

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 12, 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)

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
02/07/20	(S)	Heard & Held
02/07/20	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/11/20	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
02/11/20	(S)	Heard & Held
02/11/20	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/12/20	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

MARY BETH VERHELST, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

DEBBIE CARY, member
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District School Board
Ninilchik, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

JENNIFER KNUTSON, Ph.D., Senior Director
Teaching and Learning
Anchorage School District (ASD)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

CHRISTINE VILLANO, representing self/retired teachers
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6 with recommendations for changes.

JUDY ELEDGE, State Literacy Coordinator
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

STACI EIBERT, representing self/parent/homeschool

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 6.

DAVID NEESE, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

CHRIS REITAN, Superintendent

Craig City School District

Craig, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified about his concerns with SB 6.

SHAWN ARNOLD, Superintendent

Valdez City Schools

President

Alaska Superintendents Association

Valdez, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6 with concern about some provisions.

MARY KRETZSCHMAR

Decoding Dyslexia Alaska

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

RONDA SCHLUMBOHM, Teacher

Salcha Elementary

Salcha, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6 with concern about some provisions.

SCOTT MACMANUS, Superintendent

Alaska Gateway Schools

Tok, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6 with concern about some provisions.

ESTHER PEPIN, Early Learning Coordinator

Bristol Bay School District

King Salmon, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

DONN LISTON, representing self

Eagle River, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Shared his experience teaching adults to read.

POSIE BOGGS, Member
Alaska Reading Coalition
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6 with some recommendations.

MARVAT OBEIDI, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

JODI TAYLOR, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director
Best Beginning
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

BRAD GALBRAITH, Regional Advocacy Director
ExcelinEd in Action
Phoenix, Arizona

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

ROY GETCHELL, Superintendent
Haines School District
Haines, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified about concerns with SB 6.

TREVOR STORRS, President and CEO
Alaska Children's Trust
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

MALAN PAQUETTE, representing self
Kenai Peninsula, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Did not speak to SB 6 in her testimony.

DAVID BOYLE, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

BETHANY MARCUM, Executive Director
Alaska Policy Forum
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

BARBARA GERARD, representing self
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6.

PATRICK MAYER, Superintendent
Aleutian East Borough School District
Sand Point, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 6 with concerns about some provisions.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[9:00:11 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 Hughes, Begich, Costello, and Chair Stevens. Senator Coghill arrived as the meeting was in progress.

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

[9:00:34 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."

He noted that the committee substitute, work order 31-LS0159\G, was available but this hearing would be spent taking public testimony.

[9:01:16 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH reminded everyone that in all versions of SB 6 and in the previous version, SB 99, pre-K is not mandated. The bill is clear that it always remains the parent's choice. He also addressed concerns of homeschool parents. AS 14.03.016 is about the parent's right to direct the education of the parent's child. It recognizes the authority of a parent, allows the parent to object to and withdraw the child from the standards-based assessment or test required by the state. This bill does not mandate that parents who homeschool would have to do the

screenings in SB 6. Parents' rights under AS 14.03.016 are not changed under this bill.

SENATOR BEGICH noted that the bill requests that school districts provide the department the ratio of kids to teachers in a classroom, to gather good data from around the state. He reminded the committee that Mr. Parker [NEA-Alaska President] talked about large class sizes in each of the committee member's school districts. Legislators want to address that important issue but need evidence from rural and urban areas of the state to identify the effect of class sizes. Under SB 6, this element would be reported to the department and to both the House and Senate Education Committees.

CHAIR STEVENS shared that he received several emails from homeschool parents who need to understand that parents always have the right to opt out.

9:04:53 AM

SENATOR HUGHES said everyone knows that smaller class sizes are better at the lower grades. She encouraged districts to reprioritize funding to reduce the classroom ratio of students to teaching staff. The bill will not mandate that, but school districts and boards should be doing that as much as possible, she said.

9:06:02 AM

CHAIR STEVENS reminded the public that written testimony could be submitted to senate.education@akleg.gov. He opened public testimony on SB 6.

9:06:43 AM

At ease.

9:06:46 AM

MARY BETH VERHELST, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, applauded the state for taking action to ensure that all Alaskan students learn to read well. She is an instructional coach at the district level for the Anchorage School District. She has been a kindergarten teacher. She has experienced the need for explicit teaching of the five essential areas of reading and for having an assessment system in place to show the effectiveness of instruction. As she has worked with teachers, the need is apparent to support teacher in teaching the five areas of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Many teachers have not had the training on how to teach phonics explicitly so that all students get a well-

developed phonics lesson daily, especially in kindergarten and first grade, where it is essential.

9:08:43 AM

DEBBIE CARY, Member, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District School Board, Ninilchik, Alaska, said her district is in support of SB 6. She asked about the change from September 1 to June 1 for kindergarten entry in the committee substitute.

SENATOR BEGICH explained that the date for the qualifying age for kindergarten is being changed from September 1 to June 1. He said Senator Hughes can speak about the developmental awareness of a child. According to the data from the department, that change would have affected eight kids in the state.

SENATOR HUGHES added that the change will allow kids to be older and more prepared to enter school. It allows a few more months for children to mature which will be helpful to teachers. A lot of parents now hold boys back a year to allow them to mature before entering school. This just adds a few months so the set of students will be more mature.

MS. CARY stated that would be more than eight students. Students born from June 1 through September 1 would not enter kindergarten until they are almost six.

SENATOR BEGICH replied he got the data from the department. If that is not correct, he would like to hear from the department.

SENATOR HUGHES said she thought the data indicated that on October 1, eight students were still not that age, but the point is to allow children to mature. It would be all the children born between June and September. A lot of schools begin in August, so some four-year-olds enter kindergarten. This would mean that all students starting kindergarten would be five years old.

CHAIR STEVENS said further questions about that should be directed to the department.

9:13:05 AM

JENNIFER KNUTSON, Ph.D., Senior Director, Teaching and Learning, Anchorage School District (ASD), Anchorage, Alaska, said SB 6 provides direction and support to ensure all Alaskans students are proficient readers by third grade. She worked in two Title I schools in Anchorage that were part of the Reading First initiative in the early to mid-2000s. With that grant, ASD

implemented many of the practices that are in this bill. That includes a core curriculum that addresses those five essential areas of reading, universal reading screening, targeted and intensive reading interventions and progress monitoring. ASD implemented reading instruction and what is now referred to as response to instruction or multitiered systems of support. During that time, the third graders increased from 28 proficient or higher on state assessments in 2001 to 85 percent in 2006. ASD saw significant results with this model in Title I schools. Reading is the one content area with a convergence of evidence about how students learn and how to best teach. Given the higher standards the state has in 2020, it is even more critical that it have this early reading instruction for all students in Alaska. This would allow students to access advanced classes and experience the joy of reading. She offered her support for SB 6 as a parent and district administrator.

CHAIR STEVENS thanked her for providing the specific information about the students' improvement in reading skills.

[9:16:19 AM](#)

CHRISTINE VILLANO, representing self/retired teachers, Fairbanks, Alaska, said she has been an Alaskan teacher for many years. Her training and courses have focused on reading, writing, and STEAM [science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics] education. She taught in the inner city in Newark, New Jersey, in the Yupik village of St. Mary's, and has been a first grade teacher in Fairbanks for more than 45 years. Her professional life has been focused on teaching reading and writing. She likes many things in the bill--pre-K programs for all Alaskan children, the focus on reading practices, the connection with parents, and early reading interventions.

MS. VILLANO said she is concerned about how the bill will be funded. Early primary teachers often face large class sizes and will be hard pressed to do all the components required by the bill. She is encouraged about the state's interest in reading but concerned about the prescriptive nature of the bill. Basic skills are important but that is only part of a balanced reading program. The bill needs more teacher voice throughout the process from the selection of supplemental materials, assessment tools, professional development, the retention policies, and how the program will be implemented.

MS. VILLANO said those who have been in the classrooms have much to offer the legislature on reading instruction, progress monitoring, interventions, and assessment. Teachers need to be

part of the process of how the legislation evolves and what it will look like in the future. Teacher "buy-in" and motivation happens when teachers are part of the process and policy implementation. A one-size-fits-all reading program does not work. Educators need to be able to differentiate and personalize instruction. All reading instruction should be culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate. Issues of English language learners must be addressed. She said she is passionate about class size. The bill talks about small group instruction and frequent assessments and reporting to parents. This is all best practices, but she has taught up to 31 first graders. It is difficult to reach the needs of all kids in such a stressful and difficult situation. When classes are smaller reading instruction is much more successful.

MS. VILLANO said she wants this bill to succeed because she wants Alaskan kids to succeed. With just a couple of modifications, it could benefit Alaskan students. She thanked Senator Begich for meeting with groups of teachers to get their input on the bill. She asked the committee to feel free to use her expertise as well as that of many of her colleagues.

9:21:07 AM

JUDY ELEDGE, State Literacy Coordinator, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Anchorage, Alaska, said she has been an educator since 1981 and since 1997 has lived and worked in rural Alaska. Since 2003 she has worked in the lowest performing schools in the state. She has been a teacher, principal, curriculum director, testing coordinator, and state instructional coach and now is the state literacy coordinator. She wants to commend the wonderful teachers she has known and worked with through the years. There are many reasons for why the state is where it is today. That blame does not only lie with teachers, who are often blamed, but on parents, districts, and local school boards. The law will not work without total commitment from all stakeholders.

MS. ELEDGE said she wanted to comment on one of the changes that were reviewed in yesterday's meeting. For item 17 of the explanation of changes in the committee substitute, she thinks there may not have been knowledge about what already exists. Item 17 states to insert "require consideration of recommendations from the 2018-2019 Task Force on Reading Proficiency and Dyslexia." References to this task force are in several statewide documents regarding literacy. The \$21 million comprehensive literacy state development grant received by the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) in October

of 2019 includes state activities related to the approval of a state literacy plan and an update to the Alaska reading blueprint. These tasks are already under way as part of grant activities. The draft state literacy plan includes that task force report, along with other evidence-based interventions. Under this plan, the task force is mentioned as the number one evidence-based resource. This report is included in full in this plan. It is also listed as the fourth reference for the state plan. After consultation with the department, she would recommend a change to item 17 to better represent what is already happening in the state. Also, not all reading deficiencies are dyslexia related. This would broaden and make language consistent for all students with reading difficulties.

MS. ELEDGE said she will submit this wording to the chair:

Current DEED efforts include state activities related to the approval of a state literacy plan and an update to the Alaska reading blueprint, which includes recommendations from the 2018-2019 Task Force on Reading Proficiency and Dyslexia and other evidence-based reports that define screenings or assessment tools that meet the needs of all students.

This wording would better include all the efforts going forward, not just that one task force.

9:25:00 AM

STACI EIBERT, representing self/parent/homeschool, Anchorage, Alaska, said the common ground in the state is knowing the importance of the state's children. Everyone wants what is best for the students of Alaska. The failure of the current educational model is that it is based on the 20th century response to the Industrial Revolution. Factories needed workers with a common set of skills and knowledge. This one-size-fits-all methodology made sense in its time. However, in the 21st century the digital revolution shrank the globe and education must adapt. She cited successful examples from Finland and Japan. The dangers of continuing down the one-size-fits-all path is evident. The 21st century work force must be able to collaborate, adapt, and problem solve. No one-size-fits-all test can measure these intelligences. Critical thinking skills are forged in a facilitative classroom environment. The Alaska Reads Act is right in its heart, but wrong in its methodology. Everyone wants students to achieve more, but this is going about it in the archaic way.

[9:28:05 AM](#)

DAVID NEESE, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, noted that he was a member of the House Education Task Force in 2014. The task force found a swing in methodology of reading delivery over the years. Alaska is not getting what it is supposed to out of reading. In Anchorage, 2,063 out of 3,400 third graders in 2019 were not proficient on PEAKS (Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools). In Fairbanks North Star School Borough, 600 of 1,000 were not proficient. In the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, 326 out of 580 were not proficient and in the Juneau School district, 186 out of 300 were not proficient. This bill does not help those kids. Delaying any implementation promotes several thousand kids to fourth grade without any intervention. These are students who have not been able to prove their ability in English language arts. He said it is very important to pass this bill and he offered his support for SB 6, as written.

[9:31:19 AM](#)

CHRIS REITAN, Superintendent, Craig City School District, Craig, Alaska, thanked the committee for the improvements to the bill based on previous testimony. It is obvious the committee is listening and trying to craft the most equitable bill for all Alaskans. He referred to page 13 of the committee substitute regarding how the department will adopt a statewide screening or assessment tool for kindergarten through grade three under Section 14.30.760. The bill states this will be done three times each school year. Craig City School District operates PACE, a statewide homeschool program with students all over the state and in a number of remote areas. He said he is not sure how this bill will intersect with homeschool families, particularly those who live in remote areas. On page 14, Section 14.30.765 states that reading intervention services will be offered to students in kindergarten through grade three who exhibit a reading deficiency. Providing that in an equitable fashion is another concern for homeschool programs. He noted that it will be difficult to find and hire the necessary reading instructors. He clarified that he is not suggesting the bill should not move forward, but merely pointing out that school districts could have difficulty finding people to provide these services.

[9:33:52 AM](#)

SHAWN ARNOLD, Superintendent, Valdez City Schools, President, Alaska Superintendents Association, Valdez, Alaska, said he was optimistic about many components of this bill, including providing reliable funding for early education programs and an increased focus on reading proficiency by third grade. These two

pillars are critical to ensure all Alaskan students are adequately prepared to live successful and fulfilling lives. Establishing statewide, early education programs means the state supports children in a critical development time period and prepares them to be successful students in first grade. Further initiatives to provide evidence-based instruction and interventions will only strengthen the progress made through these early learning initiatives.

MR. ARNOLD said as Dr. Parady testified last week, this reading bill will not reach its full potential unless it is accompanied by other changes in education in Alaska. Teacher and principal turnover, the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students, and historical trauma continues to have significant impact on student abilities and outcomes. Any new program, curriculum, or intervention will be undermined by the realities and practical aspects of learning conditions across Alaska. As the bill moves forward, these pieces must be addressed. The science on the effective methods of teaching reading is clear, as is research on student retention. He and his colleagues do not fear retention or accountability, but these administrators know it can hurt kids. For example, research has shown that retention has a negative impact on students. The studies in Florida can be misleading since those studies do not provide definitive data on the pure effect of retention on student outcomes.

MR. ARNOLD said the state should focus on the most effective instruction and intervention and consider potential obstacles to avoid pitfalls. He emphasized the need for increased feedback from educators on critical parts of the bill. Commissioner Johnson asked superintendents for general input about reading early in this process. Alaska's administrators responded immediately with a willingness to help craft the bill and offer meaningful input. Superintendents asked the commissioner and the governor repeatedly to share ideas but were not given that opportunity until Senator Begich introduced the bill and solicited input. Superintendents were not initially at the table, so the bill had limited input from educators in Alaska. He offered his view that SB 6 is a good start and by working together the bill can be one that is good for all students.

[9:38:21 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS noted the arrival of Senator Coghill.

[9:38:30 AM](#)

MARY KRETZSCHMAR, Decoding Dyslexia Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, said Decoding Dyslexia is a parent-led movement. She spoke in support of SB 6, but urged the committee not to delete "and publish on the district's Internet website" the number of students being retained from advancing to the next grade. Reporting and accountability should be transparent. Parents need to be able to access information through their districts. Parents cannot always navigate the state's database but can ask local school districts for the information. If districts are required to report the number of students being retained, it is more accessible and transparent. She suggested that there should be a public notice requirement. The Alaska Reads Act is important, but it must be crafted with strong language to hold everyone accountable.

SENATOR BEGICH clarified that the school districts would still report to the department and the legislature. The committee substitute (CS) for SB 6 does not eliminate reporting, but some districts did not want to be required to report on their web sites. However, he acknowledged that she makes a good point in that school districts should share that information with parents who are interested in it.

[9:41:28 AM](#)

RONDA SCHLUMBOHM, Teacher, Salcha Elementary, Salcha, Alaska, said she has taught for 30 years, 22 of which have been at Salcha Elementary. She has a reading endorsement and a master's degree in education. She applauds the committee's work on pre-K and moving the date for entrance into kindergarten. She said placing a reading teacher in schools that are struggling is a good start. She expressed concern that the language in SB 6 changes the language to only reading, which means that writing will be neglected. This is problematic because writing is how many children access print and learn how language is put together. Another concern is that SB 6 only mentions dyslexia, but there are other reading deficiencies. She suggested the committee could develop language in the bill that supports all struggling readers. Research states that time spent on print is the most beneficial way to help children learn to read. Teaching must be balanced and engaging and teachers must teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The National Reading Panel included all five aspects. Further, vocabulary and comprehension cannot be neglected, she said.

MS. SCHLUMBOHM expressed concern that emphasis is placed on screeners because they do not always accurately capture what students know. She turned to class size, stating that teachers

with 27 students in their classrooms cannot adequately respond to all of the needs. One of her colleagues said even for veteran teachers, teaching is hard, but the biggest reason kids struggle to read stems from poverty. She said poverty affects Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the number of books at home, and children's exposure to words. She said adding pre-K is a good start, but it does not address dealing with traumatized children, coping with challenging behavior in classrooms, or making sure all kids are ready to learn. She referred to her written testimony with research links. She offered her willingness to discuss these issues because teaching is her passion and her life's work.

9:45:09 AM

SCOTT MACMANUS, Superintendent, Alaska Gateway Schools, Tok, Alaska, said there are many good things in SB 6 The intent is to get kids reading at level in third grade. That has been the goal for the last five years for his school district and the district is making progress on that. The district uses AIMSweb as a screener and a blended instructional model that incorporates the findings of the National Reading Panel. Teachers are trained on vision-related learning issues, such as dyslexia. Teachers and aides have all received training on these instructional programs. The district has made significant gains in the past four years with reading in the elementary population because of the focus on reading. Some classrooms had a full grade level of improvement over the regular growth curve. He has seen students lose ground with poor teachers. Those teachers are replaced as soon as possible.

MR. MACMANUS said there is much to like in the bill, including the honorable intent of most of the sponsors to make sure kids can read and function literately in a society that requires it. The bill supports pre-K and parent engagement and provides support from the department to train staff. It bases its findings on the National Reading Panel. But some aspects raise serious flags. The one-size-fits-all approach, the loss of local control, the significant reporting mandates, the emphasis on centralized control from the department. Those will crush this idea. Perhaps most important is the availability of qualified staff. He advertised for a reading interventionist for two years. One came for one semester before getting on a plane and going back to the states. He would like to see a bill that focuses on student growth and takes into account where many kids are starting from. He suggested a menu of screeners for districts to choose from. He would like to see a university training program that is available to teachers and aides. Aides are critical for long-term change. He suggested a phased-in

implementation. Resolving this is a function of available resources. School districts are already being tasked with doing more and more. Based on getting funded .5 [for pre-K], his district would get \$144,000. A quick estimate suggests it would cost \$400,000 to implement the bill. He supports the intent and much of the content of SB 6. He hopes more input is taken from educators before the bill is finalized. He wants to see the bill implemented in a way that would be effective in rural Alaska.

[9:48:58 AM](#)

ESTHER PEPIN, Early Learning Coordinator, Bristol Bay School District, King Salmon, Alaska, said she supports funding for pre-K. Having public funding for preschool will allow schools to build relationships with families early on. Schools need to have conversations about important milestones in children's development on a local level. Learning to read is so often affected by children's social and emotional development. Having funding for preschool will support district efforts to begin this work in the critical years of development. If districts are to develop a strategic response to intervention in grades K-3, the role that preschool plays in the development of phonological awareness must be considered.

MS. PEPIN said her district has been able to provide preschool for every three and four-year-old in the community because the district has been a recipient of a state pre-elementary grant for the past four years. Having funding for preschool has ensured that the district's children are ready for kindergarten. The Alaska Developmental Profile annually measures 13 goals that are significant predictors of students' success in school. Before receiving pre-elementary funding, only 25 to 35 percent of Bristol Bay students were fully ready for kindergarten. In the four years of the grant, the percentage of students who are ready for kindergarten ranges from 60 to 100 percent. With support through the bill, the district hopes that this readiness level will continue and it will have more data to compare kindergarten readiness to third grade reading scores. A high-quality preschool is a challenge for school districts to collaborate with families and elders and community partners to develop a model of continuity of care with K-3 so that preschool is not a silo experience. Continuity of care also applies to the Alaska Native ways of knowing and the Western education system. As a mother of a child who will be in preschool next year, she said she hopes that he will have a rich environment to socialize, develop problem solving skills and collaboration skills, and play with other children as he begins his educational career and life.

[9:52:56 AM](#)

DONN LISTON, representing self, Eagle River, Alaska, said he holds a Master of Education from the University of Alaska Southeast. He taught adult basic education at the Mountain View Community Center in Anchorage and at the Wasilla Job Center. In 2013 he was named a BP Teacher of Excellence. He said an estimated 25 percent of Alaska's kindergarteners do not graduate from high school. He offered his view that the primary reason is poor reading skills. Many of his adult basic education students must first learn phonics in order to learn to read. He found that once students overcame poor reading methods, these students quickly learned to read. He taught GED [General Education Development] to students of varied ages. He said he did not find any evidence that early pre-K programs impacted their potential for success. The Constitution of the State of Alaska requires the state to provide an education for children from the age of seven. The state has reading specialists throughout the state, but students learn when they are ready, motivated, and have a capable teacher. In closing, he said he supports any effort to ensure Alaskans can learn to read at an early age.

[9:55:24 AM](#)

POSIE BOGGS, Member, Alaska Reading Coalition, Anchorage, Alaska, said she is excited to see the changes to strengthen SB 6. For example, simply using the word "reading" focuses the bill on reading and not the whole of education. In a pre-K bill, it is important to define appropriate prereading skills that should be assessed in preschool and then be directly taught in preschool in engaging and fun ways that are not drill and kill. Having that same sort of language continue into K-3 classrooms is important. She is happy to see there will be a panel of stakeholders to consider the efficacy of the act. She said defining terms such as evidence-based reading intervention and reading specialist in statute is critical.

MS. BOGGS said the state needs many highly knowledgeable and skilled teachers of reading. Dr. Steve Atwater says the University of Alaska's initial licensure programs already produce this level of reading teacher. She question how that can be verified. UA needs beginning teachers to have fluent reading instructional skills and current teachers need to become reading specialists. One way to be sure that UA is producing fluent reading teachers is to have the university administer a reading competency exam similar to those used in Massachusetts, Colorado, Arkansas, Connecticut, and other states. The results should be reported to the legislature. It may be thinking out of

the box, but the legislature created ISER (Institute of Social and Economic Research) quite a few years ago. The legislature could fund a multidisciplinary institute of reading excellence.

CHAIR STEVENS announced that because the committee schedule was so tight, he would have to limit public testimony to two minutes. He stated that written comments sent to senate.education@akleg.gov would be appreciated.

10:00:37 AM

MARVAT OBEIDI, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, said she is in support of the Alaska Reads Act. As a parent of a four-year-old and educator, she thanked the State of Alaska for taking action to ensure that all students learn to read. As a former classroom teacher, an English language learner teacher, and now an English language learner coach with the Anchorage School District, she understands that there is not only a need to help students decode but to ensure that students are in school environments that are rich in vocabulary and that support language acquisition. Both are essential components for developing language and skilled readers.

10:01:44 AM

JODI TAYLOR, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, said she is joined by her friend Celeste Hodge Growden, who is on the NAACP board. She and Ms. Growden both support SB 6. Students in Alaska need focused reading, especially early reading, to achieve success throughout their school years. Statistical data shows that if students can read proficiently by third grade, they are successful in the rest of their academic years. However, students who do not read by third grade are unsuccessful. She has personally observed this when she has helped administer ACT camps. She offered her support for student retention, so that students have outcome-driven results. She related that she held her daughter back in first grade and repeating it was very beneficial for her daughter. She offered her belief that the accountability provision in the bill will help all students.

10:03:25 AM

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director, Best Beginning, Anchorage, Alaska, began with the quote "children are made readers on the laps of their parents." That says beautifully and clearly why she does what she does every day. Everyone wants Alaskan children to read well by the time students leave the third grade. That makes a big difference in children's whole lives. She is watching the evolution of SB 6 and is excited to see support for more state-funded preschool, a designated home for

Parents as Teachers, and a detailed plan to ensure kids learn to read by third grade. She encouraged the committee to consider the recommendations made in the National Governors Association's publication "Governor's Pocket Guide to Early Literacy." It includes five action steps. Four of them are included in the bill. She is not suggesting adding anything to the bill, but to keep the fifth action step in mind. That is to engage and support families as partners in early language and literacy development, invest in programs that increase families' capacity to build their children's language and literacy skills. For example, home visits, public/private partnerships to promote parent/child book reading and home libraries, and early literacy campaigns focused on families. This list focuses on what families can do at home. As the committee hones the Alaska Reads Act, she asked them to keep in mind that getting ready to read does not begin when a child turns four and attends preschool. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents read to their children beginning at birth.

[10:06:43 AM](#)

BRAD GALBRAITH, Regional Advocacy Director, ExcelinEd in Action, Phoenix, Arizona, said ExcelinEd is a national nonprofit that works on student-centered policies across the country. ExcelinEd has worked on several reading acts and has identified 14 fundamental principles that make a successful reading act. His organization is encouraged by the approach in SB 6, which has touched upon almost all of those fundamental principles. It will be a significant step forward as the state strives to create excellent opportunities for students to succeed throughout their lives as proficient readers.

[10:07:48 AM](#)

ROY GETCHELL, Superintendent, Haines School District, Haines, Alaska, said he has an undergraduate degree in elementary education in the area of remedial reading. He has a Ph.D. in educational leadership and policy studies from the University of Denver. He successfully implemented the Colorado Basic Literacy Act and the Colorado READ Act as a teacher and principal for many years. In 1991, when he came to Alaska as a brand new teacher, he was one of over 3,000 candidates at the Alaska Teacher Placement job fair in Anchorage. Those numbers have changed significantly since then. Alaska's students are capable and represent the best of their generation. He moved his two daughters to Alaska and it was the best thing he could have done. He offered his view that Alaskan schools are not broken. However, he appreciates the early literacy and early education components in SB 6. He expressed concern about language in SB 6

that requires districts to change existing processes. For example, the Haines School District uses DIBELS and Lindamood-Bell and requiring the district to change that could be problematic. Further, with the change from phonic awareness to phonemic awareness, he wonders whether many of Alaska's educators did not provide input before SB 6 was introduced. Finally, the retention policy could be removed from the bill since school districts are already allowed to retain students.

[10:10:37 AM](#)

TREVOR STORRS, President and CEO, Alaska Children's Trust, Anchorage, Alaska, said that as the statewide leader in the prevention of child abuse and neglect, the Alaska's Children Trust supports SB 6. Early childhood education has been shown to reduce several of the factors that put children at risk of abuse and neglect. He said his testimony is not focused on the language of the bill, but the intent. The goal of the bill is to invest early and ensure children are ready to be contributing members to the collective success of the state. The trust commends the bill for recognizing that investing early provides the best return on investment. However, it will be equally important to remember that children need to arrive at school ready to learn. No matter how good the reading program is, if children arrive hungry or homeless and cannot access good health care or have trauma in their lives, their ability to learn is greatly hindered. As this bill moves forward, it will be important to remember the role social determinants have on a child's ability to learn. Other states have seen that an increase in third grade reading went beyond instituting the right reading or pre-K program. These states also ensure that children and their families have support to reduce the many barriers to learning. The trust encourages the legislature to think of this bill and other decisions related to the budget. If the state invests here but cuts Medicaid, food stamps, housing, and homeless programs, the success of this bill and the investment the legislature is making is greatly reduced.

[10:13:11 AM](#)

MALAN PAQUETTE, representing self, Kenai Peninsula, Alaska, did not speak to SB 6 in her testimony.

[10:15:45 AM](#)

DAVID BOYLE, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, said no other bill is more important this session than SB 6. If properly implemented with accountability metrics, it will impact the state's children. He supports SB 6 if it includes retention. Everyone has seen the data on how poorly Alaska's children

perform on national tests. Everyone can agree that every child should read at grade level. The question is how to accomplish this. SB 6 is a start, but it is only a start if implemented with accountability. The legislation needs teeth to be truly effective. To pass a reading bill without retention would be like passing a DUI bill with no consequences for the violator. Data clearly shows the positive effects of retaining students in third grade who are far below grade level in reading. Eighteen states have implemented the Florida model since 2015. Eight of those states have strong retention requirements and ten have weak requirements. Of the ten states with weak retention requirements, only four increased their NAEP scores for students eligible for free or reduced lunch. Two actually saw their scores decrease. The bottom line is that the NAEP score growth is six times higher for those states with strong retention bills. The state could ignore the data and pass a bill that continues to fail children or the state can help teachers, parents, and children to ensure that all kids can read at grade. To quote from the testimony from the Association of Alaska School Boards on SB 6: "It seems to me that retaining a child for lack of reading proficiency may be more a failure of the system rather than the fault of the child." He urged the committee to not fail a child again by not requiring retention. For public schools to improve, every child must have a teacher who can teach kids how to read. Parents must also be helped to teach their children to read.

[10:18:44 AM](#)

BETHANY MARCUM, Executive Director, Alaska Policy Forum, Anchorage, Alaska, said robust early childhood literacy programs are a proven solution for Alaska's last-in-the-country scores. These programs have resulted in gains for children in some, but not all, of the states that have implemented the programs. In some states, the results have been flat. The difference is accountability. In states such as Colorado and Connecticut, the programs contain the right interventions, such as early and continuous parental notification of struggling readers, pairing the weakest readers with the most effective teachers, and instruction in phonological awareness. In those states, if the interventions do not bring a child to proficiency, often the child gets passed along. While some of these children will eventually catch up, many will not. These are the children most likely to drop out of school, end up in poverty, and land in the corrections system. Some states with early literacy included performance-based promotion policies. These states have all the same interventions, but in the end, if a child is not at grade level proficiency, the child gets a different year of third

grade, not just another year of third grade. The repeated third grade includes targeted, focused attention, which is precisely what these children deserve. In Mississippi, for example, the number of children with disabilities who passed the literacy test increased by 23 percent. There can be no better return on state investments than making a difference in the lives of Alaska's children, she said.

[10:20:47 AM](#)

BARBARA GERARD, representing self, Palmer, Alaska, said she is the principal of Academy Charter School in Palmer. She is excited about SB 6 and the movement to improve literacy across the state of Alaska. She is supportive of the change for the kindergarten eligibility date from September 1 to June 1. Three years ago, the Academy's governing board developed a policy to change its kindergarten eligibility date from September 1 to August 1. In the three years following this change Academy has found more of its kindergarten students entering school ready to learn. Turning five a few months before entering kindergarten allows children to reach developmental milestones necessary to meet academic expectations and be more socially and emotionally ready.

MS. GERARD said research supports early intervention and early learning. She supports preschool for all Alaskan children. Children who have attended preschool have an edge when entering kindergarten. They arrive with a basic understanding of classroom expectations, have learned some collaboration skills, have been exposed to rich language and vocabulary and phonemic awareness, and are already developing the love of reading. She acknowledged that preschool is costly, but the positive outcomes of preschool for all Alaskan children would reap not only early benefits but long-term benefits. From the beginning, kids need to be on the trajectory of reading proficiency. When children learn to read early and love to read, fewer children are retained for a lack of reading proficiency in second and third grade. She urged the committee to implement preschools in all public schools and allow pre-elementary students to be counted in the school's average daily membership. To be able to do that at Academy Charter School would make it even better. She reiterated full support for SB 6.

CHAIR STEVENS stated that written testimony could be submitted at any time.

[10:24:27 AM](#)

PATRICK MAYER, Superintendent, Aleutian East Borough School District, Sand Point, Alaska, said he is the past president of the Alaska Superintendents Association (ASA) and most importantly, a student advocate. He thanked Senator Begich for introducing the Alaska Reads Act, especially the universal preschool sections. According to the 2019 Alaska Developmental Profile, nearly 70 percent of Alaskan students enter kindergarten lacking foundational preparation for learning. ASA believes equitable access to fully funded, sustainable zero-to-five and pre-K learning programs provides a foundation of excellent social, emotional, and cognitive instruction to students. Research demonstrates that early intervention and instruction is the best way to increase student achievement across all demographics and create the greatest opportunities for all students to read proficiently by third grade. He fully supports that early childhood education should be part of public school funding through the base student allocation.

MR. MAYER said students in Alaska must learn to read and deserve no less. He supports early assessment of reading proficiently, research-based interventions for less than proficient readers, and high-quality professional development to enable educators to create proficient readers. However, superintendents were given no opportunity to provide input in this bill. There was an overarching, general solicitation. When he was president, he asked for a draft of the bill to provide meaningful input. This did not happen. A real opportunity to hear from a broad base of superintendents, principals, and teachers will certainly help shape the bill to provide the best outcomes for students. He encouraged legislators to solicit input from educators in the field who will be asked to implement anything that is passed. As written, the bill is overly prescriptive about details districts must implement. A better approach would be to provide high-quality professional development to educators and paraprofessionals in reading instruction and intervention and to hold them accountable. Retention should not be a strategy in this bill. "Why would we support something that we know unequivocally hurts kids? I've heard a lot of concern across the state about the capacity of the Department of Education to implement this bill, especially given the ambitious timeline. Please consider this in your deliberation.

[10:27:12 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS apologized to all who were not able testify today. He reminded the public that the committee will accept written testimony [at Senate.Education@akleg.gov. He closed public testimony and held SB 6 in committee.

10:27:48 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 10:27 a.m.