

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 7, 2020

9:00 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

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

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Senator Mia Costello

**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)

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
02/04/20	(S)	Heard & Held
02/04/20	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/07/20	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

**WITNESS REGISTER**

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

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 6 but expressed concern about some provisions.

BRIDGET WEISS, Ph.D., Superintendent  
 Juneau School District  
 Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 6 but expressed concern about some provisions.

NORM WOOTEN, Executive Director  
 Association of Alaska School Boards  
 Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 6 but expressed concern about some provisions.

TIM PARKER, President  
 NEA-Alaska  
 Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 6 with the recommendation that educator voices be heard.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

9:00:26 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 Begich, Hughes, Coghill, and Chair Stevens.

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

9:01:14 AM

CHAIR STEVENS announced the consideration of the sponsor substitute for SB 6, 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 known as the Alaska Reads Act. He stated his intention to hear invited testimony, discuss some changes, and hold the bill for review.

9:01:36 AM

SENATOR BEGICH shared that the commissioner approached him in late October with the concept of putting this bill together. He said the fact that people could reach out after a difficult year with a lot of animosity that divided the legislature, and the administration and legislature, is commendable. The legislation, which has moved rapidly and effectively, is at a beginning point.

SENATOR BEGICH said he has appreciated the philosophical debate, but some is not relevant to the bill. He asked members to remember the components of the bill when listening to testimony, which is early education supported by identification of the elements of successful reading that includes interventions. Those interventions include support for those schools that are failing. He urged people not to spend time debating issues not in the bill.

CHAIR STEVENS said he appreciated Senator Begich bringing the committee back to the basics about what it is trying to accomplish. He invited Lisa Parady to the table.

9:04:39 AM

LISA SKILES PARADY, Ph.D., Executive Director, Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA), Juneau, Alaska, thanked Senator Begich for his leadership and bringing the bill forward and reaching out to her organization. In response to Senator Begich's request for input from administrators, she surveyed districts to get feedback from the field and received 25

responses from about half of the districts. She said ACSA is happy with the focus of the bill and they look forward to helping shape the best bill possible for all students.

DR. PARADY pointed out that ACSA administers the Alaska Staff Development Network (ASDN), which has been providing Alaskan educators high-quality professional development for almost 40 years. Their mission is to improve student achievement by providing research-based online learning and face-to-face professional development for Alaska teachers and school administrators.

DR. PARADY shared that last night Commissioner Johnson, Senator Hughes, Senator Begich, Senator Costello and many others were at an event focused on civil discourse in education. It is relevant because everyone wants to do his or her best to support students. People may have different routes on how to get there, but the intent is to do something positive.

[9:08:44 AM](#)

DR. PARADY said SB 6 must be viewed in a multidimensional way. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), while an important indicator, is not the only indicator of success for students. She displayed a graph on slide 3 of the presentation showing the growth in high school graduation, charts of 2018 ACT scores on slide 4, and 2018 SAT scores on slide 5 showing that Alaska's scores are at or above the national average. She said these statistics show that the idea that education in Alaska needs to be fixed is not exactly the full picture.

DR. PARADY called attention to the ACSA joint position statements and the early childhood education position statement in the committee packets. She said members support the core concepts in SB 6. They know that the research 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. ACSA believes that early childhood education should be part of public school funding through the base student allocation. They support those provisions in the bill.

DR. PARADY pointed out that the position statement on preparing, attracting, and retaining quality educators aligns with the Alaska Education Challenge. Everyone recognizes that attracting and retaining effective educators is essential to student achievement. That is another dimension that must be recognized when looking at this bill, she said.

DR. PARADY showed data on educator turnover from the Northwest Regional Educational Lab on slide 9. Rural-remote areas have a 36 percent turnover rate for teachers and 38 percent for principals. This kind of turnover undermines program implementation. As the bill is considered, the question of what to do about these other pieces needs to be considered. Almost half of current superintendents have two years or less of experience. If a business had this much turnover, what would the output look like. This dimension also needs to be reviewed.

[9:13:59 AM](#)

DR. PARADY displayed the social, emotional, and mental health position statement and referenced Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice in Alaska developed by the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) and the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB). She said the social-emotional health of children is another dimension to consider because one of two Alaskan youth has lived through one or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) by kindergarten, the age group addressed in SB 6. She displayed a graph on slide 6 that shows that the more adverse experiences a student has had, the lower the rate of high school graduation and college achievement.

DR. PARADY explained that when students struggle with academic achievement or behavior, schools need a method of providing systemic and data-driven intervention. The main goal of RTI (Response to Intervention) and MTSS (Multitiered Systems of Support) is to identify and provide intervention before students get too far behind. She showed the three tiers of RTI and MTSS on slide 13. Most districts are heavily engaged in some level of RTI, but against the backdrop of turnover, districts are constantly training staff about this. The bill accounts for that. Commissioner Johnson has referred to the RTI conference put on by ASDN every year and the support ASDN provides to districts. The most recent RTI conference had 49 school districts and over a thousand educators attending, representing one in 10 educators. This foundation is in place and supports the goals of the bill. She feels optimistic about working with the department to continue to support districts with this type of professional learning.

DR. PARADY presented information on Hattie's effect sizes on slide 15. Dr. John Hattie is an internationally renowned research educator who is focused on what works best in education. He has provided a list of the relative effects of

different factors on student achievement. Effect size tells how powerful a factor is in making change. Effect size is a way of quantifying the size of the difference between two groups. It moves from the simplistic "does it work or not" to the sophisticated "how well does it work." Cohen's  $d$  is the effect size used to indicate the standardized difference between two means. It is the appropriate effect size for the comparison between the two means.

DR. PARADY showed the graph of the hinge point, Cohen's  $d=0.4$ , on slide 16. The hinge point represents a year of progress for a year of school. With higher effect sizes, there is more progress. The goal of RTI is to move kids to be with their peers. Collective efficacy, which means everyone is on board with the will and belief to make that change, is in the blue zone.

[9:20:51 AM](#)

DR. PARADY showed the effectiveness of RTI with a  $d=1.09$  on the graph on slide 17. She said the point is that retention with a  $d=-0.32$  as shown on slide 18 has a negative effect. This is Dr. Hattie's research that is well accepted by education experts. This has been one of the philosophical discussions, and both sides of that must be considered.

DR. PARADY displayed quotations from Dr. Winter's studies on Florida's retention policies research that her team reviewed. She said her team is not discrediting the entire study, but she wanted to point out that the effect of retention is not clear. Dr. Winter is unable to differentiate between the impact of treatment or interventions and retention. That is significant. If he repeatedly says, "does not allow for separating the effect of retention from these other interventions," then it is not clear that retention is intervention. That combined with Dr. Hattie's research should cause everyone to pause and look at retention again.

DR. PARADY shared some of the feedback from her survey of districts on slide 20:

- Reading is a priority. It is also an issue of equity. Research supports that the majority of students are able to learn to read with well-rounded instruction
- Mandated intervention services like summer school, after hours intervention, and high-quality professional development without increased funding to districts

- Being asked to implement practices that are internationally benchmarked as ineffective (retention)
- A lack of educator input during an opportune time for collective efficacy statewide on critical parts of the bill, including details concerning cost, curriculum, measurement tools, and accountability
- The rush to push the bill through the legislature and without resolving important details until later, there is a lot that DEED needs to do prior to districts being able to do their part.
- Hiring highly-qualified reading specialists in a time of critical teacher/educator shortages
- Growth measures should be included and considered
- Let's not create a high stakes environment for our young children but rather focus on their individual needs in regard to reading

DR. PARADY said the bill is not in its final form and ACSA will continue to provide feedback from school districts as it is received, but there are questions about how this can go forward. All respondents agree that a district reading program should include diagnostic assessments to identify significant reading deficiencies. This includes a universal screening tool that measures phonological awareness, but school districts are using 15 different programs. How to provide a menu of options vs. a single option needs to be considered.

[9:24:07 AM](#)

DR. PARADY relayed that four respondents agreed with the statement about retention and almost 70 percent disagreed that retention would be an effective strategy. Several did not answer because they did not know. Everyone supports reading as a high priority and unequivocally everyone supports universal pre-K and including in the formula. There is concern about mandating intervention services and lack of educator input when the bill was created. She thanked Senator Stevens for taking the time to allow educators to review bill and for future public testimony. She asked the committee to talk and think and work together on this because there was limited educator input on the front end. Now is the time to hear from people in the field about the impact to their districts, their questions, and how this can work for all students. ACSA stands ready to be a resource she said.

CHAIR STEVENS called Dr. Weiss to the table.

[9:26:58 AM](#)

BRIDGET WEISS, Ph.D., Superintendent, Juneau School District, Juneau, Alaska, shared that she is a third generation Juneau resident, so this state and place are incredibly important to her. She has spent 36 years trying to make a difference for kids and is a fierce advocate for achievement. She taught high school mathematics for 16 years, so she is not trained as an early learning literacy specialist. However, she has spent much of her career focusing on early childhood programming and was an elementary principal for three years. After 20 years in secondary education, it was incredibly informative and educational to work in the early years. That experience formed a lot of the last 16 years of her work.

DR. WEISS thanked Senator Begich, Commissioner Johnson, and others who have worked on this bill. She emphasized that reading achievement, math achievement, and literacy achievement are top priorities. The Juneau School District has had that as a legislative priority as well as part of its strategic plan. In the new strategic plan being written, reading by grade three is in both the achievement and equity pillar. The district recognizes that it is more challenged in meeting the needs of certain subgroups. "So, we're naming a few of those subgroups. It is a little bold. It is not finalized yet, but I'm encouraging my school board to make a bold statement and say, 'If we're going to do this, we need to do it genuinely and pragmatically.' We have our economically disadvantaged students, our Alaska Native and American Indian students, and we have our English learner students who have demonstrated that those are the areas that we are the least meeting their need in achieving grade level proficiency. So, we're going to name that and we're going to measure our progress and we're going to attack it," she said.

DR. WEISS shared that based on her discussions with Southeast superintendents, early learning is critical. One-third of kindergarten students in Juneau show up ready for kindergarten. That is about the average across the state. Juneau is starting kindergarten with kids sitting in the dugout and not at the plate. She appreciates the acknowledgement that the work done before kids are five is critical.

[9:30:31 AM](#)

DR. WEISS said Juneau has developed programming through a variety of grants. That has been part of the school board's strategic plan and legislative priority for multiple years. There was some pushback initially because the district is a K-12

institution, so how could a school board of a K-12 institution have a priority around early childhood. The board owned it and as a result the district was able to get grants and city support and now has effective programming. She serves on the steering committee for ROCK Juneau (Raising Our Children with Kindness) that works on gathering agency resources for the betterment and empowerment of youth in Juneau from cradle to career. She served as the cochair of the mayor's task force on childcare, which developed options for the city to support high-quality childcare. The task force stated that zero to five is all about learning, so whether a child is six months or four-years-old, the task force wants them in the highest quality learning environment that is developmentally appropriate.

DR. WEISS observed that one part of the bill is about accountability. She said there was adequate yearly progress with No Child Left Behind. She spent 26 years in the state of Washington where there was the Washington Assessment of Student Learning and high stakes graduation qualifying exams. She lived through that as an administrator who helped kids get to that stage. For many it was traumatic. Her own children were part of that accountability system and passed the tests the first time. She worked with many kids who didn't. She tutored a girl who took the exam three times and finally passed it in tears, fearing that she would not walk across the stage with her classmates. That system is not in place anymore in Washington.

DR. WEISS continued to say:

I want us just to be prudent and wise. We want to be held accountable. Our strategic plan is built with measures and strong layers of accountability. We are being very strategic about what we choose to measure and what strategies we're putting in place. So, I'm not opposed to accountability. I hold myself accountable every day. Every day I wake up and think how can I, I just have to keep at it because there's more and more to do. But broad scoping accountability has a tenor of shame. We have to be super careful. We have to inspire our educators. Dr. Parady talked about teacher retention. I'm picturing myself at 21-years-old when I became a teacher. I'm not sure I would be inspired by this challenge, the way that it's framed. Language, tenor, tone is super important. When we say a district is going to post on its website how many children are retained in third grade, in second grade, to what end, I ask. To what end." She is all in for

reports to the state and school boards and to work collectively to make a difference. Accountability needs to make sense, be pragmatic, and connected to the goal of the bill, which is to increase achievement. "We will not shame achievement. It just doesn't work. It hasn't worked in the past. We've seen lots of examples.

[9:34:25 AM](#)

DR. WEISS mentioned the discussion on civil discourse last night and said it would be great civil discourse to discuss whether retention is mandatory, whether it is conditional as written in the bill, and whether it is necessary in the bill. The dominant voice of superintendents she represents is not in support of that provision in the bill.

DR. WEISS said she heard that this is not about funding, but the connection between the economic status of families and their resources and the resources of districts cannot be denied. She mentioned a phone call between Southeast superintendents and Senators Begich and Kiehl in which Senator Begich said the Department of Education has been challenged because of its dwindling resources and this bill would support the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED). Districts need support from the department and districts need DEED to be funded so it can support school districts. The department and school districts have lost resources, and school district needs have increased. Juneau does not have a nurse in every building and it lost all six instructional coaches. The two middle schools, with 450 and 500 students respectively, have one counselor in each school. In the last nine years, the percentage of families eligible for free and reduced lunch has increased by 50 percent while resources have dwindled. Money does matter.

DR. WEISS said the unfunded mandates in the bill should be considered in terms of how districts can meet them. A kindergarten teacher said she may not get 17 kids to proficiency, but she would be close. She has 27 kids. Dr. Weiss said many people are stressed trying to meet needs, so it is important to look at the costs of the bill. As superintendent, once this bill passes she will have to think about the expectations and the most effective and efficient ways to get this done with limited resources. Legislators have the responsibility to keep that in mind too and not set educators up for failure. She said she wants to set teachers up for success.

[9:38:46 AM](#)

DR. WEISS said states with an increase of students eligible for free and reduced lunch have seen NAEP reading scores go down, so there is a connection with socioeconomic status and performance. She noted that another piece of Juneau's strategic plan is family engagement. The beauty of early childhood is that it gives the district access to families one to two years before children begin kindergarten. The district needs to provide support to families so they understand what their kids need before entering the school system. Juneau's Kinder-Ready Program has a 65 percent scholarship rate, she said.

DR. WEISS said Alaska's incredibly diversity is a gift and a challenge. She urged legislators to think strategically about that. Just like in a classroom, the same strategy does not work for everyone. The needs of districts and communities are so diverse that it requires another filter to prevent unintended consequences. The Southeast superintendents are talking as a group because their region has its own challenges and these administrators are trying to leverage resources for reading instruction. For example, since travel for professional development is expensive, these administrators are considering that Juneau could be a hub for professional learning experiences rather than Anchorage.

DR. WEISS said last summer when she was reading about reading and achievement, she kept coming across high-quality instruction, effective interventions, high levels of engagement, and reducing classroom distractions because behaviors are going up extraordinarily compared to five to ten years ago. As a result of this reading she realized that the finish line has changed. It used to be graduation and when she started, there was no measure of accountability for graduation. Kids either made it or they didn't. Education has grown a lot since then regarding the importance of accountability, the importance of measuring, and keeping track of where progress is being made. And graduation rates have gone up across the country. Now high-stakes decisions are made at third grade so accountability has to be well thought out. She noted that many of these kids have had extreme challenges. She questioned what would happen if people changed their expectations of the end game in a supportive and inspirational way that fits the needs of a diverse state.

[9:44:25 AM](#)

DR. WEISS concluded saying, "You have a very complicated job, and I appreciate your hearing from a superintendent. We are

deeply engaged in the work, and we want nothing more than to help you help us be successful."

CHAIR STEVENS expressed appreciation for her comments and perspective, including the storm warnings of potential problems. He called Norm Wooten to the table.

9:46:13 AM

NORM WOOTEN, Executive Director, Association of Alaska School Boards, Juneau, Alaska, said pre-K is a topic near and dear to the hearts of school board members. For many years, the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB) has had resolutions supporting both pre-K and reading proficiency by third grade. The 2011 report of the Alaska Advisory Task Force on Higher Education and Career Readiness stated in part:

Children who receive quality early education arrive at school ready to learn and perform better in school. They are less likely to need expensive special education interventions, and they are more likely to graduate from high school and to successfully enter the workforce.

Research is clear that when students enter kindergarten, 40 percent of them on average are one to three years behind grade level, and too many of them stay behind throughout their school careers. Alaska can invest a relatively small amount in early childhood and innovative K-12 programs, or a vastly greater amount at the college level. Today's third grader can't wait for, and our public treasure cannot afford, a remediation response that doesn't begin until the third grade.

MR. WOOTEN gave the following testimony:

Reading and literacy are the great equalizers in the world in which we live. Students who cannot read are educationally crippled in every other academic subject, as well as being career disadvantaged throughout adulthood. Our children must learn to read and deserve no less from us.

AASB unequivocally supports Pre-K, early assessment of reading proficiency, interventions for less than proficient readers, and high-quality professional

development to enable educators to create proficient readers.

However, my recommendation is to carefully consider the provision for retention of students. It seems to me that retaining a child for lack of reading proficiency may be more of a failure of the system, rather than the fault of the child. I applaud the bill's provision for early assessments and implementation of interventions. This seems to be a more logical approach than retention, and one that is more about improvement.

MR. WOOTEN noted that some members are calling some details overprescriptive. Providing high-quality professional development to educators and paraprofessionals in reading instruction and intervention and then holding them accountable would be more productive. He voiced concern about the aggressive timeline for implementing provisions in the bill and DEED's ability to find enough educators trained and competent in teaching reading, implementing interventions, and providing professional development for those needing assistance.

MR. WOOTEN said his concerns should not be taken as opposition to the bill because he is very excited to address the reading crisis. AASB has sought this state support for years, and districts are anxious to begin the work. He only asks for careful consideration of legislation to ensure that it is the very best that can be provided for students.

CHAIR STEVENS said the concern about finding the right staff is shared by all. He called Tim Parker to testify.

[9:51:11 AM](#)

TIM PARKER, President, NEA-Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska, stated that the 12,000 teachers and support staff that NEA-Alaska represents are motivated by student learning and they feel it acutely when student learning hits a bump. These educators want the Alaska Reads Act to succeed because reading is fundamental and opens the doors to learning. He said SB 6 is a product of Alaska's Education Challenge. He believes all the committee members were part of that process, which also included parents, educators, school board members, and community leaders from every part of the state. The center of that challenge work was an excellent education for every student. That language is in statute. It is surrounded by the three commitments--increase student success, support responsible and reflective learners,

and cultivate safety and well-being. Those are key phrases and educator buy-in was a result of the process for the Alaska Education Challenge. Educators want that same support when this bill moves forward. The commissioner had a big role in making sure the buy-in happened for that challenge. Because of that work, educators are here today reviewing SB 6.

MR. PARKER said teachers and education support professionals (ESPs) look at things a bit differently than superintendents, principals, and school boards. NEA-Alaska has members in virtually every one of Alaska's 500 schools. He worked hard to get the Alaska Education Challenge in front of each member. It was discussed at staff meetings, staff lounges, at union meetings and these educators reviewed the language. Members believe that the five trajectories are the right way to go. Two of those ideas are in front of the committee this session. Besides the Alaska Reads Act, there is tribal compacting. If Alaska keeps an eye on those five trajectories, it will be in a much better place.

MR. PARKER stated that teachers and ESPs like the research and evidence-based aspects in the bill. Teachers like the pre-K provisions because studies show a solid pre-K program is important for success in reading. NEA members like the connections with families, such as reading at home and the support adults outside of school give to their kids. The bill continues to emphasize family connections from pre-K to third grade. His members like early interventions and differentiated instruction. Reading intervention needs to happen early. Finally, teachers like the broad focus on phonics and phonemic awareness. His members like that the science of reading is based on research and evidence. They also like that the bill talks about comprehension, building content knowledge, oral reading, and literacy. Those are all fundamental skills that are included in the state standards.

[9:57:43 AM](#)

MR. PARKER said his members want to participate in helpful ways. Alaska has 8,000 teachers and 2,500 teach K-3. There are 500 schools and 350 schools include the grades affected by the bill. Each of those school has education support professionals (ESPs) who play a big part in reading development, which is critical to success. They often deliver specialized instruction side-by-side with teachers. His members want to make sure that aspect is supported. His members appreciate the team support reflected in the bill with training and professional development for principals and district staff.

MR. PARKER said these teachers and ESPs are key to the success of the bill and are closely following it. They have much experience to bring to the table and that expertise needs to be tapped both during the legislative process and the years of implementation.

MR. PARKER relayed that he brought about a dozen respected and experienced reading instructors from around the state together to read SB 6 and compare it to similar bills around the country. Two concepts surfaced repeatedly. The first is the time for the implementation. Time is one of the most valuable resources that teachers have. The United State puts teachers in front of kids teaching mode about 28 hours per week, which is more than any other country. The world average is 19 hours per week and some countries are as low as 15 hours per week. Teachers already have big time pressures; they do not have much time to prepare lessons.

[10:01:16 AM](#)

MR. PARKER said the second issue is class size. Senator Hughes mentioned earlier in the week that she heard from a first grade teacher who had 26 students in her class. He looked up some of the larger class sizes in each of the senators' districts. For Senator Begich, Fairview Elementary has 26 students in first grade. For Senator Coghill, North Pole Elementary has 28 students in second grade. For Senator Costello, Sand Lake Elementary has 27 students in first grade. And East Elementary School in Kodiak has 23 students in each of its first grade classrooms. These classes are too big. The committee heard about the many changes in Florida, one of which was a limit on class size. The cap is 18 for K-3. Eighteen for K-3 is a research-supported number. It is not what the majority of classrooms in Alaska have. The Florida limit for grades four through eight is 22 and the class limit for high school is 25.

MR. PARKER said one of his recommendations is that educator voices and buy-in are needed to make this work. There are 37 other states that have adopted statewide reading policies and Alaska can learn a lot from those states. Policy makers can learn a lot from educators who have been teaching kids to read for years. Educators teach in the face of large class sizes, pink slips, trauma, poor curriculum, misguided administrators, scripted curriculum, and more. Those are all realities that his members talk about a lot.

MR. PARKER said educators have a lot to offer in this policy debate. For the Alaska Reads Act to succeed, there are some must-haves: Educators voice and buy-in. Parental engagement and buy-in. Stability in the education system and adequate resources. Support for all students. Adequate resources are a factor in large class sizes. Budgets are moral documents that show how states prioritize. Education has been essentially flat funded for seven years and the system is strained almost to the breaking point. This is the system that people want the Alaska Education Challenge to move to success. Educators think it is possible, but it will take a focus on resources.

10:05:18 AM

MR. PARKER said he would be remiss not to mention the socioeconomic and trauma impacts students face on a daily basis. That is one of the aspects of the challenge and he applauds the state for the work that has been done there. He said educators assess kids every day and if they show up for school hungry or traumatized, they are unable to learn until those issues are resolved. This takes time and effort.

MR. PARKER said his members know that pre-K is a game changer for reading and the whole public school ecosystem. His members have ideas about how the reading component in the bill could be successful for students. For the bill to succeed, educators, administrators, and all Alaskans have to be at the table and engaged.

CHAIR STEVENS stated that the intention is to get the content of the bill right before it leaves the committee. The Finance Committee will deal with the fiscal issues. The committee appreciates the input from parents, teachers, school boards and others. Getting it right will not be easy.

SENATOR BEGICH explained that after the beginnings of the bill were ready in late December, one of the first contacts was to get input from the Alaska Council of School Administrators. Another meeting was with the early education group with Posie Boggs to discuss dyslexia and other learning disabilities. "We wanted to be sure we didn't put a written document out that didn't at least take some of that into account. All of us love education, and everyone who just testified and Mr. Parker just reminded me of how integrated this is into Alaska Education Challenge," he said. Those at the table who participated in the challenge and others who continue to move forward with that agenda have been talking for three-and-a-half years. In 2013, Senator Stevens initiated an Alaska literacy act, a lot of which

is incorporated in this bill. In the past, every time legislators have tried to build something that addresses one of the elements identified in the challenge, the weight of the bill caused it to collapse. He acknowledged that other provisions could be added to the bill, but he hoped members would not do that. Instead, he hoped members would incrementally build the education system so it supports the growth of kids. That is what the bill tries to do, but it cannot be everything for everybody.

10:10:37 AM

SENATOR BEGICH reflected on what he heard from the testimony. Ms. Weiss mentioned shaming language on page 2, line 26. That language could be taken out. Part of the process is making changes so the bill does not do anything unintended. That is a great suggestion. Mr. Wooten said, "Today's third grader can't wait for, and our public treasure cannot afford, a remediation response that doesn't begin until the third grade." That is exactly why this bill begins before third grade. It is possible that the timelines cannot be met, but why not set them as aspirational goals. And the committee substitute that is being worked on will include regular reporting of progress. An annual report will inform legislators.

SENATOR BEGICH said the governor is a partner on this bill and he mentioned the importance of teacher retention in his State of the State address. Yesterday, other legislative leaders and the governor's chief of staff talked about what that commitment looks like. Senator Begich said he thinks there will be a separate piece of legislation dealing specifically with retention. He has never said funding does not matter. The administration showed its commitment by adding additional resources specifically around support to teachers, superintendents, districts, and professional development to the bill.

SENATOR BEGICH said feedback about the bill will be deeply integrated in the committee substitute. Nothing in this bill will change the current retention policy in any district in the state. Every district can retain a student today and nothing compels districts to do more than they would normally do. Last night a speaker at the civic discourse event said Alaska has good teachers who want to teach reading, but if those kids come to school unprepared, all their efforts fall apart. By the same token, a strong pre-K program will fail if not backed up with strong reading [instruction] and those kids will not progress well. This is the step that moves the state in the right

direction. He said he is pleased that there will be at least three more days of testimony.

SENATOR BEGICH emphasized that the bill is starting with decades of testimony from this committee, the work of the Alaska Education Challenge, and the work of educators for decades and decades. This might be one good, solid incremental step in the right direction.

CHAIR STEVENS advised that the bill has five fiscal notes and he asked the University of Alaska to prepare an additional one. An enormous responsibility falls upon the university in this process and it will have to find a way to make sure its departments of education are teaching teachers to teach reading. Beyond that, the university will have to be prepared to help bring teachers currently in the field up to speed.

10:16:29 AM

SENATOR HUGHES said she loves that students are doing well on the ACT and SAT relative to the national average. She would like to know if the percentage of students taking the tests in Alaska is the same as other states. Those students tend to be the "high end" students that would not need the intervention addressed in the bill. She said she is not sure how relevant those scores are to this bill. Also, no matter the profession, people are more apt to stick with the current process if it results in a successful mission. With this type of policy, there would be a built-in reward because more kids would succeed. Students would not just be better prepared in kindergarten through third grade, but also up into middle and high school. This will help with retention. It is not the sole solution to the turnover rate, but it will be helpful.

SENATOR HUGHES said she heard the school board association and the superintendent association express concern about what she calls proficiency-based promotion. The committee saw the charts [of Bob Griffin, Senior Education Research Fellow with the Alaska Policy Forum] that showed that states with policies of both proficiency-based promotion and intervention had higher scores and improvement. The states that only had the intervention piece had lower scores and less improvement. She asked if any state that only had the intervention policy without proficiency-based promotion could match those scores. Dr. Goyette, [superintendent, Mat-Su School District, and Dr. Bishop, [superintendent, Anchorage School District], have both indicated to her their comfort with a proficiency-based

promotion policy. These administrators will be happy to testify if the committee wishes.

SENATOR HUGHES added that when she was the chair of this committee, she had several conversations with school board members from small districts who were concerned about social promotion. She asked how to make sure students were graduating with valuable diplomas and had mastered the objectives along the way. School board members said that even though they knew it would be better not to promote certain students, such a policy was difficult in a small community where everyone knows each other. The communities in small districts would prefer that the state be the "bad cop." The committee needs to continue the conversation. There is a way to learn from the other 37 states so that Alaska does not have a spike in students repeating grades, but a spike in reading proficiency. She agrees with Senator Begich that the committee does not want to implement something that harms students and teachers who are trying hard. But she also recognizes that it is hurtful and shameful for a fifth grader or a ninth grader who is struggling because of deficient reading skills. There is a way to do this that will not increase student retention, but will put some teeth to what the committee is putting forward, she said.

[10:23:02 AM](#)

SENATOR COGHILL thanked everyone for working on the bill. Obviously, class size becomes a question. He wonders whether, apart from establishing pre-K, if current resources were used to decrease class sizes for first and second grade, if the result would be the same, rather than creating a whole new program. That will be his question during the process. Perhaps the state will want to get better specialists, but first, second, and third grade teachers will still need specialized training. Lifting everyone up is another question he has. The issue is whether the state can use existing resources better or does it have to do this and still do that other. He has to answer to his constituents about why one thousand five hundred million dollars are being put into the education system and students cannot read.

SENATOR BEGICH said the committee substitute incorporates so many suggestions that he could not mention them all. One is the suggestion from Senator Hughes to report on class size. Mr. Parker mentioned the 70 hours [page 12, line 15] and time constraints for teachers. The committee substitute will recognize what has already been put in place if a student has an Individualized Education Plan. He said he looks forward to the

next three days of hearings. He thanked Senator Stevens for providing the opportunity for people to testify, modify, and build a better bill.

10:25:18 AM

CHAIR STEVENS reminded the committee of the deadline for amendments and held SB 6 in committee for further review.

10:25:49 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 10:25 a.m.