

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 4, 2020  
9:00 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair  
Senator Shelley Hughes, Vice Chair  
Senator John Coghill  
Senator Mia Costello  
Senator Tom Begich

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

**SPONSOR SUBSTITUTE FOR SENATE BILL NO. 6**

"An Act relating to early education programs provided by school districts; relating to funding for early education programs; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; establishing a reading intervention program for public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; establishing a literacy program in the Department of Education and Early Development; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: SB 6

SHORT TITLE: PRE-K/ELEM ED PROGRAMS/FUNDING; READING

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    |
| 04/16/19 | (S) | Heard & Held                    |
| 04/16/19 | (S) | MINUTE(EDC)                     |

|          |     |   |
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| 01/21/20 | (S) | SPONSOR SUBSTITUTE INTRODUCED-REFERRALS |
| 01/21/20 | (S) | EDC, FIN                                |
| 01/23/20 | (S) | EDC AT 3:30 PM SENATE FINANCE 532       |
| 01/23/20 | (S) | Heard & Held                            |
| 01/23/20 | (S) | MINUTE (EDC)                            |
| 01/28/20 | (S) | EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205            |
| 01/28/20 | (S) | Heard & Held                            |
| 01/28/20 | (S) | MINUTE (EDC)                            |
| 02/04/20 | (S) | EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205            |

**WITNESS REGISTER**

BOB GRIFFIN, Senior Education Research Fellow  
 Alaska Policy Forum  
 Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented research in support of proficiency-based promotion.

MARCUS WINTERS, Ph.D., Associate Professor  
 Wheelock College of Education and Human Development  
 Boston University  
 Boston, Massachusetts

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented his research on school retention.

ANJI GALLANOS, Director of Preschool through 3rd Grade Office  
 Colorado Department of Education  
 Denver, Colorado

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified on lessons learned from Colorado literacy initiatives.

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner  
 Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
 Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified about implementation questions with SB 6.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

9:00:01 AM

**CHAIR GARY STEVENS** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Costello, Coghill, Begich, Hughes, and Chair Stevens.

**SB 6-PRE-K/ELEM ED PROGRAMS/FUNDING; READING**

9:00:19 AM

CHAIR STEVENS announced the consideration of SPONSOR SUBSTITUTE FOR SENATE BILL NO. 6, "An Act relating to early education programs provided by school districts; relating to funding for early education programs; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; establishing a reading intervention program for public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; establishing a literacy program in the Department of Education and Early Development; and providing for an effective date."

CHAIR STEVENS said this is the third hearing and his intent is to hold the bill. He asked the committee to focus the discussion on the policy of retention regarding mandatory grade level reading. He asked Senator Begich for comments.

9:00:56 AM

SENATOR BEGICH, speaking as sponsor of SB 6, said the point of the bill is to ensure that the state effectively addresses students' ability to read and graduate and go on to lead meaningful lives. The committee has repeatedly said throughout the hearings that a reading program without effective early education and prekindergarten does not work. The data shows that prekindergarten without an effective reading program is not sustainable in the long run. SB 6 combines both with some extra intervention which he and the governor's office support.

CHAIR STEVENS commented that there is enormous support for the bill throughout this building, but a number of important points need to be understood better. He called Mr. Griffin to the table.

9:02:16 AM

BOB GRIFFIN, Senior Education Research Fellow, Alaska Policy Forum, Anchorage, Alaska, stated that he has worked for the Alaska Policy Forum as a volunteer education researcher for 11 years. He thanked Senator Begich and Governor Dunleavy for their bipartisan effort to help the kids of Alaska. He thanked Senator Hughes for her leadership on this issue with her bill last year. He thanked Representative Drummond and Posie Boggs and all the reading task force members that added to this "great stone soup of a bill" that will be one of the best in the country. He noted that Representative LeDoux introduced a similar reading bill as early as 2013. People have been chipping away at this and finally, a good bipartisan understanding of what needs to be done exists. He also thanked the staff at the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) for their hard work.

MR. GRIFFIN pointed out that the number one priority of the Alaska Education Challenge and the State Board of Education is to improve early childhood literacy. He advised that when he talks about this topic, he always starts with the statement that Alaska's kids are just as bright, its teachers just as dedicated, and Alaska's parents love their kids just as much as anywhere else, but policy decisions drive some of the state's disappointing outcomes.

[9:04:18 AM](#)

MR. GRIFFIN showed a map on slide 2 of his presentation to illustrate that only 13 states, including Alaska, do not have reading policies. States in dark blue have the most comprehensive reading policies. Should SB 6 pass its current form, Alaska would be the twelfth dark blue state. The committee heard [policy analyst] Tom Keily of the Education Commission of the States speak about the three components [of an early literacy policy]--prevention, intervention, and retention. SB 6 is strong in all components. Of the policies recommended by the Foundation for Excellence in Education, this bill scores strongly in 12 of 14 categories.

MR. GRIFFIN presented Alaska vs. Florida NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] Standings 2003 on slide 3 to frame "why we're here." In 2003, all states were required for the first time to participate in NAEP. Florida was average in 2003. Alaska already had some deficiencies in some areas, particularly in reading, but for eighth grade math, Alaska was ahead of Florida for kids who qualified for free or reduced lunch and kids who did not qualify, as shown by the numbers in dark blue. He noted that he breaks his work into economic strata because it makes it easier to compare high-poverty states to low-poverty states. Nationwide, there is generally a 30-point difference on the NAEP for kids who qualify for free or reduced lunch and kids who do not.

[9:06:26 AM](#)

MR. GRIFFIN said the comparison between 2003 and 2019 on slide 4 shows that Alaska slid dramatically in its standings. The numbers in red show the state finished in the bottom five in seven of the eight categories shown on the slide. In the meantime, Florida has risen to a top five finisher in four of the eight categories and has increased its standing nationwide in all eight categories. Florida was the original model for comprehensive reading policies. California was the first state

to have strong retention policies, but it did not have the 14 points of Florida's strong reading policy.

MR. GRIFFIN said the reading policies that were put in place in Florida were not just an accounting trick to make the scores for kids in fourth grade look better. The effect has been shown in eighth grade. For students eligible for free or reduced lunch for eighth grade reading, Florida went from 38th to fifth in U.S. rankings.

MR. GRIFFIN said an offensive narrative popped up last year that Alaska's Caucasian kids were doing fine. It was just Alaska's Native kids who were dragging test scores down. That drove him to do some research. The chart on slide 5 shows the difference between 2003 and 2017, which is similar to the difference between 2003 and 2019. Caucasian kids who do not qualify for free or reduced lunch moved to second to last with a slight decline in scale score while Florida had a 14-point rise in test scores for kids in this category. Alaska across the spectrum has reading issues.

MR. GRIFFIN said the slide 2003-2018 Increase in K-12 Spending Florida and Mississippi, highlighted in yellow, shows that their increase in per student spending in average daily attendance was about the national average, even though these states added the pre-K and reading programs the committee is considering.

SENATOR BEGICH said he did not appreciate the comments he made today and in the past about Alaska Natives. He continued to say, "I'm going to say one more time that you've misrepresented my position on that a number of times. When we were discussing test scores, we talked in this committee about rural and urban test scores. Your comments that continue to characterize that as a Native and White issue are not appreciated by me. And I recognize that we are working together today on this legislation, but that really has hit me hard for the last year and a half. I just really want to put that on the record. I am disappointed that you've just brought it up again."

9:10:15 AM

SENATOR HUGHES said she appreciated Senator Begich's concern, but it was important the record reflect that an op-ed described it in those same terms and it was not correct. Mr. Griffin is basically saying that many Alaska Native kids are doing fabulously. The op-ed, which was disturbing to her, claimed that Alaska Natives were dragging down the test scores.

CHAIR STEVENS stated that there is no intention to offend anyone. He added that he understood Mr. Griffin to say that Caucasians in urban Alaska are doing worse than in the past.

[9:11:28 AM](#)

MR. GRIFFIN agreed and apologized to Senator Begich. He added that the comments were in an op-ed by Dermot Cole last year and repeated in the Capitol and on the chamber floors several times. He said he reviewed the scores after the op-ed came out and it seemed odd that the upper middle income kids were near the bottom of the nation and low test scores for Native kids were somehow responsible for dragging down those test scores. He said Alaska has low test scores across the spectrum.

SENATOR BEGICH replied, "Let's try to move forward with what I'm hoping will be a way of bridging all gaps and I appreciate your comments earlier today as you opened your presentation about how we are working together in a bipartisan manner to improve reading and to improve education for all Alaskans."

MR. GRIFFIN displayed graphs on slide 7 that showed NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] fourth grade reading scores for students eligible for free or reduced lunch in states with strong vs. weak retention policies. The seven states with strong retention policies have about eight times the average point gain over three NAEP cycles than the states with weaker retention policies. This indicates more growth in students eligible for free or reduced lunch.

MR. GRIFFIN pointed to the seven studies on slide 8 that talk about the positive aspects of retention. He said the research on this is mixed, but more and more the positive aspects of retention are being found.

[9:15:36 AM](#)

MR. GRIFFIN concluded that the retention part of the bill does make a big difference for outcomes in the end.

CHAIR STEVENS asked if he could give the committee a brief idea about the difference between the strong-retention states and the weak-retention states.

MR. GRIFFIN replied he would give some examples of weak retention policies. In Arkansas students are only retained if they do not participate in an Individualized Education Program. In Oklahoma, a committee must make a unanimous decision in order for a student to be retained. In Colorado, the school and parent

jointly suggest retention but the decision is made by the superintendent. In New Mexico, parents can refuse the first retention. In Iowa, students are not retained if they attend summer school, regardless of the outcomes. Utah, Minnesota, and Virginia have good, comprehensive reading policies but no retention policy. He said his assessment is that weak retention states have significant wiggle room in their retention statutes.

CHAIR STEVENS asked him to describe the policies of strong-retention states.

9:17:55 AM

MR. GRIFFIN replied, as a general rule, strong retention states require kids to read at a basic, minimum level of proficiency. He pointed out that SB 6 says that students should be retained if they are not reading at grade level. That would be aggressive compared to some other states. A more reasonable cutline would be to retain students who score far below proficiency, as measured by the Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools (PEAKS) scores. He said the state does not know where the bottom is for those who score far below proficiency on the PEAKS but it could be not knowing the alphabet in third grade. In Florida, kids who do not demonstrate a basic proficiency reading level are considered for retention.

CHAIR STEVENS opined that retention will be a big issue as the bill progresses.

SENATOR HUGHES shared that when she looks at the chart of reading gains on slide 7, she wants Alaska to be on the side of greater gains. She said her preference is to have a proficiency-based promotion policy rather than one focused on retention. She reiterated her earlier statement that if legislators accomplished nothing other than this bill this session, it could be a game changer for these students, their futures, and the state as a whole. However, if the state continues to socially promote, the state is not going to get those outcomes.

SENATOR HUGHES proposed that legislators think hard about the goals. For example, Colorado is being considered as a policy model, but it is shown as a weak-retention state on slide 7 and its scores went down in the six years that are shown. If Alaska learns from other states and passes a bill with "teeth," retention could be phased in to avoid spikes. For instance, it could be phased in so in the first year retention would apply only to students in kindergarten. Thus, teachers and students in first, second, and third grades, who had not fully participated

in the program would not be held responsible. The Alaska Board of Education could develop an incentive program for teachers who reached certain measurable progress. In the second year, the retention policy would apply to students in kindergarten and first grade, the incentive policy would apply to students in second and third grade, and so on. By the fourth year of the program, the retention policy would apply to all four grades. She offered her view that Alaska should not fear proficiency-based promotion policy because the outcomes will be greater and students will have diplomas that will be valuable.

9:22:12 AM

SENATOR HUGHES commented that her understanding is that most of the research studies were based on students being retained without massive intervention, like what is proposed in SB 6. Children who were retained in the early grades continued to be behind the curve in the intermediate grades and were failing across the board. She said it is psychologically and emotionally traumatic to be held back, but it is also psychologically and emotionally damaging to be failing in ninth grade. With a proficiency-based promotion policy, those students who were held back in kindergarten or first grade would likely be succeeding by ninth grade. She acknowledged that the research did not apply to this type of scenario. She said she would like the goal for students held back in second grade because of reading deficiency to be to catch up to their cohorts.

CHAIR STEVENS said he appreciated her consistency in this and her contribution in the past.

SENATOR BEGICH, referring to slide 2, stated that Mr. Griffin said the Alaska Policy Forum hoped Alaska would be one of the dark blue states [representing states with strong reading policies]. He noted that Colorado and Oklahoma, shown in dark blue, are also listed as weak-retention states. He said right now, any school district in Alaska has the ability to retain kids. Mr. Griffin testified that he liked the bill because it has a detailed, comprehensive reading policy and has a condition for retention, which was one of the key parts of the 14 points of the Foundation for Excellence in Education. Senator Begich pointed out that the way the bill is construed, Alaska would be in the category of dark blue states if the legislature can maintain consistency with clear reading outcomes and known policies. For instance, kids should not progress if they do not meet those outcomes.

MR. GRIFFIN agreed. He said he has reviewed many reading bills and this is one of the better ones. Of the 14 points, retention gets the most attention. It makes people pay attention, but the other 13 points beyond retention are important to create the better outcomes Alaska seeks.

SENATOR BEGICH shared that he wants to ensure parents have a voice in the retention decision. He asked Mr. Griffin if he supported that as well.

MR. GRIFFIN replied he absolutely does. The parents' ability to appeal is universal in all those policies.

CHAIR STEVENS invited Dr. Winters to testify.

[9:27:52 AM](#)

MARCUS WINTERS, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, informed the committee that he is an economist who uses quantitative research methods to study the effects of modern education policies. One thing he has studied a lot over time is test-based promotion policies. He has particularly studied Florida's policy in a variety of ways. He said his presentation will lay out some basic findings from his studies with a brief nod to how the comparisons are made.

[9:28:56 AM](#)

DR. WINTERS said his research in Florida addressed the three questions shown on slide 2:

- What is the effect of retention under the policy on later student outcomes?
- What is the impact of the policy on student performance within the 3rd grade?
- What is the cost of retaining students under the policy?

DR. WINTERS stressed that he was looking at the effect of retention under the policy, along with the other interventions that are part of Florida's policy. He added that the question about the impact of policy within the third grade has not gotten as much attention as it deserves.

DR. WINTERS presented the effect of retention on slide 3:

- In essence, compare the later outcomes of students who scored "just" below the threshold on the reading exam

and thus triggered the policy to that of students who scored "just" above the threshold and thus were not likely to be retained

- Findings:
  - Large immediate test score increase following retention that fades over time
  - Still a large positive effect in the 10th grade if compare when at same grade level
  - No significant effect on high school graduation rate
  - No significant effect on college entry
  - Significant and substantial increase in GPA
  - Significant and substantial decrease in taking remedial high school courses

DR. WINTERS said he has done this study several times in Florida. The first study came two years after the first class was retained and the most recent one was conducted when the first cohort retained under the policy graduated from high school. That provided a look at longer outcomes and the performance trajectory.

DR. WINTERS said he described the technique of looking at those just below the threshold and those just above as regression discontinuity, which is a strong research technique used frequently in economics. It is considered as strong as a randomized control trial in many ways because it allows the comparison of two students who are very similar. The students are followed over time to see and differences in outcome.

DR. WINTERS noted that high school graduation rates are imprecisely estimated, but students who were retained in third grade under the policy had higher grade point averages in high school and took fewer remedial courses.

[9:33:16 AM](#)

DR. WINTERS said he also examined the question of whether the policy affects everyone in the third grade because it should as administrators try to avoid the perceived need for retention. The expectation is that teachers and others in the school will put more effort into pushing kids to increase reading performance to avoid falling below the cutoff. For the first year of the policy, he found a meaningful positive effect in third grade performance, prior to the retention decision. He has a working paper on a similar study he did in Arizona, which adopted a policy similar to Florida's about a decade later, and he found almost identical effects.

DR. WINTERS said he also looks at the question of whether retention under the policy is costly, particularly for taxpayers, because an additional year of schooling is much more expensive than some other reading interventions. Retention also imposes costs on the retained students, such as entering the labor market or college a year later. The point that he makes in the paper is that these costs are real, but they have been overstated in prior work.

DR. WINTERS said a student retained under the policy does not represent an additional cost to taxpayers until the student is in 12th grade. But retention is not happening in a vacuum. Being retained in the third grade under Florida's policy is associated with much less than an a full year of additional schooling. If the policy were not there, many students would have been retained in a later grade. The policy moves retention into the earlier grade and the students, on average, spend less than a full year in that status. In Florida, the academic benefits from the policy far outweighed the cost of retention when all factors are considered.

CHAIR STEVENS mentioned summer school and individual tutors and asked how the additional schooling is handled in Florida.

[9:38:44 AM](#)

DR. WINTERS answered that some students might move up and reenter their cohort, but the biggest difference is that a student who was retained in third grade because of the policy might have been retained anyway, so the policy did not increase the number of years in school for that student. If the policy did not exist, many of those students would be retained in the fourth or fifth grade or later. Being retained in third grade under the policy dramatically reduced the chances of retention in later grades. By including those students who would have been retained at a later grade in the calculation, the cost to taxpayers is less than a full year of additional schooling.

SENATOR HUGHES asked if the study only looked a school costs or if reduced special education costs were also factored in. In an earlier hearing, the committee heard that without a reading program, some students end up in special education. And from what she gathered from his testimony, he was only considering the costs to school budgets, not societal costs. She noted that some is data showing that students who do not learn to read often end up incarcerated and on public assistance.

[9:41:15 AM](#)

DR. WINTERS replied he does not have the data to show whether those students received fewer of those services. There is data showing retention increased test scores and there is data that can link increased test scores to some of those reduced services, but it is not as strong. That could be an additional reduction of costs, but it cannot be proven in the same empirical manner.

DR. WINTERS said the Florida study did not show a large decrease in the probability that retained students were placed in special education. But there is convincing work showing that increasing student performance reduces the probability of students getting a new Individualized Education Program (IEP), particularly in the category of specific learning disability. One reason that a large effect is not seen in Florida's policy is that a lot of specific learning disability classifications have been made by third grade. There was not a lot of empirical evidence one way or the other so that is not part of the cost estimate.

[9:42:55 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES asked if most states retain students primarily in third grade, or earlier. She noted there is some concern about the psychological impact about retention, and the older a child is, the greater the concern.

DR. WINTERS replied that is an interesting question, but he is not aware of work that has systematically looked at whether there is a change in retention rates prior to a student entering third grade. He said it makes intuitive sense that schools might respond that way, but he has not seen any systemic work on that. His work has been focused on measuring the effect of retention under the policy in Florida, and that is all happening in the third grade.

SENATOR HUGHES asked him to comment on the possibility of a phased-in approach for a proficiency-based promotion policy that would be paired with incentives. The full policy would only apply to the cohort of students who have had the full advantage of the great reading program. She asked if he had seen anything like that in other states and whether that might be a solution. She said this state would not want a huge number of students to repeat a grade the first year the policy is implemented, and a phased-in approach might avoid that.

[9:45:17 AM](#)

DR. WINTERS responded that he did not know of any direct evidence that looked at that approach, but there is evidence that schools respond to these policies by making improvements before third grade. His work that shows a jump in third grade performance relative to later grades suggests that schools are trying to make gains to push students over that line. Test scores do not exist for earlier grades. In the similar study in Arizona where he saw that third grade effect, some qualitative (not quantitative or empirical) research was done by WestEd. They reported through interviews with school leaders and teachers that schools were focusing on reading instruction and making changes in early grades, so there is reason to believe that schools will increase the effort prior to third grade with some incentives and other additional resources. In Florida, retention is the culmination of the policy, but other things are going on in earlier grades.

DR. WINTERS added that the other thing that should be considered when adopting these policies is where to draw the line that triggers the policy. That varies in different states. Florida saw a large increase in retention because the line between Level 1 and Level 2 was very high relative to the distribution of reading performance within the state. Trying to study the effect of retention in Arizona was difficult because the cutoff was so low that few students were retained. Policy makers need to think about where the best place is to draw that line, making sure that students who need treatment get it but also keeping in mind how many students might be affected.

CHAIR STEVENS called on Ms. Gallanos from the Colorado Department of Education.

[9:48:36 AM](#)

ANJI GALLANOS, Director of Preschool Through 3rd Grade Office, Colorado Department of Education, Denver, Colorado, shared that she was a former Alaska teacher and employee of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) where she served as the literacy content specialist and early childhood education director. She said the Colorado preschool office supports state-funded preschool and the K-3 reading initiative called the READ Act.

MS. GALLANOS said she would share information about two Colorado programs as opportunities for reflection. Colorado has funded part-day preschool for 31 years and is showing strong outcomes. Students who participated were more likely to do better on third grade summative assessments, were less likely to be identified

as having a significant reading deficiency, and were more likely to graduate on time. The investment Colorado is making in three- and four-year-olds is seeing strong long-term results. She said she would provide a copy of the Colorado 2020 legislative report with outcome data.

MS. GALLANOS reported that Colorado has learned that the purpose of preschool is not just school readiness. That is just one step of a child's academic preparation. For the impact of high-quality preschool to be seen, children must continue to receive the benefits of a quality education into the early grades. Colorado has committed to a stronger connection of efforts across preschool through third grade systems. This integrated approach builds upon successes and will help more students stay on track for school success.

MS. GALLANOS said that in addition to the preschool program, Colorado joined 37 other states to implement a K-3 reading initiative. The 2018/2019 school year was the fifth full year of implementation for the Colorado READ Act. There has been deep commitment from school leaders, teachers, and parents but the state realized it needs to see better outcomes in reading. It takes time for parents and teachers to work together to successfully support reading acquisition. Colorado has been consistently monitoring for the best outcomes and does not consider a lack of significant progress to be a sign of lack of success. Rather, it is an opportunity to recommit and refocus efforts.

MS. GALLANOS advised that as Alaska considers SB 6, it can learn from Colorado and the 37 other states. Many states have K-3 reading policies and although SB 6 and the Colorado bill are different, almost all K-3 reading bills have certain things in common.

[9:52:54 AM](#)

MS. GALLANOS said the first commonality is policies related to screenings, assessments, and collaboration with parents on individual planning. Most states use a screener that is reliable and valid at demonstrating which students will be most at risk to fail third grade assessments. The screener is used to identify students with reading deficiencies, it monitors progress, and supports the notification of parents. It helps to create individual reading plans so that interventions can be collaborative between parents and schools. Screening is critical for supporting intervention. Intervention plans have to be written with that knowledge. Plans written without knowing the

areas of deficiencies cannot help provide accurate planning. Quality screeners that are discrete enough to flag students likely to fail outcomes tests will stop the pattern of failure. In Colorado, ongoing screening and statewide reporting allowed the state to identify exactly how the Colorado READ Act was being implemented and quickly make necessary changes.

MS. GALLANOS said another common factor is policies for intensive intervention for children who need it and retention in third grade. Only a few states have policies related to direct support from the state department of education. Colorado provides early literacy grants to school districts, which have shown strong outcomes. Those grants provide direct support through coaching, intervention services, and professional development. Mississippi, Arizona, and North Dakota are states that provide direct support as in SB 6.

9:55:09 AM

MS. GALLANOS said the Colorado bill, although different than SB 6, can be a learning tool, but first it is important to understand and align with the science-based reading research. This is 30 years of research compiled from thousands of studies with similar findings on how the brain processes written text across multiple languages. These studies provide conclusive evidence about how people learn to read, why some struggle, and the type of instruction shown to have the greatest impacts on reading outcomes.

She said Colorado came to recognize that it had implementation challenges and it needed greater intensity to support reading outcomes. The state board of education and state legislature made changes to the READ Act in 2019 and that bill passed with rare, unanimous consent.

MS. GALLANOS said it might be useful for Alaska to reflect on the metrics that led Colorado to reauthorize its READ Act. For Colorado, success of the K-3 reading initiative was defined as a reduction in the number children identified as having a reading deficiency, as demonstrated by one of seven districts-choice screening tools.

Each year about 14 to 16 percent of children in Colorado were shown to have a significant reading deficiency (SRD). However, Colorado did not measure the number of students newly identified and the number of students who were no longer identified, so they had no way to measure the flow of students coming in as newly identified and the flow of students making progress and

those no longer identified with a SRD. This made it seem as though the rate of children with significant reading deficiencies was stagnant, even though there was no way to confirm that data. She suggested that Alaska can start by ensuring that the metrics that are used to measure student growth actually show how many students move between benchmark points on a reliable and valid screening tool.

MS. GALLANOS advised that what success looks like in Alaska also needs to be identified. Most states' summative assessments only measure a child's ability to read and understand grade level text. Summative assessments cannot show if students can decode actual words in the text. A reading submeasure could be useful to identify whether poor performance is related to comprehension of the test or lack of ability to decode the words.

She said another key point that is not in SB 6 is that Colorado provides funding for each student identified with a reading deficiency. Colorado school districts get about \$650 for every student identified with a reading deficiency, using one of the seven assessments. She said two things happen. First, there is no direct comparability between assessments. She suggested that selecting one assessment as a baseline could be an opportunity for Alaska to have a more aligned approach. Second, carefully think through whether or not to allocate specific dollars per child. Districts tend to come to depend on a certain amount of available funding, which could be a disincentive to reduce the number of students identified. SB 6 funds districts as a whole rather than providing per pupil funding. She noted that Oklahoma is the only other state that provides per pupil funding.

10:00:00 AM

MS. GALLANOS related that the Colorado Department of Education initially was prohibited from asking districts about how the per pupil funds were spent, so it had no idea if the funds were being used for interventions. With the reauthorization, Colorado can review district budgets and authorize allowable use of funding. Budget and expenditure monitoring can help to ensure that funds are being used for the necessary intervention.

MS. GALLANOS reported that Colorado, along with many other states, realized that many teachers did not know how to teach children to read based on reading science and effective practices. From her experience and work in Alaska as a teacher and an employee of the department, she believes that many districts are implementing reading practices that are not only ineffective but detrimental to reading development. The Colorado

legislature mandated that all K-3 teachers in the state pass an approved course in foundational reading. Colorado is taking a close look at the types of instructional programs districts are using, the professional development provided, and the way that higher education is preparing teachers. Colorado has an approved list of instructional programs and is working with its educator effectiveness division to improve teacher prep programs to ensure that higher education institutions are providing coursework in evidence-based reading practices.

[10:01:47 AM](#)

MS. GALLANOS noted that Colorado retains few students, but screening, intervention, teacher training, and supports must form the basis of a program so that a retained student does not receive another year of the same type of programming. Colorado is focusing on the foundation of the program and the things needed to assure that students have solid supports and that retention is a last option.

MS. GALLANOS noted again that the Colorado and Alaska bills are different. Alaska is unique, and Alaskan educators understand how to support students. SB 6 aligns the preschool program with K-3 by investing in intervention early. She encouraged the legislators to be well versed in the types of preschool implementation and K-3 reading policies across the nation.

MS. GALLANOS concluded by stating that 30 years of research and evidence show that if children are supported early and taught to read using evidence-based, systemic processes that include phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development and comprehension, all but 2 to 5 percent of children will learn to read and in that, children in Alaska are no different from children in any other state.

[10:03:21 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS said he appreciated her thoughts on the science of reading; the committee has heard that repeatedly. He asked if SB 6 does enough to bring teachers into the modern world to make sure that everyone is ready through professional development to take students forward.

MS. GALLANOS replied she is encouraged by the way SB 6 draws on research about how students learn to read. This started with the research put out by the National Reading Panel in 2000, so there are ample resources and solid programs. Mississippi has done a lot of work in training teachers specifically on evidence- and science-based reading intervention. Colorado now is reviewing

160 instructional programs to see which vendors are providing the best product.

SENATOR BEGICH said Senator Stevens was asking whether SB 6 allows for that provision. He said reviewing curriculum is a department function and the department is seeking to do that in regulation. He asked if SB 6 needs to be stronger in its direction.

10:05:58 AM

MS. GALLANOS responded that the bill should define and clearly outline what it means by science- and evidence-based reading. That could be a lesson gained from Colorado where the legislation was clear in defining science- and evidence-based reading and what it looked like. This ensures that when districts or the department interprets that, there is backing in the language in the law.

SENATOR BEGICH observed that that was one of the more detailed elements in the Colorado READ Act. He said it was not included in the Alaska bill to try to reduce the volume, but that can be reviewed. In the past, the department has not provided substantial support to districts, but the bill and fiscal notes reported at the last hearing underscore a significant financial commitment from the administration to support districts in providing training opportunities for their teachers. He asked if that is consistent with the types of support necessary to ensure teacher readiness and understanding to teach children to read.

MS. GALLANOS replied absolutely. When Colorado reauthorized its bill, it put intentional effort into training all K-3 teachers. Now the Colorado Department of Education is responsible for training nearly 60,000 K-3 teachers in evidence-based reading. A request for proposals (RFP) went out to find vendors to help provide that training because it is needed. She acknowledged that when she taught in Alaska, she did not know how to teach students to read. She was not taught those skills when she earned a master's degree in education. Higher education programs are not focused on training teachers how to teach reading. Many districts do not know how to provide professional development in reading. She emphasized the importance of supporting teachers so they can support readers and identify students with reading delays. That aspect has been important in Colorado.

SENATOR BEGICH said two elements in the bill speak to that. One section talks about the department's responsibility to offer trainings. The bill has accountability clauses that are based on

research so the state will know it is getting what it needs. He related that one of the reading task force findings was the need to screen for learning disabilities and the bill tries to do that. He asked if she had recommendations to strengthen that section. He noted that one thing he enjoyed about the Colorado READ Act is the way it continues to evolve by making data-based adjustments. He said that is one intent of SB 6; to get it started, to measure, and then make quick adjustments each subsequent year. He asked if the bill does enough to screen for disabilities such as dyslexia.

MS. GALLANOS said she could not comment on whether SB 6 does enough to address dyslexia without first conferring with Alex Frasier, Colorado's dyslexia expert. However, a separate bill passed the Colorado House last year created a dyslexia task force and working group. That working group offered parents and advocates an opportunity to review the Colorado legislation and identify its shortcomings. The working group is taking an in-depth look at the types assessments and relying on expert testimony about whether Colorado's assessments are discrete enough to support the identification of dyslexia. She encouraged the committee to consider establishing a dyslexia task force and working group to provide expert guidance to see if SB 6 looks for the risk factors in a way that supports students with dyslexia.

CHAIR STEVENS said he and Senator Hughes do not know what the University of Alaska is doing in terms of teaching the science of reading. The committee needs to find out.

[10:13:52 AM](#)

SENATOR COGHILL summarized that SB 6 contemplates intervention services and hiring reading specialists. He said one of his concerns regarding intervention is that regular K-3 teachers will not be able to perform at the same level of teaching. He asked if Colorado had a concerted effort to bring teachers up to the same standard. "One of my fears was that we'd find ourselves in a mismatch situation," he said.

MS. GALLANO agreed that K-3 general education teachers need to provide an opportunity to extend interventionist learning into the classroom. She shared that her work as a special education teacher in K-3 was enhanced by a partnership with the general education teacher. An interventionist can provide support, but kids need to be in a classroom that provides additional support and opportunity for students to practice what they are learning.

A partnership has to happen between the general education teachers and intervention teachers.

CHAIR STEVENS noted that further work clearly is needed with dyslexia and the University of Alaska. He called Commissioner Johnson to the table.

10:16:22 AM

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, stated that his comments would touch primarily on implementation and briefly on the question of retention. He said the bill is full of elements implementation and for some of the large components, the department will need to work collaboratively with the State Board of Education through regulation and with school districts and teachers and parents so the implementation has the greatest chance of success. The work to develop high-quality standards for the pre-K program has already begun but it needs to be finished and adopted by the board. Then the department will need a process to award the grants associated with the program. It will also need to help the districts meet the grant application standards.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the department will need a process to award grants associated with the program and they will need to do some work to assist districts in meeting those standards. The bill also has a lot of requirements for the department to provide professional development and training for educators. Also, the department has to collaborate on selecting a screening tool because most districts currently are doing screenings. Implementation includes parent notification and resources and involvement and public data reporting and independent data analysis. The bill assumes continual improvement and refinement, whether through regulation or future legislation, so data is important. He noted his interest in ensuring that the bill works for students and not against districts. He said the data will be used for program assessment and evaluation. School-based reading improvement is a big part of the bill. All of that will be implemented in conjunction with the state board and school districts.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON emphasized that SB 6 is not a retention bill. It is about giving every child the possibility of learning to read. He said retention has generated lots of interest but that is just one kind of intervention. As this discussion goes on, he asked the committee to keep in mind that it is just as detrimental to minimize the impact of promoting students who are

not proficient in reading as it is to overuse retention as an intervention. He said he would not expect that anyone will celebrate retention, but it is a legitimate intervention for some students.

[10:21:30 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said a wide assumption about the meaning of retention is that students are automatically held back if they score poorly on one test, but that is not in this bill. Another assumption is that retained students will receive the same instruction a second time. SB 6 provides that students who are retained will get the instruction they need.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON pointed out that Alaska's statutes already assume that retention is possible. AS 14.03.072 requires each district to annually provide parents with grade retention standards. Almost every school district in the state has retention policies in board policy. For example, the Anchorage School District recognizes, especially in the lower grades, that retention may be necessary to ensure student proficiency in reading and mathematics. When academically appropriate, the superintendent or designee shall promote alternatives to retention among certified staff. Northwest Arctic Borough School District says retention may be considered when a student does not have the required appropriate and necessary skills and knowledge.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said he sees four categories that have been worked into the bill related to promotion or retention. One, communication is a strong element. By statute, school districts are required to report grade level retention standards and policies. The districts must explain implementation of intervention or progression strategies. The second big category is collaboration. Retention cannot be made in isolation; a group of people that includes the parent, teacher, and others must make that decision. Third, the bill provides guidelines and safeguards. It states that a school board may exempt a student from delayed grade level progression for good cause and lists some of the exemptions. This bill provides an appeal process, exemptions, guidelines, and safeguards. Currently, the state has no safeguards for retention; it is just allowed. The fourth big category is transparency because school districts must report the number and percentage of students retained and the number of students promoted who are not proficient in reading.

[10:24:55 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON stated that the goal is to avoid retention through quality instruction that results in proficient readers. The bill provides for students who may need additional time and instruction. It treats promotion and retention in a balanced manner and it gives students, parents, and administrators the structure needed to elevate all voices to make the best decision possible for each student individually. The bill requires parent involvement and it requires that families be given information and resources to support children learning to read. For teachers, this bill allows retention as one of many interventions and it documents the expertise and recommendations of teachers. Retention can be for a whole grade or part of a grade or one subject of a grade. For principals, superintendents, or school boards, this provides a process to make sure there is consistent, thoughtful, and effective decision-making about all students. This bill provides annual reports to the legislature regarding the implementation and effectiveness of the Alaska Reads Act, including promotion and retention. Most importantly, this bill provides students multiple pathways to demonstrate proficiency and provides evidence-based interventions if needed and multiple safeguards, whether students are promoted without grade level readings skills or retained.

CHAIR STEVENS commented that "it's easy to get wrapped around the axle on retention when, in fact, that's not what this is all about." It is about improving the system for students. He asked the commissioner to discuss screening tools.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON explained that a screening tool is an assessment to identify students who might not be on track with learning to read. The tool looks different at each grade level and vendors provide the tool. Many school districts in the state have used AIMSweb, for example. In first grade, students would be screened for identification of sounds and letters. In third grade, students would be screened for reading fluently enough to comprehend. It is a quick measure to identify students who may be struggling with learning to read.

SENATOR BEGICH thanked the commissioner for the summary that underscores the work done to hear all voices. This bill is a balance. It may not include everything some would want in a bill, but it is a comprehensive look at these different strategies.

[10:28:45 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES said she appreciated the point that a proficiency-based promotion policy is one tool, and it would be the last tool. That is important to keep in mind. It would be a small group of students. The bill talks about considering not promoting a child who is reading below proficiency. Her understanding is that category is quite broad. Dr. Winters spoke about a certain threshold or cut line. Her understanding is that some other states refer to far below proficiency. She wondered whether that language should be adjusted. A child who is just a bit below proficiency could probably be helped in the next grade but being far below proficiency is a real concern.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied he just heard of that idea in the last few days and it is worthy of consideration.

SENATOR HUGHES raised two issues to consider before moving SB 6 on to the next committee, class size and eligibility dates for enrollment. She mentioned that she had a discussion with Senator Begich about how helpful it would be to teachers if students are slightly older throughout the grades. The amount of intervention would be less. With a cutoff date of September 1, particularly for the four-year-old cohort, students who are three years old could start in August. Little boys often lag developmentally behind little girls, although either gender may not be on par as far as readiness and development. It concerns her that a very young three-year-old could be part of a four-year-old cohort. Eligibility dates factor in for preparation for four- and five-year-olds, along with grades K-3.

SENATOR HUGHES noted that as far as class sizes, she heard from a first-grade teacher with 26 students. Florida's constitution has a limit of 18 students for kindergarten through third grade. She understands that the Anchorage School District has a policy of around 20 students. She would like to have a discussion about class size and to encourage districts to have a policy about class size. This act will be more successful if the K-3 classes are smaller, as well as for the four- and five-year-olds.

SENATOR BEGICH said that in response to the discussion with Senator Hughes, there has been consideration about adding language in the research section for a report on class size. The age issue is also being looked into. Those recommendations will be brought to the committee.

[10:33:31 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS observed that there were still many questions to consider and held SB 6 in committee.

10:33:47 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 10:33 p.m.