

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

April 16, 2019

8:59 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair
Senator Shelley Hughes, Vice Chair
Senator Chris Birch
Senator Mia Costello
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 6

"An Act relating to early education programs provided by school districts; relating to funding for early education programs; and relating to the duties of the state Board of Education and Early Development."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 6

SHORT TITLE: PRE-ELEMENTARY PROGRAMS/FUNDING

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) BEGICH

01/16/19	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/7/19
01/16/19	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/19	(S)	EDC, FIN
03/21/19	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/21/19	(S)	Heard & Held
03/21/19	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/16/19	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

STEPHANIE BERGLUND, Chief Executive Officer
thread

Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director
Best Beginnings
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

DAVID NEES, representing himself
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Raised questions about data on the effectiveness of pre-K programs.

PATTY OWEN, Director
Alaska Public Health Association
Juneau, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

DAVID BOYLE, representing himself
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Asked for more research about the efficacy of pre-K programs.

BRIDGET WEISS, Ph.D., Superintendent
Juneau School District
Juneau, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

POSIE BOGGS, Alaska Reading Coalition
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

TIM PARKER, President
NEA-Alaska
Fairbanks, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

PATTY MERITT, representing herself
Fairbanks, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6 with some recommendations.

JUDY ELEDGE, representing herself
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Opposed SB 6.

ESTHER PEPIN, representing herself
Naknek, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

LAURA BONNER, representing herself
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

JENNIFER SCHMITZ, State Representative
Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals
Principal

Scenic Park Elementary School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

STEPHANIE GISH, Discovery Preschool
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

KATHY CLARK, representing herself
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

LISA SKILES PARADY, Ph.D., Executive Director
Alaska Council of School Administrators
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 6.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:59:51 AM](#)

CHAIR GARY STEVENS called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:59 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Begich, Birch, Hughes, and Chair Stevens. Senator Costello joined shortly thereafter.

SB 6-PRE-ELEMENTARY PROGRAMS/FUNDING

[9:00:04 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS announced the consideration of SB 6. He noted that the committee had run out of time for public testimony at the first hearing. He stated his intention to allow time for public testimony today and then to hold the bill in committee.

[9:00:35 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH, speaking as prime sponsor, said he introduced the bill at the last hearing and he wanted people to have a

chance to hear from the public. He emphasized that early education was absolutely essential. When he met with the governor last week, the governor asked him what solutions would make a difference in education. The Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) material provided to the committee conclude that evidence-based early education, requiring higher levels of certification, ensuring collaboration and cooperation with existing early education programs, leads to substantial positive outcomes for kids in both urban and rural Alaska. The successes of reading skills by third grade and even in eighth grade are significant. He expressed an interest in hearing from the professionals and the public. He said he that hoped over the interim the committee could fine tune the bill based on today's testimony.

[9:02:04 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES said she has read that early education can be helpful, but it can balance out in later grades. If the teaching is good, students can catch up. She wondered whether some children were simply not mature enough to begin school. Students in Finland start school later, at seven or eight years of age, and these students perform fabulously. She acknowledged he was a fan of the Finnish model, so she welcomed his comments.

SENATOR BEGICH said that some studies show the effects fade, but it depends on the studies and the quality of the prekindergarten programs. Evidence-based, high-quality prekindergarten, such as the Oklahoma model or other models that were used to develop this bill, do not show the fade effects over time. The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) results, whether in the Mat-Su or the Lower Kuskokwim, show that not only are the accelerated differences clear, but these results are retained even in the older age groups. He pointed out that the districts are now in the tenth year of consistent pre-K programming.

Second, the Perry pre-K project tracked pre-K kids into adulthood using a wide variety of indicators, such as income and criminal justice interactions. This data showed those kids do not become wards of the state. He characterized the Finnish model as complex, with results that were not just about the age of maturity. Alaska has a unique situation, particularly in rural Alaska and in Anchorage, due to the numerous dual-language students. The majority of the Anchorage School District is comprised of minority students with over 100 languages are spoken. He offered his belief that his district is the most diverse senate district in the United States. The data in Alaska

seems to show that the earlier students are prepared to enter the school system the better. He offered to produce studies to support his comments. He suggested that the committee consider holding a hearing during the interim to provide more time for him to more directly address those questions. The Finnish model works, he said. However, Finland has a fairly uniform language pool and Alaska has a diverse one.

9:06:24 AM

CHAIR STEVENS moved to invited testimony.

9:06:49 AM

STEPHANIE BERGLUND, Chief Executive Officer, thread Alaska, Anchorage, spoke in support of SB 6. She said "thread Alaska" is Alaska's childcare resource and referral network, a 33-year-old private nonprofit that works to increase access to affordable and quality early care and education. Thread supports expanding quality, early childhood education services, including pre-K. Decades of research demonstrates that pre-K makes a difference, not just in the short term but in the long term as children grow, become employed and contribute to the strength of the economy. Early and sustained participation in quality early education leads to more children graduating from high school, higher lifetime earnings, reduced public spending on remedial education and services, and lower incarceration rates. This is especially true if the administration invests in struggling schools or targets disadvantaged populations to help close the achievement gap. Work done to close the achievement gap before children start school puts children in a more successful school trajectory.

MS. BERGLUND said that a 2016 Texas study on its public pre-K programs that targeted at-risk three and four-year-old children found that children who attended full-day pre-K programs scored 28 points higher on the standardized third grade reading exams and had a 40 percent higher likelihood of reading at a college-ready pace. Programs with higher investments yielded even better results. In 2017, Montana students who enrolled in the STARS preschool showed a 21 percent overall increase in school readiness. Findings published in December 2018 showed that students who participated in North Carolina's More at Four Pre-K, reduced the likelihood of repeating a grade between the third and eighth grades. These findings included a 36 percent reduction in special education placements. Positive program outcomes were consistent from third to eighth grade, reinforcing a continuity of positive impacts. The findings showed that more vulnerable populations, including students from economically

diverse backgrounds, averaged higher scores than their counterparts without an early education foundation.

MS. BERGLUND said that Alaska's pre-K services are working. Children participating in pre-K have shown growth in cognitive, language, literacy, and math development. Further, the pre-K program is meeting all ten benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research. While these benchmarks demonstrate high-quality, the current grant reaches a small number of children. Expanding this high-quality, early childhood education through SB 6 would continue to promote school readiness, identify and provide support for the children most at need and maximize parental choice. It would provide continuity of care through collaborative, mixed delivery systems, and support quality activities. She offered her belief that access to high-quality, early education programs were desperately needed in the state. In fact, thread estimates that only half of the needed spaces for quality, early childhood programs exist. By expanding pre-K, the organization can support families with more choices by creating more affordable and accessible opportunities for children to learn in quality settings. To reap the full benefits of pre-K investments the department must ensure that the programs are of high-quality. Elements of high-quality pre-K include highly qualified, and whenever possible, degreed professionals who are well compensated with benefits, low teacher-child ratios and small class sizes. High-quality pre-k also includes parental involvement, minimum hours of pre-K instruction, developmental screening and early intervention, and programming to provide smooth transition to kindergarten.

MS. BERGLUND said that "thread" supports SB 6 as a means to grow and sustain pre-K services. The organization encourages any pre-K services be provided in communities through a diverse delivery system. That means that pre-K in Alaska can be strengthened, with not only additional investment, but by allowing service delivery in ways that best meets individual community needs, she said. Pre-K must also align with and expand existing early childhood education services and support infrastructure. This could include existing community-based programs in addition to school district programs. Alaska's quality recognition and improvement system, QRIS, is called Learn and Grow. It is a system that provides a framework to ensure quality activities for all early childhood education program types, including pre-K.

MS. BERGLUND said that in addition to existing quality early childhood education programs for pre-K, "thread" encourages the

committee to consider full-day options. Studies show that full-day programs like ones in North Carolina may be more beneficial than part-time programs. The strongest outcomes in third grade were seen in states that invested more pre-K funding. Full-day programs provide continuity of care for young children, reduce transportation needs between care settings, which helps meet the needs of working families. Alaska is not alone in funding pre-K and early education, she said. Only three states have decreased funding for pre-K in the last two years and over 40 states have significantly increased their investments. High-quality pre-K must be followed by strong teaching and learning environments in the early elementary grades. Funding for pre-K should be aligned with increased investments in young children beginning in infancy and continue through the elementary grades. Quality early education, including pre-K, needs to be part of Alaska's economic infrastructure to help create a strong and prepared workforce. The evidence is clear that high-quality pre-K programs are among the most cost-effective interventions states can make with long-term payoffs.

CHAIR STEVENS asked if she could give them facts to support the statement that pre-K leads to lower incarceration rates.

MS. BERGLUND replied that she would provide more specific research. States with higher graduation rates see more adult successes in terms of job security and higher earnings. These graduates have more protective factors and resiliency to avoid some of society's ills.

SENATOR BEGICH said that statement is directly from the Perry preschool's study, which is the longest single study. Participants were in the preschool when the study began and are now in their 40s. It analyzed employment and incarceration rates. He offered to provide an updated reference to the Perry preschool study to the committee.

SENATOR HUGHES said that Ms. Berglund mentioned programs in Montana and North Carolina. She remarked that the results in Montana and North Carolina were impressive. She asked whether she had any information on how Alaskan students have performed on standardized test results.

MS. BERGLUND recalled that Alaska had gains. Many school districts have information about the gains in early elementary grades from pre-K interventions. She offered her belief that the Department of Education and Early Development could provide the results.

SENATOR BEGICH referred to information in members' packets on the DEED's early childhood programs, which shows the differences in outcomes for the Lower Kuskokwim, Mat-Su, Anchorage, and Nome School Districts. This information also identifies changes occurring in Alaska for the higher level, evidence-based pre-K that the department has promoted with its experimental process.

9:17:15 AM

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director, Best Beginnings, Anchorage, supported SB 6. She said Best Beginnings supports early literacy with the Imagination Library and parent education. She offered to make comments not focused on the bill, but on one aspect of early learning programs promoted by the bill. She acknowledged the significant discussion about students' low scores on state and national reading proficiency assessments. Children who are good readers by third grade are more likely to graduate from high school, attend postsecondary education or training, stay out of prison and off welfare, and become productive citizens. Some studies show up to 70 percent of people who are incarcerated are functionally illiterate.

MS. HENSLEY described ways that help children can become productive citizens. She said that the first year of life is a time of synaptic exuberance. A baby's brain makes a million synapses or neural connections every second. The more that baby is played with and talked with, sung to, and read to, the stronger the baby's brain architecture becomes, laying the foundation for learning. A few years ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended for the first time that parents read to their babies from birth. Along with enhancing the development of early literacy and language skills, reading with young children helps to nurture the relationship between parents and children and builds social and emotional skills. These results can be seen in resiliency studies, she said.

MS. HENSLEY emphasized reading is a learned skill that does not come naturally. The first step in learning to read relates to vocabulary. The more words children know, the more sounds and words children recognize strengthens every aspect of reading. In 2015, the Society for Research in Child Development found that children who had a larger oral vocabulary at age two were better prepared academically and behaviorally for kindergarten with greater reading and math achievement and better self-regulation.

MS. HENSLEY described the process in how children learn to read. She explained that parents can develop their children's

vocabulary by talking and holding back-and-forth conversations with them, even as babies. A Psychological Science study found that picture books provide a richer source of unique words than conversation, containing 72 percent more unique words, which helps children expand their vocabulary. Second comes phonological awareness, the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate sounds in spoken words, and sentences. The emphasis is placed on hearing the sound in spoken words. In fact, developmental screenings are critical because it is difficult to identify when children cannot hear, she said. Third comes phonics, the connection between the letter sound and the letter that makes the sound. Finally, learning print concepts, such as knowing that print carries a message, including that print is read left to right and from top to bottom. Children need exposure to books and reading in fun and pleasurable ways in order to learn to read once school begins.

MS. HENSLEY explained that in quality early care and learning programs, children regularly read a wide variety of children's books. This month, through the Imagination Library, more than 18,000 Alaskan children from birth to age five have access to those important experiences in their own homes. These children have the opportunity to build vocabulary, hear the sounds in letters and words, connect sounds and letters, and understand print concepts. She characterized the program as being more than children receiving a book in the mailbox. Eighty-one percent of parents responded that receiving Imagination Library books increased the amount of their time spent reading with their children. Eighty-seven percent of parents reported that reading with their children helped them form closer relationships and that the children enjoyed reading together. Eighty-four percent reported that their children were more excited about reading. These positive experiences with books and reading are reinforced in the kinds of programs promoted by this bill, she said. She emphasized that she is passionate about ensuring that all Alaskan children have access to books and the early literacy experiences necessary to become good readers. It is really one of the best investments for their future, she said.

[9:24:13 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked for an assessment of early learning and pre-K funding in the governor's budget and the House version of the budget.

MS. HENSLEY replied the governor's budget cut virtually all the funds for early learning, including \$2 million for pre-K program grants. The school districts have consistently received these

grants for a number of years. The governor's budget cut \$1.2 million for schools as part of the Moore settlement, and \$475,000 for the Parents as Teachers program. She reported that the governor's budget cut \$6.8 million for Head Start, which is the state matching portion for the federal \$40 million. The governor's budget cut \$320,000 for Best Beginnings. As a consequence, the Head Start program reported that 138 jobs would be lost, and programming would not be available for hundreds of children. Further, twelve to fifteen communities may not have any early childhood programs. Funding was cut for the home visiting programs located in a number of communities throughout the state, she said. The department could also provide information about the consequences of cutting the pre-K grants, she said.

MS. HENSLEY offered to focus on Best Beginnings, noting that the state has invested \$320,000 annually for the public-private partnership since this program began. The Imagination Library in Alaska is set up very differently than in the rest of the country. Alaska's program has been held up as a model program by the Dollywood Foundation. Twenty-eight Imagination Library affiliates are supported by Best Beginnings, many with funding but all offer training and technical assistance. The necessary resources exceed \$320,000, which meets half of the budget costs for Best Beginnings. In 2018, 223,729 books provided by Best Beginnings and local communities, valued at \$2.9 million were delivered to 112 communities, she said.

MS. HENSLEY pointed out hearing testimony that parents should take responsibility for teaching their children. While parents have the base responsibility to do so, for \$30 per child per year, from birth to age five, families can have as many as 60 books in their home libraries. In other states, kindergarten teachers reported that Imagination Library children exhibited more school readiness, which is very valuable to kindergarten teachers. It helps them pull a group of children together, she said. Some studies indicate that children who attend pre-k also have higher math achievement, she said.

CHAIR STEVENS asked for clarification on the funding in the House budget.

MS. HENSLEY reiterated the figures.

9:30:13 AM

SENATOR BIRCH said the Constitution of the State of Alaska requires the state to establish a system of public schools

without reference to pre-K or Kindergarten. Therefore, the judgement and responsibility to provide funding outside of the constitutional requirements are vested with the legislature and governor, he said. In the Molly Hootch case, {Alaska Supreme Court, Tobeluk v. Lind] a young woman said children are entitled to an education in their communities under the Constitution of the State of Alaska. One challenge the legislature has after passage of Senate Bill 26 last legislature, is that the state has a finite revenue, eh said.

He offered his belief that the legislature would need to make a policy call on the amount of permanent fund dividend dollars versus public services dollars to fund government.

SENATOR BIRCH said that everyone hopes that adults have good parenting skills, but this is not always the case. He asked for further clarification on her perspective about screen time impacts on pre-K children. He recalled previous committee discussions on educators who use distance delivery using internet tools. He further asked whether the state should support or moderate that concept.

MS. HENSLEY responded that she has long been interested in the impacts of of media screen time on children. In 1994, she began working with parents and childcare providers to provide public television to young children. About two years ago the American Academy of Pediatricians modified its position on screen time, which was not based on research, from advocating for no screen time for children under the age of two to recommending that screen time for children under the age of two should be more interactive with a parent. One beneficial screen time use for children and grandparents is FaceTime. This allows children to interact with grandparents or other family members, she said. When a person talks to children via FaceTime, it provides almost the same quality of interaction as when children and grandparents are in the same room. But experts still find that kids have too much unattended screen time. She referred to a section on the Best Beginnings website that provides resources and help for parents. A recent study said that e-books are probably better for older kids, but print books provide greater benefit for young children than e-books since children can lose track of the story with an e-book, she said.

SENATOR BEGICH said that based on a task force that he and Senator Stevens served on, he has been contemplating early education as an opportunity to provide developmental screening for audio and visual. He asked for her professional perspective.

MS. HENSLEY replied that one thing she found in her work with ARISE [Anchorage Realizing Indigenous Student Excellence] with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council a few years ago was that most children have hearing screenings at birth, but not again until entering school. She said that is a long period when no one would know whether these children can see or hear well. For phonological awareness, children must hear the sounds in letters and words to learn how to make sense of the words. For example, it is important to identify when children cannot distinguish the difference between sounds *p* and *t*, to help determine the type of intervention that might be needed. She offered her belief that that type of screening would be valuable.

[9:36:49 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH said that one element of high-quality early education is related to social interaction. Part of the Finnish model involves social interaction in order to prepare children for a learning environment. Early education is about developing reading and social skills, not screen time, he said.

MS. HENSLEY said one reason the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends reading to children from birth is to help children develop social and emotional attachments. In Finland, formal reading education starts at age 7 but it also involves substantial play-based education. However, that play-based educational component was sometimes lost in America because the first-grade curriculum has been pushed into kindergarten. The AAP has expressed concern that the kindergarten curriculum will be pushed down into pre-K, she said. She emphasized the importance of developing pre-K programs and standards in line with age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate standards. She expressed her concern that educators might make things even more academic, which would ultimately hurt children.

SENATOR HUGHES remarked anecdotally that she read to her children as babies and taught them to read before kindergarten. Her daughter began reading to her own son when he was a few weeks old. She said she found it fascinating to see how much her grandson, now one year old, enjoys that time.

CHAIR STEVENS [opened public testimony].

[9:40:52 AM](#)

DAVID NEES, representing himself, Anchorage, raised questions about data used to rate the effectiveness of pre-K programs. He

said that pre-K has been offered in Alaska at least since 2001. The McDowell Group "ARISE" report did a good job of reviewing the data from 2010 to 2016. He offered his belief that committee packet information was an incomplete snapshot because it only included one year, but the available data spans many years. Anchorage has had a consistent gap between the Native and non-Native population. While Cook Inlet Tribal Council has taken a good approach, the CITC is missing longitudinal data. He said that the Yupiit School District has consistently been ranked as one of worse performing school districts in the state, even though YSD has 92 percent pre-K enrollment. He questioned spending \$50 million a year in state funding for Head Start if it does not produce measurable results. Other studies indicated the lack of a male in a household was a better predictor of poor performance in school and subsequent arrests and incarcerations. Alaska regulations, 4AAC 06.712 requires all children entering kindergarten be tested, but it does not provide any guidance of how to use the data. When he served on the House Education Task Force five years ago, the assistant commissioner at the time was considering a longitudinal study on Head Start, but it was never completed or published. He emphasized that the districts need the data.

MR. NEES said that there is no Constitution of the State of Alaska mandate to provide education prior to the 7th grade. He suggested that if the legislature decides to fund [Head Start] based on anecdotal evidence, it should seek long-term evidence to determine how many students graduated from high school, went to college, or were incarcerated. Even though thousands of children have gone through the program, the administration does not have data to determine its success or whether the free books program, [Imagination Library], has had a positive impact. Without data, the districts and the legislature must consider the main drivers. In his view, one of the main drivers would be for districts to run a pilot program for five years and count the children in their ADM [average daily membership]. Using the multiplier effect, the further away the districts are from Anchorage, the more money the legislature could put into the program.

He said that SB 6 has merit, but the committee also needs to obtain longitudinal data. In 2014, DEED's former commissioner and assistant commissioner started the study. The legislature should obtain that data and analyze the \$60 million investment, he said.

CHAIR STEVENS said he made some good points for the committee to follow up on.

[9:46:56 AM](#)

PATTY OWEN, Director, Alaska Public Health Association, Juneau, supported SB 6. She said the Alaska Public Health Association is a statewide organization of health professionals and other community members dedicated to improving health and well-being in Alaska. APHA is an affiliate of the American Public Health Association, which was on record as supporting universal preschool programs. She reminded members that this is also an important public health issue. The APHA considers education as one of primary social determinants of health, along with things like economic status and housing, she said. Education strongly correlates with a longer life expectancy and improved health status. Early education is particularly important, not just for school readiness, but also for brain development, positive social and emotional and cognitive development. The experts know that adverse childhood experiences have detrimental effects on young people, including diseases and other adverse health outcomes later in life. Early childhood development opportunities can help provide protective factors to offset those adverse childhood experiences. The APHA is very supportive of early childhood development to improve health and education, she said. She clarified that she was referring to quality early education and quality K-12 education.

[9:49:40 AM](#)

SENATOR BIRCH remarked that people typically immunize their children but lately some pushback against vaccinations has occurred, which has had adverse impacts. He asked for further clarification on vaccinations in general and in public schools since substantial numbers of kids are congregated together in that setting.

MS. OWENS replied that the public health community was united in its support for immunizations.

CHAIR STEVENS expressed concern about shocking news related to disease outbreaks.

SENATOR BEGICH recalled an earlier discussion on developmental screening. He said he is contemplating adding language to the bill related to developmental screening. He asked whether Ms. Owens could play a role in developing an adequate screening tool. He further recalled that screening arose as part of the

Task Force on Reading Proficiency and Dyslexia Task Force, which was something Ms. Hensley also described.

MS. OWENS responded that she could research it but believe the APHA would be interested.

[9:51:39 AM](#)

DAVID BOYLE, representing himself, Anchorage, asked for more research about the efficacy of pre-K programs. He said that everyone in the state wants what is best for Alaskan children, but the state must proceed carefully in any efforts to improve education outcomes. Before the [legislature and the districts] spend money on a perceived problem, the legislature must evaluate the efficacy of pre-K programs in Alaska and across the nation.

He said he read most of the documents in the bill packet. He expressed concern over the "cherry picking" of research to justify universal pre-K in Alaska. He strongly recommended that the committee conduct its own research, consider questions, and use the most reliable, gold standard randomized research to decide if pre-K programs present the appropriate approach. Initially, it might seem like the right thing to do, but pre-K may have unintended consequences, he said. The greatest downside might result in less parental involvement in their children's education. When the state substantially provides early education, parents are absolved of the responsibility to provide it. He advocated for more parental involvement in pre-K and K-12 education and his concern that the state was replacing the parent as the primary teacher.

MR. BOYLE said that in addition, the majority of pre-K majority studies do not show any difference after third grade between the control group and those children who were enrolled in pre-K. The most recent longitudinal data in the Vanderbilt study shows that the control-group kids had higher achievement than those in the pre-K group, which he found unbelievable. The Vanderbilt study provided the gold standard research, which compared two randomly selected groups of children. Even the federal government's study on Head Start demonstrated that there were no significant differences in student achievement after the third grade. He other states' pre-K programs, noting the Alabama has the highest rating for a pre-K program from the National Institute for Early Education Research. The reading proficiency rate in the Montgomery public schools was less than one percent according to the state standardized test. He asked members to consider the impact of an excellent pre-K program and identify the solution.

He suggested a pilot program that would actively engage parents involved in their children's early education. The program should teach parents how to teach their children phonics, reading, and basic math. Some parents who want to be involved lack the knowledge of how to help. He said he places his faith in parents who know their kids better than the government does. He expressed concern that spending more money on pre-K won't produce needed results.

CHAIR STEVENS asked Mr. Boyle to inform the committee staff how to access the Vanderbilt study.

SENATOR BEGICH reminded members that SB 6 would not expand Head Start. He referred to a list of studies in members' packets, including a study of the Arkansas Better Chance program. Children who participated in the Better Chance program scored higher on kindergarten measures of vocabulary, math skills, and an understanding of print concepts than students who did not. There are a number of studies for every state that provide some form of universal pre-K. "No cherry picking here, Mr. Chairman, just the facts," he said.

SENATOR HUGHES said the committee previously discussed a policy to ensure that every child reads proficiently by the third grade. That policy would seem to meet the sponsor's goal, she said. She agreed with Ms. Hensley on the importance of healthy play and activities for young children. She highlighted Finland's early education program, which does not focus on actual phonics and letters until age seven that has had excellent results. She was unsure if any studies were done related to states with Read by Nine programs. She cautioned that it was not possible to isolate the effects of preschool if the schools also use a Read by Nine approach. She pointed out that the committee hasn't discussed child readiness for math, just for reading. She questioned whether the committee would like to focus expand its focus. The districts have been running pre-K programs long enough to acquire the data about the impacts all the way through high school graduation, she said.

She reported that Alaska currently spends about \$11 million a year for the [pre-K] programs. The fiscal notes for SB 6 indicate that amount would increase. She said that using the multiplier effect once the children are added to the BSA [base student allocation] would relate to a significant number of dollars. She would like the longitudinal data from the Department of Education.

CHAIR STEVENS said committee will request that data from the department.

10:00:03 AM

BRIDGET WEISS, Ph.D., Superintendent, Juneau School District (JSD), Juneau, supported SB 6. She said she wanted to share a Juneau project that has been dear to her heart. The community has spent considerable time over the last few years discussing early childhood and high-quality childcare from ages zero to five. The community has grave concerns about the availability and capacity for high-quality childcare, she said. Mayor Weldon put together a Child Care Task force (CCTF), comprised of seven members, including assembly members and community members. The CCTF members were tackling that issue as a city to decide what funds it can contribute and the potential scope of the program. The JSD uses local funds, state funds, and partners with other Southeast communities in a five-year STEPS grant for pre-K facilitated by the Association of Alaska School Boards, she said.

DR. WEISS agreed that the committee members raised important questions about data and tracking. She said she hoped that the JSD would seek data for the district during the interim. She asked the committee to realize the many variables when it reviews the data. Educational data is seldom scientific, she said. She said when Juneau considered its targeted population for early childhood programs, it wanted to identify students who live in economically disadvantaged homes.

She highlighted Juneau's program, KinderReady, which hosts children aged three to five. This year the district has expanded the program from one classroom last year to three classrooms. About 60 percent of the students in each classroom reside in economically disadvantaged homes. One piece that the JSD has gained through that process was family engagement. That is a different view than the testimony the committee heard earlier, which suggested family engagement and responsibility for children's education. She said that it would be wonderful if every child in Alaska lived in a high-functioning home, that their children's activities were a priority, and that these children came to school ready to learn. However, the reality is that many families are in crisis across Alaska, she said. Sometimes these crises are due to language challenges, as Senator Begich stated. Other times the crises are due to economic factors and other traumatic experiences.

DR. WEISS said that when the districts track that data it is important to see the impact, but it may be relational in comparison to children from families who may not have any challenges. The Juneau School District commits 13 classrooms to preschool. Seven classrooms are for special education programs, plus the district has three KinderReady programs. The district also uses two classrooms to support Head Start and has a Montessori classroom that was a blended pre-K and kindergarten classroom. She characterized the JSD program as a strong commitment.

She related her experience working with Family Promise, a program for homeless families, designed to help the families to transition into their own homes. She described watching a child go from homeless, to kindergarten, and to a K-3 program. It represented a beautiful example of the continuum that the most vulnerable children need. She highlighted the many layers of need including academic, social/emotional, self-regulation, and parent engagement at an earlier level. She said that these areas were ones in which the district can help guide families who may not know how to read to their children, what it means to connect with the schools. Many of these parents had their own traumatic school experiences, so these parents don't seek support from the district. However, parents viewed the district as meeting their kids' needs, the children might enter the district systems earlier and the district can start influencing them. She offered her belief that there are a lot of moving parts that can make a difference. The districts can start putting some of those data pieces together, she said.

SENATOR BIRCH thanked her for her advocacy for children. She asked about the onsite daycare in Juneau. He asked whether there is commercial or government support for daycare because it is a component of zero to five.

DR. WEISS answered that Juneau has some daycare, such as the day care in the federal building for the U.S. Coast Guard. The community has experienced day care closures due to the financial challenges. The Child Care Task Force is reviewing that issue, she said. The continuum from zero to age 5 is childcare. This is something the task force would like to be high quality learning, she said. The continuum is something the CCTF has been reviewing. The CCTA has been creative about where to look in Juneau to increase capacity and quality.

She related that one issue raised earlier related to health care screenings. The districts are federally required to do Child

Find, she said. The districts are obligated to pursue students who have special needs that have not yet been identified. The district also partners with the Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC) on early learning and performs screening at early learning fairs.

10:09:10 AM

POSIE BOGGS, Alaska Reading Coalition, Anchorage, spoke in support of SB 6. She said that reading starts in infancy. The ARC supports high-quality preschool and early literacy screening. The result is to produce intervention if needed. If schools had high-quality early literacy screening and preschool, she would not need to tutor a ten-year old to read or teach a 35-year-old had he had early screening in preschool. He is now learning to read with her help, along with an online reading coach. She would like the committee to consider early preschool screening as a parental right. Parents do not have the knowledge to be aware of what to look for. She asked if parents naturally know about phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, orthographic mapping, and other topics.

MS. BOGGS said that regarding Senator Hughes' comments about Finland, it is important to understand that it is easy to learn to read Finnish. One letter has one sound. English has 26 letters and 44 sounds. It is extremely difficult to learn. English is considered an opaque language, not a transparent language such as Finnish, Spanish, or Turkish. He emphasized the importance to start literacy as early as possible because of the nature of English. The first thing Finland did when it went from a poor education system to one of the best was to close every school except the five best and then standardize its teacher preparation courses. That fact gets buried with the love affair the districts seem to have with Finland.

MS. BOGGS agreed with Senator Hughes that children do not catch up. The NAEP reported that 12th grade reading outcomes are just as dismal as fourth grade reading outcomes. She offered her belief that the country wouldn't be experiencing the cost of illiteracy to industry is \$250 billion because the districts do not start screening and intervention in preschool. She referred the committee to contact U.S. Senator Cassidy for correlations between reading capabilities and incarceration.

10:16:19 AM

TIM PARKER, President, NEA-Alaska, Fairbanks, supported SB 6. He said educators primarily work with children ages five to 18, but the NEA also considers what happens in pre-K, because it is

interlinked to K-12. He said that when he moved to Alaska almost 30 years ago, he was surprised the department was named Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) since it is the Department of Education in other states. He said that SB 6 is helping push the state in that direction.

He reviewed the DEED's homepage, which lists Alaska's Education Challenge as the driving force within the department, with the goal to provide an excellent education for every student every day. In order to achieve that districts must focus on pre-K. One commitment of the DEED is to cultivate safety and well-being. It also provides recognition that Alaska is not like other places in the country. The state needs to provide additional focus to make sure that some of Alaska's most vulnerable students get the necessary help so these children are able to learn.

MR. PARKER cautioned that the state can't wait until children are five years old to assess whether children live in a safe environment since environmental influences have dramatic effects on student achievement. The Alaska Developmental Profile, in which 600 kindergarten teachers examine 13 areas for incoming kindergarteners. According to a 2018 department study, only 70 percent of students meet fewer than ten of those benchmarks.

He recalled the committee previously discussed the idea of return on investment. According to research from Professor James Heckman, a Nobel-winning economist from the University of Chicago, pointed to a 13 percent return on investment in the pre-K area. He cautioned that the longer the state waits to address pre-K, the less the return on investment.

MR. PARKER acknowledged that the quality of pre-K programs was important. He appreciated that Senator Begich provided a large volume of research in this area. The legislature must work with DEED to ensure quality in pre-K. The state needs a program that actually works, one that works for parents and fits Alaska. He urged member to look to their professionals and invest in Alaska's children.

[10:21:28 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS asked Mr. Parker to provide the Heckman report to the committee.

[10:21:51 AM](#)

PATTY MERITT, representing herself, Fairbanks, Alaska, supported SB 6 with some recommendations. She has worked as a professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks for over 40 years in early

childhood education. She said it is wonderful that Alaska is considering a universal pre-K option. She has three concerns with the bill. First, she expressed concern about the qualifications of the lead teacher and other adults in the classroom. Early childhood education is often misunderstood. People recognize specialized training in the health field, but not in the education field, she said. For example, this bill refers to six early childhood credits for someone who is already certified. However, the training and course of study is very different for someone to teach K-12 compared to early childhood. Most K-12 teachers have one course in child development that covers ages zero to 18 whereas early childhood development teachers take three courses to cover the same range to provide depth and foundation. Curriculum and preparation for K-12 is also very different for early childhood, she said. Assessment for K-12 is standardized, but is performance based and uses specialized observation skills for preschool. Early childhood training focuses on child guidance while training for older kids focuses on class management. She agreed that suggesting a type A certified teacher could take six credits to become a lead teacher was a significant gap in the bill.

MS. MERITT expressed concern that the bill is missing some points about quality. For example, research shows that ratios are critical, which the bill should address. Public schools, due to funding and space problems often work with large group sizes.

CHAIR STEVENS asked Ms. Meritt to send in her written recommendations.

MS. MERITT said her third point was that the bill should be equitable to childcare licensing standard requirements. For example, some childcare standards might require meeting a 1 to 10 ratio in a private setting but children in a public setting have ratios of 1 to 15 or 1 to 20.

10:28:27 AM

JUDY ELEDGE, representing herself, Anchorage, opposed SB 6. She provided a brief work history, including that she has worked in education in Alaska since 1981 and in rural and bush Alaska since 1997. She expressed frustration that people are asking for things that have already been tried, especially when considering the cost. She said the state does not address truancy, which is a problem. In her experience, attendance was even worse in pre-K. Since 2003, she has worked with low-performing schools to provide support. She has worked with the lowest of the low. It was baffling to discuss adding pre-K funding when the

legislature is reducing K-12 education and districts struggle to provide it, she said. She encouraged districts and the legislature to discussing improving the current program before adding additional grades.

MS. ELEDGE said she supports the Read by Nine effort because it has provided early screenings since 2001 when the department brought in Roland Good of DIBELS from the University of Oregon. She described her experiences working with low-achieving students in low-performing schools, noting that many of these schools don't have the capability to change. However, when schools have strong programs and strong principals, these low-performing schools can be turned around. She acknowledged that the department has limited resources. She hoped that the department would focus on K-3 reading. She has observed students enter kindergarten well behind catch up from teacher effort. She did not hear anything in testimony today that districts haven't already tried. Sometimes programs don't work well when the administration forces them on teachers, who push back. She offered her belief that the districts know what needs to be done. She expressed frustration that nothing seems to change.

10:33:08 AM

ESTHER PEPIN, representing herself, Naknek, supported SB 6. She said she is the early learning coordinator for Bristol Bay School District. As a recipient of the pre-elementary grant, her community was able to provide every four-year-old with a quality half-day pre-K program for the last three years. This has had a significant impact on child development, kindergarten readiness, and development of a culturally responsive education program. With the continuation of pre-K funding, the schools and districts hope to continue to explore a sustainable model to ensure that early learning support is a priority for their community and that the children's needs are being met. The pre-elementary grant is not a one size fits all preschool program. It is a challenge to ensure that districts develop a model responsive to their community's needs, one that supports continuity of care through a mixed delivery system. The districts respect the educational role of parents, elders and families. It is their right to participate as their children's first educators, not just at home but also in the classrooms for early learning, she said.

MS. PEPIN said that continuity of care means that preschool is not a silo learning experience and continuity includes Alaska Native ways of knowing and a Western education system. The program has ensured their young children are ready for

kindergarten. Before receiving the pre-K funding, their children averaged 25 to 30 percent fully ready for kindergarten based on the Alaska Developmental Profile. In the last three years, the school's profile score has increased from 67 and 100 percent on the 13 goals kindergarten teachers must measure. She said the district hoped this readiness will be reflected in future years and also when measuring literacy and math skills in third grade and beyond. Funding has allowed the school district to provide a responsive program that meets the social/emotional, cognitive and physical needs by providing daily opportunities for inquiry-based play. This funding also provides and trains teachers, selects and implements research-based inquiry curriculum resources, and develops a rich, support environment for children to help them develop the necessary skills to succeed in the world. Speaking as a mother who will have a child in preschool next year, she hoped that his teachers would be able to support his needs and that he will have a rich environment to socialize in and play with other children as he prepares not only for kindergarten but for his educational years.

[10:37:11 AM](#)

LAURA BONNER, representing herself, Anchorage, supported SB 6. She said SB 6 is a good long term investment. She said she previously submitted written testimony on the benefits of SB 6. She offered support for Section 3, because it created a stair-step grant program. This program could help the lowest performing districts improve, many of which are in rural areas with less access to programs. She expressed support for Section 5, regarding cultural content in the local communities and accommodations for the needs of all pre-K children and their families, regardless of socioeconomic circumstances. She suggested the bill should be expanded to include children who are three years old, and not be limited to four and five year old children. She highlighted that her daughter, now an adult, has autism but was in a special education pre-K program when she was three years old because of testing. At the time, Ms. Bonner did not know anything about autism, but she through the pre-K program she learned how to help her daughter. She acknowledged that the program has costs, but early investment costs less. She urged the committee to find the revenue to fund this important program.

[10:39:29 AM](#)

JENNIFER SCHMITZ, State Representative, Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals, Principal, Scenic Park Elementary School, Anchorage, spoke in support of SB 6. She said the Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals strongly supports

early childhood. She briefly reviewed her background, including that she served as an elementary principal in Anchorage for the past 13 years. She has seen more rigorous standards and changes in families' overall fiscal and personal situations. She taught kindergarten her first year of teaching in 1990. All but one of her students that year had attended at least one year of preschool. Today, only 12 of 85 kindergarten students in her school have attended some type of preschool program. Those who were attended preschool immediately become leaders in the classroom. She and her colleagues believe that these students will remain leaders long after kindergarten. Unfortunately, quality programs are not available to all families. These programs are difficult to find and expensive. While the number of students in high-quality programs has decreased, the standards for student expectations have increased. When her 22-year-old son was in kindergarten, it was a half day. The children played, learned social skills, did art projects, had naptime, and a basic introduction to letters and numbers. Today, kindergarten runs a full day. Students are expected to learn letters, letter sounds, letter blends, story structure, to compose and decompose numbers, add and subtract fluently to five, and many other skills. School districts have raised their rigor, which helps schools compete nationally.

MS. SCHMITZ said each year she discovers that many of her kindergarteners have never held a pencil, have never had a book read to them, and many of them have never heard English at home. These children have never had to sit in a circle, stand in a line, learn their colors, or many other things that other students experience prior to beginning school. These teachers spend much of the school year being pre-K teachers at the same time these teachers function as the kindergarten teachers. It is difficult raise these students to the appropriate level by the end of the year. Unfortunately, some students never catch up. Pre-K involves parents early on in the educational process, she said. These parents learn the importance of reading books to young children. As Ms. Hensley said, reading to children, talking and interacting with them at home is vital for reading readiness. However, without early childhood programs and resources, many parents don't recognize the importance of reading or how to teach their children. She urged the committee to support the bill to provide adequate and early funding for public education.

[10:43:11 AM](#)

STEPHANIE GISH, Discovery Preschool, Juneau, spoke in support of SB 6. She said neuroscience has confirmed that the first five

years of life are crucial to human development. Early childhood experiences lay the foundation for life. Infants are active participants in learning. Besides preparing children for kindergarten, early child educators are trained to spot trauma triggers and to build resiliency in preschoolers. Considering Alaska's high incidence of abuse and neglect, early learning programs might be the only place where healthy development is being fostered. Continued lack of investment in early education will produce dire and costly social and economic results, she said. The lifelong effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) place a significant and lifetime burden on the state. High ACE scores are correlated with poor physical and mental health, along with an increased likelihood of criminal behavior and unemployment. In short, criminals are made from children who are abused and neglected, children who cannot access healthy environments or attachments. Lowering crime rates in Alaska starts with early childhood education. Adversity and childhood trauma are not limited to the impoverished, she said. It happens to far more children than people realize, and the results can last for generations.

MS. GISH said that learning begins at birth, such that an infant's brain triples in size by age three. Their dense brains are eager to learn more about the world. Their brains cannot distinguish one type of toxic stress from another. These stresses have the same impact and capacity to impair their health and well-being for life. If the state honestly wants to make a difference for current and future Alaskans, the legislature must pave the way for high-quality care and education to begin in infancy, she said. Programs that provide developmentally appropriate, high-quality continuity of care will generate greater academic, social, and economic success.

[10:46:10 AM](#)

KATHY CLARK, representing herself, Homer, spoke in support of SB 6. She said she lived in Talkeetna when the first primary program was introduced in the elementary school for three and four-year-old children. Her son's daycare teacher was hired to run the preschool program and encouraged Ms. Clark to enroll her son. Because he entered the program when he at three-and-a-half years old, the district discovered he had dysgraphia. That early diagnosis made a huge difference in how the teachers approached his education. Currently, her son is a successful graduate and getting his contractor license at 21, she said. Early education is not only important for social issues but for learning disabilities. She referred to testimony she heard today about the availability, capacity, and quality of childcare. If the

Homer were to lose its Head Start and early preschool programs, only one church in her community would provide childcare. She expressed concern that it would cut off a substantial number of children in the community from the benefits of pre-K. Unfortunately, some parents are illiterate and cannot read with their children or help them do simple math problems. These parents now observe their children being left behind in a system that left them behind, she said. She urged members to pass SB 6 because it is important.

[10:48:38 AM](#)

LISA SKILES PARADY, Ph.D., Executive Director, Alaska Council of School Administrators, Juneau, supported SB 6. She said that Ms. Hensley, Dr. Weiss, Principal Schmitz, and others have explained the importance of this investment in early learning. The Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) 2019 joint positions statements consider early childhood as one of their highest priorities. She read the ACSA position statement on early childhood education, "ACSA believes equitable access to fully funded, sustainable preschool programs provides a foundation of excellent social, emotional and cognitive instruction to students. Research clearly demonstrates that early intervention and instruction is one of the best ways to increase student achievement across all demographics and create the greatest opportunity for all students to read proficiently by third grade. Early childhood education should be considered as part of public school funding through the BSA."

DR. PARADY said that the ACSA and their educational partners invested in a public opinion poll administered by Zogby Analytics, a highly respected international polling and research company. The poll was administered to provide a better understanding of Alaska voters' perspectives, both on pre-K and K-12 public education. The pre-K question was whether voters support or oppose state funded public preschool. The answer was overwhelming with 73.5 percent of Alaskan voters supporting state funded preschool. The evidence of public opinion is clear. Yesterday, the Anchorage Daily News published an opinion piece that she and her colleagues, Norm Wooten and Sarah Sledge, wrote. She offered to submit that opinion as written testimony. She said strongly agreed with the previously testifiers that the committee should independently research pre-K. She offered her belief that members will find that investing in early childhood programs was one of the most critical investments the legislature can make for the future success of our children and of our state.

SENATOR BEGICH disclosed that his wife is Sarah Sledge, the executive director for the Coalition for Education Equity.

10:53:02 AM

CHAIR STEVENS held SB 6 in committee.

10:53:12 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 10:53 a.m.