

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 26, 2021

8:15 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky
Representative Grier Hopkins
Representative Mike Prax
Representative Mike Cronk
Representative Ronald Gillham

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 43

"An Act extending the termination date of the special education service agency; and providing for an effective date."

- MOVED HB 43 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PRESENTATION(S): ALASKA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION & EARLY DEVELOPMENT REPORT

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 43

SHORT TITLE: EXTEND SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICE AGENCY

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) STORY

02/18/21	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/21
02/18/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/18/21	(H)	HSS, FIN
02/19/21	(H)	EDC REPLACES HSS REFERRAL
02/19/21	(H)	BILL REPRINTED
03/17/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
03/17/21	(H)	Heard & Held
03/17/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/26/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:15 AM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

HEIDI TESHNER, Director
Finance and Support Services
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a legislative fiscal note for HB 43.

JESSIE TOWARAK, Director
Special Education
Bering Strait School District
Unalakleet, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the hearing on HB 43.

PATRICK PILLAI, Executive Director
Special Education Service Agency
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the hearing on HB 43.

JAMES FIELDS, Chair
State Board of Education and Early Development
Department of Education and Early Development
Glennallen, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented and answered questions.

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented and answered questions.

TAMARA VAN WYHE, Division Director
Innovation and Education Excellence
Department of Education and Early Development
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the presentation.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:15:42 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HARRIET DRUMMOND called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:15 a.m. Representatives Cronk, Gillham, Prax, Zulkosky, Hopkins, Story, and Drummond were present at the call to order.

HB 43-EXTEND SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICE AGENCY

[8:16:28 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 43, "An Act extending the termination date of the special education service agency; and providing for an effective date."

[8:17:13 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY, prime sponsor, stated that HB 43 would extend the termination date of the Special Education Service Agency (SESA), which provides high-quality, efficient services for students with severe disabilities in Alaska. She explained that legislative auditor Kris Curtis recommended an extension of eight years, to June 30, 2029, as the agency has met the mission set out in statute. She reviewed the March 17, 2021, hearing where the bill was considered for the first time, emphasizing that the testimony of SESA director Patrick Pillai and the findings of legislative auditor Kris Curtis supported the bill. She recommended that the bill move out of committee.

[8:19:44 AM](#)

HEIDI TESHNER, Director, Finance and Support Services, Department of Education and Early Development, presented a legislative fiscal note for HB 43, Office of Management & Budget (OMB) component number 2735, which included a governor's fiscal year 2022 (FY 22) projected grant of \$2,404,400 for SESA. The grant was calculated in accordance with Alaska Statute (AS) 14.30.650. The fiscal note estimated a cost of \$2,368,900 for FY 23, based on the FY 21 final average daily membership of 127,016.30 multiplied by \$18.65 as specified in AS 14.30.650. The estimated amount for FY 23 was carried forward through June 30, 2029, with the department planning to adjust it annually based on the prior year's average daily membership.

[8:22:01 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND opened public testimony on HB 43.

[8:22:38 AM](#)

JESSIE TOWARAK, Director, Special Education, Bering Strait School District, stated that students, teachers, families, and

districts have been positively impacted by SESA. She said SESA staff have provided expertise, training, teleconference support, librarian services, site visits, and assistance in programming for students with disabilities. She stated that as Special Education Director, she is responsible for recruiting and training special education teachers for 15 villages in her area. Teachers often arrive with little or no training or experience in programming education for students with low-incidence disabilities using resources available in rural areas, she explained. She continued, stating that SESA has been a bridge for students, their teachers, and their programs while also assisting in retaining special education teachers. She recalled the experience of one of her teachers, who would not have known what to do without the aid of SESA. She emphasized that the services are a vital, necessary resource for students, teachers, and families. She recalled her experience as a teacher when SESA provided programming, support, and training for her and her colleagues. In order to meet the unique needs of her students, she stated that she fully supports the reauthorization of SESA.

[8:24:42 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND closed public testimony on HB 43.

[8:24:55 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY added that she has been impressed by, and is grateful for, the support the program brings to students and staff in special education across Alaska. She thanked Patrick Pillai for his work in guiding the agency through several decades, and expressed her gratitude for the special education community, the support of students, and the SESA program.

[8:26:00 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked for clarification on if the programs are driven by federal regulations.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND stated that the programs are driven by the Americans With Disabilities Act, and school districts are required to provide services for students with special needs.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked for verification that the top priority in AIDA is providing those services.

[8:26:54 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY stated that her understanding is that SESA provides one way to meet the federal requirements to serve students with low-incidence disabilities. The program ensures efficient delivery of services and that teachers understand the unique needs of the 1 percent of students affected by these disabilities nationwide.

[8:27:54 AM](#)

PATRICK PILLAI, Executive Director, Special Education Service Agency, responded that Representative Prax was correct, and the federal mandate to provide special education services extends through 21 years of age. This responsibility was entrenched by AS 14.30.630, which required SESA to provide special education services and outreach services for individuals with low-incidence disabilities, as well as support and training for local school districts, he explained.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked, since the services are available through the age of 21, when they begin to be available.

[8:28:55 AM](#)

MR. PILLAI replied that services are available from ages 3 to 21.

[8:29:23 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked to clarify that the funding for SESA is for staff travelling throughout the state and providing support to districts, rather than district hires.

[8:29:49 AM](#)

MR. PILLAI confirmed that the funding to the agency allows for 11-15 specialists to travel to rural school districts and provide training, programming, and support for educators of children with specific disabilities. In districts with few staff, the needs of children with these specific disabilities would go unmet without this specialized support, he explained.

[8:31:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK asked if the funding for the program has stayed at a flat rate for, for example, the last three years.

MR. PILLAI said funding was established eight years ago during the last reauthorization period. He referenced SB 19, which proposes a 24 percent increase in funding.

[8:31:52 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK expressed doubt in the numbers for FY 23 - FY 26 and asked if those numbers will continue to provide enough for the necessary services of the program.

[8:32:20 AM](#)

MR. PILLAI stated that the program's projection for FY 22 shows a \$578,000 deficit, and the 24 percent increase in funding proposed by SB 19 will adjust for that deficit through FY 29.

[8:33:03 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY verified that the Senate Education Standing Committee recommended the increase in funding found in SB 19, and that HB 43 will be referred to the House Finance Committee for recommendation.

[8:33:53 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY moved to report HB 43 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, HB 43 was reported out of the House Education Standing Committee.

[8:34:12 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:34 a.m. to 8:38 a.m.

PRESENTATION(S): Alaska State Board of Education & Early Development Report

[8:45:34 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced that the next order of business would be a presentation of the Alaska State Board of Education & Early Development Report.

[8:45:57 AM](#)

JAMES FIELDS, Chair, State Board of Education & Early Development, provided a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Report

to the Legislature: Alaska State Board of Education & Early Development," dated 3/26/21, [hard copy provided in the committee packet]. He directed attention to slide 2, which provided brief biographies of board members.

[8:48:16 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY noted that the Education and Early Development budget reflects an emphasis on virtual meetings and asked how the virtual model has worked for them.

[8:48:58 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS said it presents a challenge, but the board has become used to it. He stated that the will of the board, in order to move work forward quicker, would be to have more than one face-to-face meeting each year. He noted that despite this, the board has placed priority on COVID-19 mitigation measures and continues to move forward admirably.

[8:49:45 AM](#)

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development, added that partnerships with other associations in hosting online meetings has been very helpful.

[8:50:17 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS continued to slide 3, highlighting the board's mission, vision, and purpose, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Our Mission, Vision, and Purpose

OUR MISSION

An excellent education for every student every day.

OUR VISION

All students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them.

-Alaska Statute 14.03.015

OUR PURPOSE

DEED exists to provide information, resources, and leadership to support an excellent education for every student every day.

[8:51:04 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS continued to slide 4, "Our Strategic Priorities: Alaska's Education Challenge," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Five Shared Priorities:

1. Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade
2. Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs
3. Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources
4. Prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals
5. Improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes

[8:51:49 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked if there are specific goals and performance measures associated with each of these priorities.

[8:52:18 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said that the department website holds a document titled "Meeting Alaska's Education Challenge" which holds some metrics. He stated that the department aims to include all Alaskans in this framework, and quality legislation will provide an opportunity to create specific metrics statewide. Metrics exist in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act and the website, but he emphasized that this is a framework which is still in progress, and he hopes to fill it out with more specific goals and metrics. He mentioned the Teacher Retention Work Group, item 4 on slide 4, which is close to

finalizing a report containing data collected over the previous year that will allow for the development of specific metrics. Various degrees of metrics exist in the framework, but it becomes more important to move toward greater specificity in order to meet the priorities set out by the state board, he stated.

[8:54:09 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX commented that many are angry with the current education system, making it difficult to identify specific aspects and address the differences in expectations. He spoke on the need for feedback in order to address specific issues.

[8:55:21 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS added that the department set up board committees to address the priorities outlined. He stated that the committee work was put on hold, due to the circumstances of the last year, and he hopes to move forward in the coming year. He said that the committee work includes determining which priorities will require legislative action to proceed, and which channels to navigate in a complex system in order to do so. He reiterated that the last year presented huge challenges in moving the priorities forward.

[8:56:42 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND brought the committee's attention to Alaska's Education Challenge, a collection of over 100 people in 5 committees in spring of 2017, and provided a link to the report on the department's website.

[8:57:16 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY said she is pleased there is an annual meeting in statute for all policy makers to come together, ask questions, and support one another. She emphasized her appreciation for the discussions held statewide, including today's committee meeting, with the goal of attaining the best outcomes for students.

[8:59:08 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS continued to slide 5, "Board Action Highlights," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Adopted emergency regulation changes to ensure funding to eligible school districts under Senate Bill 74 to improve Internet services under the School Broadband Assistance Grant program.

Adopted regulation changes to allow military training with the Alaska Army National Guard to count for high school credit and be available to all eligible high school students in Alaska.

Adopted amendments to update the state's school library standards.

Repealed and replaced regulations to allow the issuance of emergency administrative certificates and some emergency teacher certificates.

[8:59:53 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS continued to slide 6, "DEED Significant Steps-School Health & Safety," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Alaska Project AWARE Grant

DEED was awarded a five-year, \$9.1 million Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education) grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

The grant will assist the state in improving mental health by growing mental health literacy, reducing mental health stigma, strengthening early identification and intervention for student mental health conditions, as well as providing more robust services for students who are experiencing severe mental health issues.

Transforming Schools Toolkit

DEED, in collaboration with the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB), launched a new trauma-engaged resource—a toolkit to complement the Transforming Schools Trauma Framework completed last year. The toolkit is a supplemental and highly

practical online resource to assist Alaska schools becoming fully trauma engaged and practicing. The toolkit is intended for districts to use with staff.

Alaska Safe Children's Act Statewide Curriculum

The Health and Safety Unit completed construction of a state authored student training to support districts with the implementation of the Alaska Safe Children's Act in grades 7-12. The curriculum is designed to help prevent childhood sexual abuse and teen dating abuse.

[9:01:25 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked how grant stakeholders are informed of the department's work.

[9:02:06 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON stated that every board meeting is made public, and the new emphasis on virtual meetings has allowed more people throughout the state to participate. The department also provides reports to the board members and hosts webinars, which provide feedback to stakeholders, he stated. He explained that the Alaska Council of School Administrators posts routine meetings with the department, which provide feedback as well. He elaborated that he meets weekly with various stakeholders, including the National School Superintendents Association and the National Education Association. He stated that the department also hosts webinars and publishes various newsletters in order to keep districts informed. He then emphasized the importance of communication all the way down to constituents, who are also stakeholders.

[9:04:19 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND commented that the budget for travel has been greatly reduced due to virtual meetings. She also stated that virtual meetings have also had the fortunate effect of allowing many more people to participate, and she hopes that the added virtual capability will continue to allow greater public participation.

[9:05:27 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON agreed with Co-Chair Drummond's statement, and expressed his excitement with the new capability for rural communities to participate.

[9:06:00 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY stated her support for the Health and Safety Unit in implementing the Alaska Safe Children's Act and combatting the alarming rates of abuse, neglect, and suicide.

[9:07:08 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS continued to slide 7, "DEED Significant Steps-Increased Focus on Third Grade Reading Proficiency," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

DEED received a \$20.7 million five-year Comprehensive Literacy State Develop (CLSD) grant from the U.S. Department of Education to expand the state's efforts to improve literacy skills for all students.

-Sixteen district projects were selected for funding, involving students from birth through grade 12 in 45 different schools.

-Subgrant awards were finalized and announced on January 17, 2020.

Project highlights include professional development in effective reading instruction for teachers, hiring reading specialists, incorporating new and innovative reading instruction, and more.

-Five out of the 16 district projects focus on the K-5 grade span, specifically targeting students reading at grade level by third grade.

[9:08:08 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND mentioned the 16 district projects from the CLSD grant that involved improving the literacy rates of students from birth and asked how those projects work. She also expressed her excitement for such a program.

[9:08:27 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON reiterated that the CLSD grant encompasses students from birth until high school. He stressed the

importance of the third-grade benchmark. He explained that there are several districts that have pre-kindergarten ("pre-k") programs using the grant funds.

[9:09:32 AM](#)

TAMARA VAN WYHE, Division Director, Innovation and Education Excellence, Department of Education and Early Development, stated that of the 16 districts that received CLSD grants, several of them have elements that cover birth to five years of age. She elaborated on the activities, including providing books to parents, story time, workshops for parents and caregivers of preschool children, and stressing the importance of reading to toddlers. She offered to provide specifics on the exciting and rich components of these district projects to the committee at a later time.

[9:11:05 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS continued to slide 8, which provided contact information for the Department of Education and Early Development board members and legislative liaison.

[9:11:34 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK thanked Mr. Fields for his service.

[9:12:30 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS acknowledged Representative Cronk.

[9:13:00 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX pointed out that Alaska, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), performed at the bottom of the national scale in proficiency for fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math. He asked how the State Board of Education is focusing on these performance metrics.

[9:14:48 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS replied that many elements go into bringing the proficiency up, and that the board and committees remain focused on these aspects. However, he explained that the board and committee work has been held up in the past year and the department has limited bandwidth, which must be used for

districts and department employees to maintain their operations above all else.

[9:16:20 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON highlighted three aspects pertaining to educational achievement. He began with character, emphasizing that the state, department employees, and legislature must conduct themselves with the same behavior and approach to achievement expected of the students. Second, he stressed the importance of not being content with these results, given that Alaska students show equal or greater intelligence than other students across the country, in his opinion. He reiterated his confidence in Alaska students and the importance of not settling for poor results. He related that the third aspect pertains to focus, explaining so many ideas to improve education exist and the board and committee members are instrumental in determining which ones will work the best in order to streamline progress.

[9:19:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked which slide listed the priorities outlined in the presentation, for the purpose of making a poster for the committee.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND answered that the priorities were on slide 4. She then commented on the removal of Rebecca Himschoot from the Alaska State Board of Education by Governor Dunleavy in 2019. Ms. Himschoot was offered a seat on the NAEP board, which she had to decline as a result of no longer holding a seat on a state education board, she explained. She stated that having Ms. Himschoot on the NAEP board would have provided Alaska insight into the NAEP process and how to further help Alaska children. She then touched on the limitations of NAEP, specifically that parents do not receive results of these assessments and that the results do not come in for months afterward. She then stressed the importance of teachers, who constantly assess their students and know what needs to be done for them, over that of a national assessment.

[9:22:19 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK commented on the importance of testing at the local level to provide instant, relevant data on student progress. He recalled his experience as a teacher and the negative side of spending time studying for a national assessment.

[9:23:51 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS agreed with Representative Cronk, stating that the board's goal is to provide one comprehensive, timely, local assessment throughout the year.

[9:24:42 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX commented on the inefficiency of spending a week on a national assessment that, although it remains a focus for many, gives results that are not always useful. He stated the importance of communicating a newer, effective program of assessment in order to gain the trust of those that have lost faith in the education system.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND recalled her experience on the Anchorage School District Board, serving a district that was approximately eightieth out of a group of the 100 largest districts in the nation. She brought up the statistic that, on average, 15 percent of the population of those districts were school-aged children while Anchorage, on the other hand, was closer to 20 percent. The number shows a greater interest in education in Alaska's overall population, due to the number of people involved in student lives, she explained.

[9:27:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK reiterated how unique Alaska is regarding the challenges faced by educators and thanked those present for their work in addressing those challenges.

[9:27:57 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked for an update on priority 2, to increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs.

[9:28:34 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON stated that last year was overwhelmed by the pandemic response. The board's focus was on kindergarten through third grade reading policy, but proposed legislation did not pass in last year's legislative session. Once the pandemic hit, focus immediately shifted to the response. Department of Education and Early Development staff had been partnering with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development to provide

guidance to school districts and extend career and technical education (CTE) opportunities to students. He detailed the work done through Anchorage's Canvas learning management system and the Carl Perkins grant programs in other districts to continue delivering CTE. He expressed his optimism for the development of these programs in the coming year.

[9:30:43 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY commended the board on its focus on the pandemic response and its reassurance and support for school districts, students, and families.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND brought up the need for schools to return to in-person teaching, especially for CTE, which requires so much hands-on teaching and tools. She reminisced on seeing the entire school board in person and looked forward to having the opportunity again in the future.

[9:32:23 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON praised the work of the NACTEC program in Nome in providing CTE opportunities to their students virtually.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND commended Doug Walrath, NACTEC director, and stated that she wishes to invite him to make a presentation to the committee.

[9:33:39 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND thanked the presenters.

[9:34:00 AM](#)

MR. FIELDS made one final comment regarding slide 3, stating that the department has, in fact, provided information, resources, and leadership to every district in the state. He applauded the efforts of Commissioner Johnson and all the department staff.

[9:35:03 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND offered closing comments and the committee agenda for the next week.

[9:36:02 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:36 a.m.