

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 30, 2017

9:03 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Harriet Drummond, Chair
Representative Justin Parish, Vice Chair
Representative Zach Fansler
Representative Ivy Spohnholz
Representative Jennifer Johnston
Representative Chuck Kopp
Representative David Talerico

OTHER LEGISLATIVE MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Dan Ortiz

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Geran Tarr (Alternate)

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 64

"An Act relating to the establishment of the Task Force on Reading Proficiency and Reading Instruction for All Students and on the Effects of Dyslexia on Some Students."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 64

SHORT TITLE: READING PROFICIENCY TASK FORCE; DYSLEXIA

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) DRUMMOND

01/20/17	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/20/17	(H)	EDC
01/30/17	(H)	EDC AT 9:00 AM CAPITOL 106

WITNESS REGISTER

KRISTIN KRANENDONK, Staff
Representative Harriett Drummond
Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HB 64 on behalf of Representative Drummond, sponsor.

MARGIE GILLIS, President

Literacy How

New Haven, Connecticut

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the hearing on HB 64.

SERENA ELFTMAN-MOLLENKOPF, Teacher

Anchorage School District (ASD)

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the hearing on HB 64.

LISA CONNER

Alaska Reading Coalition

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 64.

LARRY "WOODY" WILSON, Educator

Wrangell, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with opposition to HB 64.

ANTHONY HABRA, Superintendent

Haines Borough School District

Haines, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concern for HB 64.

AMY SPARGO, Executive Director

Instruction

Matanuska-Susitna School District

Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concern for HB 64.

LUCY HOPE, Executive Director

Student Support Services

Matanuska-Susitna School District

Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concern for HB 64.

POSIE BOGGS

Alaska Reading Coalition

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 64.

ROBERT BOYLE, Superintendent

Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District (KGBSD)

Ketchikan, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 64.

JANET DONNELLY, Representative

Future Frontiers Tutoring

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the hearing on HB 64.

MIKE BRONSON, Volunteer

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 64 and SB 27.

LISA SKYLES PARADY, PhD

Executive Director

Alaska Counsel of School Administrators (ACSA)

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the hearing on HB 64.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[9:03:34 AM](#)

CHAIR HARRIET DRUMMOND called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:03 a.m. Representatives Drummond, Talerico, Spohnholz, Johnston, Fansler, Parish, and Kopp were present at the call to order. Also present was Representative Dan Ortiz.

HB 64-READING PROFICIENCY TASK FORCE; DYSLEXIA

[Contains brief discussion of SB 27]

[9:04:10 AM](#)

AIR DRUMMOND announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 64, "An Act relating to the establishment of the Task Force on Reading Proficiency and Reading Instruction for All Students and on the Effects of Dyslexia on Some Students."

[9:04:26 AM](#)

KRISTIN KRANENDONK, Staff, Representative Harriett Drummond, Alaska State Legislature, presented HB 64 paraphrasing from a prepared statement, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

HB 64 establishes a fifteen member task force on reading proficiency and instruction with the goal of increasing statewide reading proficiency scores within 3 years.

Section 1 of the bill lays out some legislative findings demonstrating the need for the task force. About 47,000 students in K-12 in Alaska do not currently meet AMP, or Alaska Measures of Progress standards.

Dyslexia is the most common learning disability and affects up to 17 percent of the student population.

Section 2 of the bill lays out the purpose of the task force, which is to evaluate and make recommendations to the legislature and examine how current regulations affect reading proficiency.

On page 3 of the bill starting on line 20, the bill also lays out the makeup of the task force, which includes:

3 members of the House, including at least one minority member, appointed by the Speaker.

3 members of the Senate, with at least 1 minority member appointed by the Senate President.

The commissioner of Education and Early Development or the commissioner's designee.

1 active or retired K-3 teacher with significant experience teaching reading.

1 member of the Alaska Association of School Boards who is knowledgeable about reading and dyslexia.

1 non-voting member who is a judge or representative of the judicial branch. We feel a member familiar with federal education laws such as IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, is needed to help make informed recommendations. IDEA has implications for early identification of struggling readers and the task force will need legal expertise to help navigate federal laws.

1 member representing the University of Alaska who is highly knowledgeable teaching reading.

The remaining 4 members will be recommended by member organization of the Alaska Reading Coalition. Those members include Reading Write Alaska, the NAACP, Literate Nation Alaska, the Alaska branch of the International Dyslexia Association, Decoding Dyslexia Alaska, Juneau Dyslexia, Longboard4Change, 907Boards, Connections That Work, Future Frontiers Tutoring, and Turning Leaf Literacy Center.

No member of the task force will receive compensations. Meetings will take place telephonically and no member will receive per diem or travel expenses.

The task force expires on Jan. 31, 2019.

[9:07:55 AM](#)

MARGIE GILLIS, President, Literacy How, provided testimony on the advances that Connecticut has made in the past six years in a concerted effort to close the achievement gap. Connecticut has established a commission that works closely with the legislature to keep members informed of issues and address measures that are proposed. Additionally, at the legislative office building, a forum regularly meets to focus specifically on reading issues. In 2010, the Connecticut State Board of Education adopted a policy mandating that pre-service, K-3 trainees pass the [Foundations of Reading (90) Exam: Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL)], as a prerequisite for becoming a state certified teacher. The mandate was the first step in the strategic plan, to ensure that state teacher training programs included a focus on reading instruction. Previously certified teachers were also assisted in their efforts when legislation was adopted to have students in grades K-3 subjected to a universal screening program. The measure allows teachers to identify and address individuals who require additional help. In the first year, the results were dramatic, she reported. Building on that, a state wide reading model was developed based on a principle called response to instruction, also known as a multi-tiered system of support. She explained how the approach works to ensure that all students receive the attention they need, based on tier assignments/achievements. It provides the most targeted instruction available. The model was piloted in 5 schools, in

2012, and due to success rates, today 65 schools have replicated the model. Financing has been a challenge and means are still be sought to provide all schools with funding to implement the program.

[9:15:36 AM](#)

SERENA ELFTMAN-MOLLENKOPF, Teacher, Anchorage School District (ASD), opined that an extreme dichotomy exists for what is known about teaching reading skills and what is actually practiced in the classroom. It is well documented how to teach reading, she said, but unfortunately only 30 percent of Alaskan children are being taught to read proficiently. The teaching degree that she received at Ohio State University did not adequately prepare her to teach reading, and thus, she is currently taking classes in reading science. In fact, she said, one professor stood in the way of the teacher trainees wanting to learn more about how to teach reading. "We can change this," she finished.

[9:18:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON recalled the Slingerland Approach being used in the district at one time, and asked whether it's still being implemented or if it's been integrated into other programs.

MS. ELFTMAN-MOLLENKOPF answered that ASD discontinued the option of that program, circa 2000.

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON asked whether it was discontinued due to lack of results or supplanted by a better program.

MS. ELFTMAN-MOLLENKOPF recalled that it was phased out but did not conjecture on possible reasons for the curtailment.

[9:19:07 AM](#)

LISA CONNER, Alaska Reading Coalition, stated support for HB 64, paraphrasing from a prepared statement, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Please find attached a chart outlining the education history of my three school-aged children. The information shows an aggressive and earnest attempt to locate educational programs, methodologies, tools, techniques, etc., to help my students learn to read. We tried private, public, traditional, Montessori and

Waldorf methods and philosophies. We tried schools in the Anchorage School District and MatSu Borough School District. After years of academic trauma we have settled nicely with a personalized and individual approach to education at home. My three children are thriving socially and emotionally and progressing academically as we erase years of misguided instruction. I am determined to keep their self-esteem intact as they "inhibit" incorrect teaching methods while incorporating effective learning models.

As a family, we support HB 64 and sincerely hope our personal story compels you to end the trail of tears for thousands of children Alaska schools are failing. We realize our family will not benefit from the task force nor any future legislation as our time in the system has expired. If laws had been in place and enforced, my children would have benefited significantly from early screening, early identification, and early intervention up to grade three. Years of frustration would have been avoided if screening, identification, and intervention had been policy for the school districts they encountered. The critical point for Alaska's students is training all relevant educational staff in the use of evidence-based screening and identification instruments; and identification of evidence-based, multi-sensory, direct, explicit, structured, and sequential approaches to instruction of students affected by dyslexia. Our family's journey is a prime example of what our schools lack.

We remain optimistic that the next generation of children will travel a more appropriate and enriching educational path. After all, it is the birthright of all Alaskan's to have an equal opportunity to learn to read.

[9:21:55 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JOHNSTON asked Ms. Connor about her knowledge of the Slingerland Approach program.

MS. CONNOR responded that the name is familiar, but it wasn't a program offered to her children.

[9:22:55 AM](#)

LARRY "WOODY" WILSON, Educator, described his extensive, 40 year career as an educator. He said his tenure has included serving as a special education diagnostic teacher, director of special education, teacher mentor, principal, and superintendent. Stating opposition to HB 64, he opined that it suffers a number of short comings and requires significant changes. The assumption that the 47,000 students falling below the English language standards suffer from some form of dyslexia is undocumented and may or may not be accurate. Further, treating for dyslexia and expecting statistics to improve may also be inaccurate. The bill specifies dyslexia as the most common learning disability and cites 17 percent of Alaska's student population, and approximately 80 percent of learning disabilities as dyslexic issues. He opined that these assumptions would be difficult to document as dyslexia is not a common term used in education. Federal and state laws, as well as regulations, do not contain the term dyslexia, and neither is it included in commonly used school terminology. Thus, documentation of how the disorder effects student populations would prove a challenge. Assuming that the 47,000 figure is correct, there could be any number of contributing reasons for the students to be below standards, such as a lack of adequate vocabulary skills or low attendance rates. He suggested that the task force scrutinize the multitude of reasons that may contribute to poor reading levels. Lacking a common definition, the term dyslexia should be removed from the bill and be replaced with terminology that educators use on a daily basis. The bill shows good intent, he stressed, but use of terminology that isn't represented in statute, and not proposing a definition, presents a problem. Referring to the first speaker, he said Margie Gillis offered a good model to consider. A variety of approaches are, and need to be, implemented when teaching reading, recognizing the ineffectiveness of a one size fits all method. Align the language of the bill with that of existing statute prior to passage, he urged.

[9:29:47 AM](#)

ANTHONY HABRA, Superintendent, stated concern for HB 64, shadowing the sentiments of the previous testifier, Woody Wilson, and the focus on dyslexia without consideration of other detrimental effects on early reading. Implementation of a universal screening model would be a benefit, he said. Students who enter school with a low vocabulary, and those experiencing trauma may have their reading skills affected. Haines uses a program called Fast ForWord to great benefit with annual gains

that average 1.75 percent; however, there are no silver bullets for identifying reading issues. Two questions need to be addressed: what's good for students, and what's fiscally responsible. He urged the committee, when determining seats for the task force, to rely heavily on educators.

9:32:20 AM

REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ noted that some sources report 20 percent of the learning population showing signs of dyslexia, and asked what other major factors impede reading progress.

MR. HABRA said learning to read is influenced by a number of factors, which include limited learning time, trauma, and poverty. Homes where there is a lack of conversation and few words are spoken can also be an issue. He said focusing on dyslexia alone will not solve the hurdles involved in teaching a child to read.

REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ clarified that dyslexia is one problem, and other contributing factors complicate the issue.

MR. HABRA agreed.

REPRESENTATIVE ORTIZ pointed out that the term dyslexia is not identified in educational forums as a topic connected with reading deficiency.

MR. HABRA opined that citing dyslexia as the cause for 47,000 students being identified as reading challenged is inaccurate and limiting.

CHAIR DRUMMOND referred to the bill, page 2, lines 14-15, and the language indicating that the task force will address reading proficiency for all students, and the effects of dyslexia on some students. The intent of the bill, she stressed, is to address the critical issue of reading deficiencies in general. Further, she reported that dyslexia has been a topic at school board meetings for the twenty years that she's been involved.

9:38:02 AM

AMY SPARGO, Executive Director, Instruction, Matanuska-Susitna School District, opined, "Next to student safety, certainly a public schools responsibility to teach students to read is one of the most important things, if not the most important thing, we can do." The Palmer School District undergoes a six year

curriculum review, as per state regulations, she reported, where only evidence-based programs are considered and implemented. The situation is different in the charter schools, as they enjoy a level of academic freedom and means to address learning needs in accordance with their specific charter versus the district system. The district monitors student reading progress, and when it is found to be static the schools and families engage in a responsive intervention problem solving approach, similar to what was described as being used in Connecticut. She said dyslexia is a concern. She reported that dyslexia is used as a general term related to reading disabilities, similar to the relationship of dysgraphia, or dyscalculia to writing and mathematical difficulties. Consideration is given to a student's ability to read fluently, as well as comprehension skills, to determine how to meet an individual's needs. She cited a plethora of information and named a myriad of approaches that are available to identify reading issues and assist a student. She said, "What is driving our practices right now is our ability to provide small group, and one on one instruction; and that's a human resources issue." The fulltime literacy coach position, that served the district's elementary schools, has been cut to halftime and it's tenuous whether it will be retained due to budget constraints. The district maintains the stance that those closest to the issue, most invested in the students, and who are knowledgeable about local needs and resources are best suited to make the decisions regarding instructional practices and use of evidence-based programs. Thus, HB 64 presents a concern as an encroachment on local control. The district certainly welcomes legislative support for improving reading in the state. However, the best support would be increased staffing, increased professional development, and the opportunity to team-up with focus groups, such as the Reading Coalition, she opined, and questioned whether a task force is the best means for approaching the reading issue.

9:42:00 AM

LUCY HOPE, Executive Director, Student Support Services, Matanuska-Susitna School District, expressed concern for HB 64, and echoed the sentiments of the previous speaker, Amy Spargo. She said it's important to identify effective reading instruction. Regardless of a student's diagnosis, the focus is in helping them to gain reading skills. Early detection of a student's reading difficulties is key; however, the state repealed the early literacy screening legislation. The Matanuska-Susitna School District, like many districts, has continued to perform K-3 literacy screening. It is a human

resources dilemma: the district has effective measures to put into place but it can't be done when large numbers of students are entering the system and staff and time is limited. Finally, she said, Dyslexia is included in the umbrella of specific learning disabilities under federal law; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Special education is an area that is routinely under staffed, and anyone who is hired should receive effective, professional development in the area of teaching reading, she opined.

[9:44:19 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PARISH pondered what other approach, outside of assembling a task force, might be taken to provide a comprehensive report for the legislature to review and consider on this important topic.

MS. HOPE pointed out the steps, as previously stated, that the district is exercising and which have improved graduation rates. She said it is important to determine what approaches are working and how best to apply effective programs.

REPRESENTATIVE PARISH congratulated the district on increasing its graduation rate, and restated his question.

MS. SPARGO responded: direct work with the commissioner, "leaning in" with other educators, and keeping actions site specific. The most efficient mechanism for change is a direct approach, she opined.

[9:47:37 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ORTIZ noted that a human resources issue has been mentioned as the best means for making gains and improvements statewide in the area of reading. He said it appears that what works is a known, and it revolves around financial resources to put what works into play.

MS. SPARGO concurred.

[9:49:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ commented that the value of the physics education task force was bringing people together to share best practices and establish a baseline of understanding at the policy maker's level. One of the challenges is that the policy makers don't hold the same understanding as those who are

specialists in a given area. A task force is helpful as it serves to level the playing field, she opined, and asked about the early literacy screening that was repealed from statute and asked when that occurred.

MS. HOPE recalled that it may have been repealed in the spring 2015.

REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ asked for the rationale behind the repeal.

MS. HOPE reserved speculation on the reason(s) for the action.

[9:51:47 AM](#)

POSIE BOGGS, Alaska Reading Coalition, stated support for HB 64 and said a task force would be a good vehicle for bringing attention to the issue and achieve consensus among the districts about implementation factors and to identify effective site specific applications of programs to improve student outcomes. She referred to the committee packet and a guidance letter [Assistant Secretary, U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, dated 10/25/15] which explains explicitly how the term dyslexia is to be used. "It should answer anybody's questions," she said. The goal of the reading coalition is that every child learning to read should have the best teacher before them at all times and that the dose of intervention be correct for each child.

[9:53:43 AM](#)

ROBERT BOYLE, Superintendent, Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District (KGBSD), stated support for HB 64 and opined that reading ability may be the most critical aspect for a student to succeed through their educational career, as it is fundamental to academia. Current best practices begins with parent's engaging their child at an early age and creating a rich reading environment. The best educational practice is to screen early and identify any pre-reading deficiencies by age four. The early identification screening that was established has been cut by legislative action; however, he reported, KGBSD still screens children enrolling in kindergarten and necessary intervention strategies are immediately provided. The district's reading programs for K-6 uses research based diagnostic tools, curriculum, and intervention techniques. Trained reading specialists are on staff to administer the response to intervention (RTI) program in each of the elementary schools.

The result is that Ketchikan students have a high literacy rate. The district has learned that early screening, early support, and professionally applied research based programs will result in successful students. Please, consider reinstating the statute for an early screening process and provide departmental funding, he implored. Pre-school may be the most effective intervention possibility, he suggested, when it's constructed with teachers who have the appropriate skills. He referred members to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition, also referred to as the DSM-5, published by the American Psychiatric Association, to point out that page 67 includes a description of reading with word accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. The manual defines dyslexia as an alternative term, used to refer to a pattern of learning difficulties, characterized by problems with accurate or fluent reading recognition. There is more to be gleaned on the topic from this manual, he stressed, and suggested that committee members use it as a reliable resource.

[9:58:01 AM](#)

JANET DONNELLY, Representative, Future Frontiers Tutoring, recounted how her teacher training lacked instruction specific to identifying a student's reading disabilities; a deficiency which she realized in her first year of teaching. Following that initial year, she discovered and incorporated the Slingerland Approach, which she used to benefit students throughout the remainder of her career. Now retired, she continues to tutor students. The majority of them have specific language disabilities, or English as a second language, but none have been identified as such by their classroom teachers, she reported.

[10:01:14 AM](#)

MIKE BRONSON, Volunteer, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), expressed support for HB 64 and SB 27, stating that a task force will be a fantastic opportunity for the legislature to meet its constitutional obligation to provide an adequate, public school system. The Alaska Measures of Progress (AMP) scores indicate that about 80,000 students are lagging behind the national standards for reading, writing and mathematics. A task force will be helpful to provide the legislature with a means to understand the issue and consider policy for rectifying the reading and writing skills of Alaska's K-12 students. Although the bill's time line could be shortened, he opined, the NAACP likes what it proposes

and holds the expectations that, through the clear objectives it establishes, it will serve to bring dyslexia into a firm light to be addressed appropriately by the professional educators of Alaska.

[10:04:33 AM](#)

LISA SKYLES-PARADY, PhD, Executive Director, Alaska Counsel of School Administrators (ACSA), reported that recently over one thousand educators came together for a hosted workshop on the response to intervention/instruction (RTI) program and the multi-tiered support method. She explained her understanding that dyslexia is a spectrum that manifests in a variety of forms along with many other reading disabilities, such as autism, and intense trauma. It is known that targeted instruction in reading, as provided by specialized teachers, is effective, she reported, and districts employ staff to the extent that budgets allow. She commented that the need to avoid unfunded mandates appears to have been taken into account in the drafting of HB 64. Educators, literacy specialists, and school administrators should be seated on the task force, to ensure a working partnership with the legislature, she suggested.

CHAIR DRUMMOND closed public testimony.

[10:09:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KOPP commended introduction of the bill, and acknowledged that literacy issues exist, as well as deficiencies in math. Reforms are often challenged, and the task force could serve as a forum to identify the necessary, best practices to apply. The bill does not present an unfunded mandate, he noted and opined that the labor force for Alaska will be bolstered by eradicating reading disabilities.

[10:11:48 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PARISH moved to report HB 64 out of committee with individual recommendations and the [forthcoming] fiscal notes.

[10:12:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE TALERICO objected for discussion.

[10:12:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE TALERICO suggested holding the bill in order to address the concerns that have been raised through testimony. However, he said the bill appears to be in order and supportable.

[10:13:07 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FANSLER noted that concerns raised in testimony were relevant, particularly regarding who is on the task force. Lacking an immediate amendment, he said he would also like to see the bill held in committee.

[10:14:02 AM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease.

[10:14:49 AM](#)

CHAIR DRUMMOND concurred with the sentiments expressed by members and announced that HB 64 was held over.

[The motion made by Representative Parish and the objection made by Representative Talerico were left pending.]

[10:15:23 AM](#)

CHAIR DRUMMOND thanked the participants and announced the next meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:15 a.m.