were in the other bracket.

He summarized that half of the students coming out of the pilot pre-K program were working at grade level and just 24 percent of the other group was at that same level; that 72 percent of the kids who come through the pilot pre-K are at or near grade level compared to 45 percent of the other group.

[8:29:25 AM](#)

MR. BRAWNER said implementing this program is a major endeavor and they couldn't expect to see results by May. At least three years would be needed for the concept to become part of the institution so that teachers know what they are supposed to be doing and have the skills to do it. But he was excited to share

what he was seeing in Nome when he heard about this bill after seeing the marked improvements under their existing program and, He appreciated the support Nome had already received through the pilot pre-K programs and hoped it would continue.

[8:29:44 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if Nome's high rate of high school dropouts was due to low performance or if other reasons had contributed that weren't being addressed.

MR. BRAWNER answered that in doing one of his past studies relating to dropouts he found two points that educators look at: the third grade and the sixth grade. They only other factor that even gets close to those is when a student started school. By the time a student gets to sixth grade, if they are academically more than two grades below levels, either in reading or math, only one more thing is needed to make him a potential dropout. Another event on top of that, such as attendance rate or a behavioral situation, almost guarantees that a child will drop out. Then you get into other factors outside of the school's realm, like family situations that can't be controlled directly.

[8:31:25 AM](#)

MR. BRAWNER said the high school equivalency exam that a student has to take when he is a sophomore has had some unintended consequences. Because students have to be performing at a tenth grade level to be successful on that test, schools and students feel a lot of pressure when they come in at the ninth grade level. For the student to actually have a fair chance at passing that test at the sophomore level, he really needs to have had algebra and freshman English. Just the pressure alone, might contribute to not passing the test. They have had to go back and reevaluate what it is the exam is trying to achieve.

[8:33:23 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if the benchmark group is unlikely to drop out.

[8:33:45 AM](#)

MR. BRAWNER answered yes.

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked how receptive the community has been to the districts programs.

MR. BRAWNER answered that the community has been very supportive. All the seats are filled at 40 students and he has another 40 on the waiting list.

[8:34:23 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS commented that one size doesn't always fit all and at some point they get to the money end of it when all of a sudden people start questioning why successes and best practices aren't being used. He asked if more intensive work in the earlier grades of 1 through 4 would maybe equalize things so they could have standardized tests that would allow everyone at least a fair opportunity to pass.

[8:36:06 AM](#)

MR. BRAUNER answered that, "we're in the hope business," and if he is going to run a race he wants to be on the same starting line as everybody else. A large portion of students is way behind, already. One of the best things he can do to change their outcome is to get them all close to the same starting point. The key is to get all students reading by the third grade and then they can read to learn. It all happens in the early grades.

[8:36:59 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS said he agreed.

[8:37:04 AM](#)

SENATOR FRENCH thanked him for coming down and testifying and added that he thought they should always have a working superintendent with the committee to keep them going in the right direction.

[8:37:25 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS said she hoped he could continue his program and asked if funding the base student allocation (BSA) up to its proper level would help. Then he wouldn't need grant monies.

MR. BRAUNER answered yes.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if the High School Exit Exam is a good measure of students' academic success.

[8:38:21 AM](#)

MR. BRAUNER answered that he knows a standard is needed for measuring academic ability and that economics are tied to how that is done. A multiple choice exam is probably the least expensive way to accomplish that, but they are saying things about a student's ability to go out and have a successful and happy life and he just questioned whether a multiple choice test would be adequate to measure those things. He grew up on a farm

in Tennessee and knew a lot of people who didn't have what measured up to a high school diploma, but they achieved much. His concern was that he discouraged more students through such a test rather than encouraging them to complete their education. And he couldn't offer a solution.

[8:40:46 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER commented that his opinion is shared amongst other superintendents.

[8:41:53 AM](#)

LES MORSE, Deputy Commissioner, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, introduced himself and said he would let Ms. Curran begin.

[8:42:32 AM](#)

CYNTIHIA CURRAN, Director, Teaching and Learning Support, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, said she wanted to address some of Senator Stevens' questions about the reasons for student dropout. Three years ago a working group met to discuss the reasons for student dropout and looked at national and state research on it; they found it included attendance and discipline policies, lack of engagement with adults, lack of rigorous course work, bullying, family or medical issues, as well as a student needing to be financial support for a family.

[8:44:17 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS commented that she had said nothing about students not performing at grade level for dropping out.

[8:44:54 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN responded that not every person who drops out is necessarily a low performing student; many high performing students, gifted even, get bored and leave school. A mix of students is dropping out of school.

[8:45:32 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said that was his experience as a college professor teaching in Kodiak. Kids would come to his class occasionally from high school who were super students, but they had lost interest in their high school classes. Low performance can't be ignored, but there are other reasons.

[8:46:00 AM](#)

MR. MORSE said that "one is not the inverse of the other" in reference to dropout rate versus graduation rate. The graduation

rate last year was 68 percent; that means that they look at a ninth grade class and determine how many of that cohort graduate four years later. It tracks exact students through four years taking into account that some transfer in and out to other schools. The dropout rate is a one year rate meaning they count everyone who drops out in a single year. Last year the statewide dropout rate was 4.7 percent and that equaled 2,779 students.

He said it is important to note that a student can drop out and drop back in and drop back out again. They can only be counted as a dropout once for a year, but it's very likely that a student may drop out in April and the school is successful in bringing them back in the fall. Then they drop out again next year. Overall, they get 68 percent of the students through with a diploma at the end of the day, but it doesn't mean that all the rest of them dropped out. Other circumstances could have impacted their academic career.

[8:48:00 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if the program in SB 197 is needed or if it is at least a step in the right direction.

[8:48:42 AM](#)

MR. MORSE replied that the department struggled with this bill at first because they didn't understand that it didn't reward dropouts. It deserves discussion, but he questioned whether another program was needed along with the quality schools program that allows a district some discretionary actions. He explained the way most of the districts' funding streams work is that funding goes into the school districts and then they have some discretionary latitude on spending it. In many ways, it comes down to the question of state oversight or local oversight of those dollars. He didn't know if the department had deliberated enough to take a position, but the goals in it are worthy.

[8:50:10 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER remarked that he didn't understand how the quality schools program works and if it is effective.

MR. MORSE answered that the districts gets \$16 per ADM of quality schools money. The program started 10 or 12 years ago and the intent was to get districts to use those dollars to align their curriculum and instruction to the standards and then to help students move up to meet those standards. At this point, districts put forward how they are going to use those dollars

each year in an annual report, called the "Thick Report," submitted by the department to the legislature on February 15.

[8:51:07 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN added that some districts use the quality schools money as a way to focus on the high school graduation qualifying exam and others use it for writing interventions and assessments, or for professional development in reading, writing, math and early literacy. They might use it to buy computer software or programs such as cognitive tutor for algebra. Districts determine what the need is and then use the funding to help them with those needs.

SENATOR DAVIS asked if every school district gets quality school grant money.

MR. MORSE replied yes.

SENATOR DAVIS asked the total of that budget.

[8:53:36 AM](#)

MR. MORSE answered its total of \$3.9 million and he thought it started in 1999.

SENATOR DAVIS asked if the program has achieved its purpose.

MR. MORSE answered that districts have found the money particularly useful in targeting some things around their professional development and helping kids to meet the state's performance standards.

[8:54:34 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS asked if adding more money to that program could accomplish what SB 197 is trying to accomplish.

MR. MORSE answered the reason the quality schools grant program is a topic is because it is an existing program that the original version of SB 197 repealed. That wasn't the intent and it won't happen in the CS.

[8:55:23 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said before passing something like SB 197 they want to make sure there is some way to measure whether the quality schools program is working.

SENATOR STEVENS said the issue of dropouts is so important that the DEED should update the legislature on dropout rates annually.

8:56:45 AM

MR. MORSE answered that dropout rates are not verbally reported to the legislature. But the "Thick Report" that summarizes quality schools has information, for instance, on dropouts by district and how many secondary students are taught by teachers who have certification in the area of mathematics and language arts. The department's website has a report card to the public in PDF format that gives more detailed information about dropout rate, but it doesn't get at why the students dropped out. The department doesn't have a method of collecting that level of information, but most districts probably do. Also, because of Senator Davis' bill last year, SB 1, the state board reports its activities for the year. But if they didn't deal with the dropout rate, it wouldn't be mentioned.

8:58:58 AM

SENATOR DAVIS asked the name of the "thick report."

MR. MORSE said he would follow-up with the chapter title as soon as possible.

CO-CHAIR MEYER thanked the participants and stated he would hold SB 197 in committee.

9:00:20 AM

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