

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

January 24, 2014

7:58 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair
Senator Mike Dunleavy, Vice Chair
Senator Bert Stedman
Senator Charlie Huggins
Senator Berta Gardner

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 111

"An Act repealing the secondary student competency examination and related requirements; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 111

SHORT TITLE: REPEAL SECONDARY SCHOOL EXIT EXAM

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) STEVENS, GARDNER

01/22/14	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/14
01/22/14	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/14	(S)	EDC, FIN
01/22/14	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
01/22/14	(S)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
01/24/14	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

TIM LAMKIN, Staff
Senator Gary Stevens
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information regarding SB 111 on behalf of the sponsor.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information on the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE).

ED GRAFF, Superintendent
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

WILLIAM MCLEOD, Superintendent
Dillingham City School District
Dillingham, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Spoke in favor of SB 111.

PATRICK HIGGINS, Member
Anchorage School Board
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Spoke in favor of SB 111.

SUNNI HILTS, President
Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB)
Seldovia, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Spoke in favor of SB 111.

MIKE COONS, representing himself
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in favor of SB 111.

BETTYE DAVIS, Member
Anchorage School Board
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Spoke in favor of SB 111.

LARRY TALLEY, Parent
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Spoke in support of SB 111.

LIZ DOWNING, Vice-President, Legislative Committee Chair
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District Board of Education
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

BARBARA PARKER, Member
Delta Junction School Board

Delta Junction, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

PETE HOEPFNER, Member
Cordova School Board
Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

JEAN MISCHEL, Attorney
Legislative Legal and Research Services Division
Legislative Affairs Agency
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions regarding SB 111.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[7:58:54 AM](#)

CHAIR GARY STEVENS called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 7:58 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Dunleavy, Gardner, Huggins, Stedman, and Chair Stevens.

SB 111-REPEAL SECONDARY SCHOOL EXIT EXAM

[8:00:26 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS announced that the only order of business would be SB 111. He noted he would take public testimony and hold the bill. He said he would keep public testimony open for future hearings and he welcomed written testimony at any time.

CHAIR STEVENS pointed out that the governor is introducing an omnibus bill that will include the issues in SB 111. He indicated that he would like to make SB 111 a committee bill if it was acceptable to the members.

TIM LAMKIN, Staff, Senator Gary Stevens, sponsor of SB 111, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, presented information regarding SB 111 on behalf of the sponsor. He explained that SB 111 repeals the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE) also known as the exit exam. He related that Section 1 of the bill deletes the exit exam reference in the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) annual report to the legislature. Section 2 deletes the same reference in DEED's annual report to the public on school performance. Section 3 deletes the reference in DEED's school accountability section. Section 4 deletes the reference in the charter school operational requirements. Section 5 repeals the high school

competency test requirements, and Section 6 provides for a July 1, 2014 effective date.

He mentioned a policy consideration the committee may want to address - the effective date of the repeal and consequences for adults who have failed the HSGQE and may want to retest. A phase-out time might be considered.

SENATOR GARDNER referred to written testimony she received that inquired about how the repeal would affect Juneau's students this year.

CHAIR STEVENS remarked it was a good question. He said he would ask DEED to address the timing of, and the need for, the repeal.

[8:03:29 AM](#)

LES MORSE, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, presented information on the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE).

CHAIR STEVENS asked if SB 111 is really necessary. He wondered if HSGQE would need to be "taken off the books." He also requested information on the timing of the repeal.

MR. MORSE explained that a requirement that students pass an exit exam with basic competencies is clearly in statute. For DEED to repeal the exam, as well as the competency requirements, HSGQE would have to be removed from statute.

CHAIR STEVENS asked about the phasing out of the exam.

[8:05:24 AM](#)

MR. MORSE reported that there are two parts to phasing out the exam; when it would go into effect and which students would be affected. The bill has an effective date of July 1, 2014, so any student who is required to take the exam this spring, would have to pass it to graduate. Adults currently under the HSGQE system who did not pass the exam have the right to return and take it. There are several adults still in this category. Some transition for that group would be important, as well as for students that don't pass the exam this coming spring. He pointed out that most states that phase out the HSGQE allow testing for a period of years for adults to retake the exam.

[8:08:22 AM](#)

SENATOR GARDNER asked if the department has an effective date in mind. She suggested having an immediate effective date, but also

a transition period for adults that have a certificate of achievement, rather than a diploma.

MR. MORSE said July 1, 2014, does make sense to avoid confusion this spring. The problem of an immediate effective date is if SB 111 passes this session, some students will graduate in early May so there will be some graduates who will be required to pass the HSGQE and some who will not.

SENATOR GARDNER asked if there might be some other test in place such as Accuplacer, SAT or ACT.

[8:10:36 AM](#)

MR. MORSE addressed the bill the Governor referenced in his State of the State speech regarding students having a choice of SAT, ACT, or WorkKeys as exit exams. He suggested that those tests could serve as future planning tools and guides to an Alaska Postsecondary Path.

CHAIR STEVENS predicted that at some time in the future the committee would have to figure out how SB 111 and the Governor's bill would mesh. He asked Mr. Morse to share his thoughts on SB 111.

[8:13:21 AM](#)

MR. MORSE thought it would be useful to understand that the purpose of the HSGQE law was to have students leave high school with basic skills. He said that many students who have not passed HSGQE also have not met local graduation requirements. The exam was a factor in identifying students who had not met local requirements. He noted that most districts have raised graduation requirements to ensure that students master basic skills, so the exam may no longer be a factor in identifying students lacking credits.

CHAIR STEVENS requested data about how many students did or did not pass the exam at its onset and currently.

MR. MORSE referred to information in members' packets that show current pass rates of students taking the exam for the first time, followed by students that retake the exam.

He referred to several tables that show current results - "Statewide Spring 2013 HSGQE." The tables show total numbers and percentages of students scoring above and below proficiency from 2009 through 2013. The first table shows 10th grade results followed by grades 11 and 12.

He drew attention to "HSGQE Relevancy" which depicts that the 2012 senior class cohort group has a combined cumulative passage rate of over 90 percent. After five opportunities to take the test, this group in 2012 had a 90 percent success rate of passing all three parts of the exam. There were 1,590 seniors in 2010 that completed the school year but did not receive a diploma. Of that group over 53 percent had passed all parts of the exam. The remaining students who did not pass the exam, also did not pass the local requirements. Almost half of the students who did not pass the exam, also did not meet their local requirements. These students, such as special education students, typically struggle with testing,

[8:19:44 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked how many days are required for HSGQE testing per year.

MR. MORSE replied that it takes three days in the spring to test all 10th graders and 1-3 days for 11th and 12th graders, depending on the number of tests they did not pass. In the fall the test is given for 1-3 days to those who did not pass in the spring. The school has schedule changes for three days both times.

CHAIR STEVENS pointed out repealing the test would open up more days for classroom instruction and provide relief for teachers administering the test.

MR. MORSE agreed. He recalled that last year the Governor suggested the elimination of the TerraNova exam which the State Board of Education ended up removing. He said he anticipated a new language arts combined assessment and a math assessment with the new standards. The goal is better information with less testing time.

SENATOR GARDNER inquired about the timing of the HSGQE test and whether a practice test is given earlier than 10th grade.

MR. MORSE replied that the test itself is not given earlier, but there is a practice test available to take at any time.

[8:22:28 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS said 10th grade students did better on the exam in 2009 than they did in 2013. He questioned the effectiveness of the test. He listed some of the scores to show the comparisons concluding that the trend is downward.

He noted that three of the committee members have served on a school board and have struggled with how to effect change and improve student performance. He said he supports the repeal of the exit exam. He requested the history of the exit exam and maintained that it did not affect positive change.

[8:24:59 AM](#)

MR. MORSE shared his experience with the exam in a school environment and at DEED. The HSGQE came into effect in the late 90's and the first group of students to be held accountable for the exam was the Class of 2002. It soon became apparent that students were not prepared for the exam, especially in mathematics, and would not graduate. The exam was redesigned; uncodified law was clarified that it was to be a basic exam of essential grade 8-10 skills. The first cohort held accountable was changed to 2004. Special education students were not held accountable until 2005 due to a lawsuit.

He remarked that it is hard to say if the exam had an effect or not. School districts responded by increasing requirements. He said he noticed that the population of students taking the exam dropped significantly by nearly 1,000, which may have had an effect on performance.

[8:28:13 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS said he wondered if anything was learned from the experience. He opined that change should effect results and make things better for teachers. He inquired if the state accomplished anything with the exit exam.

MR. MORSE concluded that groups of students profited; those that needed to rise to the occasion - students who struggle the most. He gave an example of a superintendent whose goal was to have every student pass the exam. In many instances school districts adjusted the instruction to target the test.

[8:30:56 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS recalled conversations with teachers who said the exit exam was a method to help underachieving students.

CHAIR STEVENS observed that many states were rushing to incorporate an exit exam. He cautioned against chasing popular trends.

[8:32:09 AM](#)

SENATOR STEDMAN commented that one of the things he recalled about the exit exam is when the superintendent would report positive student scores, the business community would report lack of work skills by student workers. He suggested that some of the data "suffered from benchmark error." He said one advantage of the exit exam was to be able to see how all districts were doing. He added that he was not opposed to eliminating the exit exam, but he wanted to be able to evaluate all schools across the state for effectiveness.

MR. MORSE assured that if the exit exam is repealed, a test that provides similar data would replace it, as required by state and federal law, but without the high stakes for students. The replacement proposal would provide data, but also let students have a choice of assessments that relate to state standards.

[8:35:30 AM](#)

SENATOR GARDNER requested information from the statewide results chart from 2009 to 2013, as well as figures from implementation to 2009.

MR. MORSE agreed to do so.

SENATOR HUGGINS suggested the book David and Goliath that captures today's education climate.

[8:36:35 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS opened public testimony.

[8:36:54 AM](#)

ED GRAFF, Superintendent, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 111. He pointed out that HSGQE is aligned with the old standards and not to the new Alaska Academic Standards, which has new assessments being designed by the Achievement & Assessment Institute (AAI). Currently, HSGQE requires certain conditions to be in place which have a direct impact on the district. He concluded that graduation should be based on coursework, not an exit exam.

CHAIR STEVENS asked for Mr. Graff's opinion on the effective date of the bill and the phasing out of the old exam.

SUPERINTENDENT GRAFF agreed that the date could affect this year's graduation class. He said Anchorage does offer HSGQE for adults and there should be a consideration for adults who would like to retake the test.

[8:40:53 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS cautioned against assuming this discussion means current students will not have to take the test.

[8:41:13 AM](#)

WILLIAM MCLEOD, Superintendent, Dillingham City School District, Dillingham, Alaska, spoke in favor of SB 111. He opined that there are several ways to assess student achievement. He maintained that the exam has served its purpose. He shared statistics about the passing rate of the exam in his district. He said there are remediation programs in place for those who do not pass the exam. He gave an example of a successful student who made use of a remediation program. He said the exit exam does impact the graduation rate and the 4-year rate. He believed there were more effective ways to assess skills, such as WorkKeys, the new iteration of the standards-based assessment scores, and a differentiated diploma.

[8:44:22 AM](#)

PATRICK HIGGINS, Member, Anchorage School Board, Anchorage, Alaska, spoke in favor of SB 111. He shared Anchorage's educational focus on having students advance academically at least one full year each year. In 2010 Anchorage adopted a scale to measure academic success and has seen positive results. Graduation rates have increased from 60 percent to almost 80 percent in the last six years. The exit exam has not benefitted the Anchorage School District, especial English Language Learners and Special Education. Anchorage has adopted the Common Core State Standards which set higher standards than the exit exam does. He concluded that resources should be put where they can best be used.

[8:47:43 AM](#)

SENATOR DUNLEAVY questioned if graduation rates had increased from 60 percent to 80 percent.

MR. HIGGINS said yes and added that the dropout rate has decreased. He suggested that Anchorage should now focus on raising academic scores and investing more resources before students reach high school.

CHAIR STEVENS thanked Mr. Higgins for his service.

[8:49:05 AM](#)

SUNNI HILTS, President, Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB), Seldovia, Alaska, spoke in favor of SB 111. She shared ways the exit exam works against student success. She noted that

the HSGQE does not test the Alaska Academic Standards. She maintained that an assessment that measures 10th grade competencies sends the wrong message to students and lowers expectations.

CHAIR STEVENS asked how long Ms. Hilts has served on the School Board.

MS. HILTS said 10 years.

CHAIR STEVENS noted that Jean Mischel was available to answer questions.

[8:51:56 AM](#)

MIKE COONS, testifying on his own behalf, Palmer, Alaska, testified in favor of SB 111. He spoke against the SAT and ACT claiming they do not measure student competency. He shared a personal story about his educational experiences in high school and after. He opined that tests do not adequately measure a student's knowledge or competency. He said there is too much emphasis on testing, especially on higher-level math.

[8:55:23 AM](#)

BETTYE DAVIS, Member, Anchorage School Board, Anchorage, Alaska, spoke in favor of SB 111. She noted that she previously proposed a similar bill. She said this legislation needs to take place immediately, especially to save money.

[8:57:26 AM](#)

LARRY TALLEY, Parent, Juneau, Alaska, spoke in support of SB 111. He said that he submitted written testimony. He focused on the human cost of the exit exam and shared a personal story of his son who is a special education student and who failed the test numerous times. He shared his son's wish to attend college so he went to a summer program specializing in children with special needs. He was accepted to Landmark College even though he could not pass the exit exam. With the help of a math tutor, he passed the exit exam but was delayed a year going to college. He worked during that year successfully.

MR. TALLEY shared that his son was no longer included on the family insurance because he was not in college, leading to high costs to the family. He had a 3.25 GPA. He called the exit exam, "cruel and unusual punishment."

[9:03:53 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS apologized for how Mr. Talley's son was treated.

MR. TALLEY said he is grateful to teachers. He added that his son is in his second year of college and is on the Dean's List.

SENATOR HUGGINS thanked Mr. and Mr. Talley for supporting their child under difficult circumstances.

[9:05:13 AM](#)

LIZ DOWNING, Vice-President, Legislative Committee Chair, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District Board of Education, Homer, Alaska, testified in support of SB 111. She said the board and district believe in accountability, but the HSGQE is no longer relevant. She opined that passing grades should indicate successful completion of courses. She agreed with the concept mentioned in the Governor's State of the State address regarding SAT, ACT, or WorkKeys replacing the exit exam. However, she did not see an exit exam as a requirement for graduation. She agreed with the testimony on cost, time, and heartbreak caused by the exit exam.

CHAIR STEVENS asked how long Ms. Downing has been involved with the school board.

MS. DOWNING said 9 years.

[9:08:08 AM](#)

BARBARA PARKER, Member, Delta Junction School Board, Delta Junction, Alaska, testified in support of SB 111. She maintained that the HSGQE is a graduation-qualifying exam, the antithesis of No Child Left Behind. With the HSGQE every year, students are left behind. She noted that the district has new standards with a new state assessment system that will be a much more accurate indication of what students are learning than the exit exam.

CHAIR STEVENS thanked Ms. Parker.

[9:10:57 AM](#)

PETE HOEPFNER, Member, Cordova School Board, Cordova, Alaska, testified in support of SB 111. He said repealing the exit exam would save money and time.

[9:11:55 AM](#)

JEAN MISCHEL, Attorney, Legislative Legal and Research Services Division, Legislative Affairs Agency, Juneau, Alaska, answered questions regarding SB 111.

[9:12:19 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked whether "phasing in" for adults who have previously failed the exit exam could be included in the bill.

MS. MISCHEL replied that the Governor's omnibus bill, SB 139, provides for a transition period until July 1, 2017, for adults to complete the exam. She added that is just one example of how it could be done.

CHAIR STEVENS said he has not seen the Governor's bill, but would check it out.

[SB 111 was held in committee.]

[9:13:32 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 9:13 a.m.