

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

May 7, 2021
8:07 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Grier Hopkins

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 164

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

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 173

"An Act relating to state education policy; relating to school climate and connectedness; establishing the School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Committee; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 164

SHORT TITLE: EARLY ED PROGRAMS; READING; VIRTUAL ED

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) TUCK

04/07/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/07/21	(H)	EDC, FIN
04/21/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/21/21	(H)	<Bill Hearing Canceled>
04/23/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/23/21	(H)	Heard & Held
04/23/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/26/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/26/21	(H)	Heard & Held
04/26/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/30/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/30/21	(H)	Heard & Held
04/30/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
05/03/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
05/03/21	(H)	Heard & Held
05/03/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
05/05/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
05/05/21	(H)	Heard & Held
05/05/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
05/06/21	(H)	EDC AT 6:30 PM DAVIS 106
05/06/21	(H)	Heard & Held
05/06/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
05/07/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

BILL: HB 173

SHORT TITLE: SCHOOL CLIMATE & CONNECTEDNESS

SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) TARR

04/14/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/14/21	(H)	EDC, FIN
05/07/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

LÖKI TOBIN, Staff
 Senator Tom Begich
 Alaska State Legislature

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information and answered questions on behalf of the Senate Education Standing Committee, sponsor of companion bill SB 111.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information and answered questions during the hearing on HB 164.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information and answered questions during the hearing on HB 164.

SENATOR TOM BEGICH
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information during the hearing on HB 164 on behalf of the Senate Education Standing Committee, sponsor of companion bill SB 111.

KAREN MELIN, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information and answered questions during the hearing on HB 164.

REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented HB 173.

DAVID SONG, Staff
Representative Geran Tarr
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sectional analysis for HB 173 on behalf of Representative Tarr, prime sponsor.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 173.

TOM KLAAMEYER, President
National Education Association - Alaska Chapter
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 173.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:07:13 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR ANDI STORY called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:07 a.m. Representatives Gillham, Zulkosky, Drummond, and Story were present at the call to order. Representatives Prax and Cronk arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 164-EARLY ED PROGRAMS; READING; VIRTUAL ED

[8:08:36 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 164, "An Act relating to early education programs provided by school districts; relating to school age eligibility; relating to early education programs; establishing a parents as teachers program; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to certification of teachers; establishing a reading intervention program for public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; establishing a reading program in the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to a virtual education consortium; and providing for an effective date."

[Before the committee, adopted as a working document during the 4/23/21 House Education Standing Committee meeting, was the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 164, Version 32-LS0731\I, Klein, 4/20/21, ("Version I").]

[8:09:06 AM](#)

LÖKI TOBIN, Staff, Senator Tom Begich, on behalf of the Senate Education Standing Committee, sponsor of companion bill SB 111, presented the notes for the virtual education components [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

(Page 18, starting on line 18) Section 21. Amends AS 14.07.168 to include information on the virtual education consortium in the annual report to the Alaska State Legislature.

Section 22. Repeals the above changes on June 30, 2034.

[8:11:21 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked for a definition of "consortium."

MS. TOBIN replied that the definition would be covered in a later section. She then resumed her presentation, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

(Page 37, line 6) Section 36. Establishes a new section under AS 14.30, article 16, virtual education.

Under Section 36. DEED is directed to work in cooperation with school districts to establish a virtual education consortium.

Participation in the consortium is voluntary, and participating school districts may access virtual coursework, professional development, and teacher training.

The consortium will also employ a reading specialist to assist districts by modeling effective teaching strategies, coaching and mentoring teachers, providing training in data analytics, and supporting reading teams.

DEED may implement a fee to support the consortium, and districts may also establish fees to support their virtual coursework.

[8:13:09 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked whether there would be a fee for school districts to participate in the consortium.

MS. TOBIN referred to page 38, lines 8-9, of the proposed legislation, which read, "(d) The department may require a school district that participates in the consortium to pay a fee to the consortium."

[8:14:07 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND expressed that the virtual education components comprise a response to having to work remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She then asked who the participants in the consortium would be.

MS. TOBIN explained that the virtual education component was introduced by Senator Hughes in 2012. With regard to the participants in the virtual education consortium, she referred to page 37, lines 12-15, of the proposed legislation, which read as follows:

The consortium shall create and maintain a database of virtual education courses for students, training in virtual instruction for teachers, and professional development courses for teachers of students throughout the state if the coursework curriculum meets the state standards established by the department.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND surmised that this provision would pull together all of the resources that districts and teachers had to utilize during the pandemic.

[8:16:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY asked whether the participation fee would be implemented by the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), and what the fee would be.

MS. TOBIN referred to the text of the proposed legislation, page 38, beginning on line 11 and continuing through line 13, which read, "The fees must approximately equal the consortium's prorated administrative costs related to reviewing and approving courses and maintaining the database." She said the fees would be established in regulation, as stated on page 38, line 16.

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY commented that the virtual education consortium might be better as a virtual "clearinghouse" of resources, and that she doesn't want to begin charging fees for accessing material that should be shared among districts. She expressed understanding that there would be costs associated with implementing the consortium, and she discussed the possibility of finding equity in costs between the smaller and larger school districts. She then pointed out that rural districts have difficulties in participating in online activities due to the dearth of Internet accessibility.

CO-CHAIR STORY noted the work the Alaska Superintendents Association has done with online learning and professional development courses. She asked how staff development would be facilitated.

MS. TOBIN responded that Section 41 of the proposed legislation discusses the virtual education availability deadline of July 1, 2024, which she said would allow DEED enough time to work with existing infrastructure and regulations to ensure the program is structured in a manner that would fit students, teachers, and stakeholders.

CO-CHAIR STORY asked whether the federal funds for the virtual education consortium would be used to develop virtual education courses similar to those used in Florida.

[8:22:21 AM](#)

TAMARA VAN WYHE, Division Director, Innovation and Educational Excellence, Department of Education and Early Development, responded that emergency relief funding has already been used to support virtual education. She described the learning management platform Canvas, which can be used by schools, teachers, and students to deliver remote and in-classroom instruction.

[8:24:12 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked whether DEED would be restricted by statute to using Canvas, or whether a custom program would be developed.

MS. VAN WYHE replied that the language of the proposed legislation allows for sufficient flexibility to consider what school districts are already doing, and she pointed out that participation in the consortium is voluntary. Tools like Canvas work by taking materials and curriculum that have already been created and putting them in a common space for sharing with other educators or across the state, she said; open education resources can be used by educators at no cost and customized to meet local needs such as cultural relevance.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked whether DEED would research available platforms before developing one. He then said that he's still not sure what a consortium is.

MS. VAN WYHE replied that a consortium is a voluntary group of stakeholders that come together with a shared purpose; in this case, to support the efforts of a common learning management system, with coursework that teachers could access through the consortium. She said there are online vendors with content for

purchase and use, and Alaska's educators have successfully used content developed by Florida Virtual School.

[8:30:43 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND pointed out the attached fiscal note outlining DEED's estimate for creating the virtual education consortium.

[8:31:44 AM](#)

HEIDI TESHNER, Director, Finance and Support Services Division, Department of Education and Early Development, explained that DEED would need two new Education Specialist II positions to manage and operate the statewide system and review the courses and provide virtual instruction training. A Reading Specialist position would be needed to provide the intensive reading intervention to school districts participating in the consortium. Total charges would be salary and benefits for three positions, she said; department chargebacks of \$10,800 per person, and a one-time cost of \$5,000 per person for supplies and equipment, would be funded with COVID-19 relief money which is also used to fund the statewide virtual education learning management system license until 2023. She clarified that this fiscal note for HB 164 would only cover the salary and benefits for the three new positions beginning in fiscal year (FY) 2024. She said there is also a one-time cost of \$12,000 for legal services related to the development of the regulations around the consortium, and an expected cost of \$200,000 in FY 2032 for a contractor to assist DEED in developing the multi-year analysis of all programs, which would be presented to the legislature in 2033.

[8:35:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked whether Canvas is the learning management system.

MS. TESHNER replied yes.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND surmised that the section would be continuing what began during the pandemic and would continue using federal relief funds until FY 2024.

MS. TESHNER replied, "That is all correct."

[8:36:29 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked about resources not provided by the Alaska Staff Development Network (ASDN).

MS. VAN WYHE responded that there are several organizations in the state that provide professional development opportunities for educators. Professional development provided by DEED would be specific to the learning management system in use, she said, and would focus on the needs of the consortium; focus would be on not duplicating efforts.

CO-CHAIR STORY noted the importance of complementing instead of duplicating efforts, and she commented that the cost may be prohibitive for some school districts. She then referred to page 37, line 17 of Version I, and she asked whether "teachers delivering or facilitating virtual coursework" means certificated teachers, and whether the required credentials should be added to the proposed legislation.

MS. VAN WYHE responded that the teachers referenced in the bill are to be certificated teachers, and that a Type M Limited certificate is a recognized teacher certificate in the state of Alaska. As such, she expressed, the specific credentials shouldn't need to be detailed in the bill.

CO-CHAIR STORY referred to page 38, line 1, which read, "(2) coaching and mentoring teachers and staff in reading instruction" and she said she would like to add paraprofessionals to "teachers and staff."

MS. VAN WYHE agreed that while paraprofessionals aren't noted specifically in the proposed legislation, adding them would be appropriate.

[8:42:12 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY asked whether student participation in the consortium could impact base student allocation.

MS. VAN WYHE explained that the consortium model would not impact base student allocation; students and/or teachers would simply be accessing course content through the consortium model. A student would still remain fully enrolled in their local school and district.

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY commented that she would like to see protections for schools and districts.

CO-CHAIR STORY agreed that accommodations would be needed, since Alaska does not have consistent Internet access. She expressed wanting to know the exact fees for consortium participation.

MS. TOBIN said the difficulty in estimating the fee structure may lie in the wording of the proposed legislation, which indicates that DEED "may" require a school district that participates in the consortium to pay a fee. She said it's difficult to assess whether a fee would be imposed.

[8:46:24 AM](#)

SENATOR TOM BEGICH, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of the Senate Education Standing Committee, sponsor of companion bill SB 111, said any consortium fees would only occur in consultation with the involved school districts. The proposed associations would be voluntary, he said, and consortium participation would have no effect on base student allocation; since the association would be voluntary, the superintendent could choose to leave the consortium at any time. He suggested looking at the consortium that includes the Copper River School District for context. Regarding Internet accessibility, he discussed the possibility of the state investing approximately \$600 million in broadband; past testimony has indicated that a minimum of \$2 billion would be required to bring accessibility up to an equitable standard across the state.

SENATOR BEGICH said the intent of the proposed legislation is to codify the option of consortium participation, and he noted the existence of a statute that allows for the sharing of resources. He referred to AS 14.14.115(a), which would be amended by Section 24, subsection (a), on page 19 of the proposed legislation. The statute is the cooperative arrangement statute that has existed for years, he said, and provides resources to incentivize school districts to share officers without losing their local identities. Language addressing consortium fees could be added to Section 24, he said.

[8:51:03 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY noted the language of Section 24, subsection (a), which read as follows:

(a) To encourage cooperative arrangements between school districts and between school districts and private businesses, nonprofit organizations, or

government agencies to provide more efficient or economical administrative or educational services, a school district may receive a one-time cooperative arrangement grant from the department of up to \$100,000. The department shall ensure that grant funds provided to districts under this section do not provide direct benefit to private educational institutions.

CO-CHAIR STORY asked for discussion on this subsection.

SENATOR BEGICH explained that lines 22-24 are in keeping with the constitution, as the state does not use public funds to benefit private enterprise. Lines 18-20 are to acknowledge partnerships that already exist, such as a partnership between a school and an Alaska Native organization; there are many educational opportunities provided through nonprofits such as the Rural Alaska Community Action Program, Inc. He pointed out that such partnerships are not currently statutorily incentivized.

CO-CHAIR STORY noted that grant of up to \$100,000, and she asked whether it's limited to school districts in Alaska or if it can be used in other states.

SENATOR BEGICH replied that it's designed for Alaska school districts. He pointed out that if there is no funding, there is no grant.

[8:54:26 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked whether there would be a way to fund AS 14.14.115 through the latest COVID-19 relief package. She said that, if the initial stages of the consortium use federal relief funds, she doesn't see how a fee for participation could be charged until FY 2024.

SENATOR BEGICH stated his agreement, and he pointed out that if DEED does require a fee, it would have to be based on the consortium's recommendation.

[8:56:08 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Ms. Van Wyhe to confirm what institutions would be eligible for the \$100,000 grant.

MS. VAN WYHE confirmed that the grant is only for districts and schools within the state.

[8:56:34 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked about the distinction between private businesses and nonprofit organizations as would relate to Section 24.

SENATOR BEGICH explained that any private company a school district contracts with must meet a constitutional standard.

[9:00:38 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY referred to Section 36, subsection (f), which read as follows:

(f) The consortium may require, as a condition of participation, that school districts that provide courses or have students participating in courses included in the database under (a) of this section adopt the same school term and class schedule for all or part of a school day. The school term must meet the requirements of AS 14.03.030.

CO-CHAIR STORY expressed confusion about the subsection.

MS. TOBIN explained that the consortium would not offer educational opportunities outside of the statutory protection of what constitutes a "school day." For instance, she said, a student could not do 10 hours of coursework in a single day.

[9:01:56 AM](#)

MS. TOBIN concluded her presentation, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

(Page 39) Section 41. Establishes an applicability deadline for the virtual education consortium as July 1, 2024.

MS. TOBIN clarified that July 1, 2024, is the date at which federal funds would no longer be available. She then began her presentation of Section 27, which would amend AS 14.17.505 by increasing the amount of unreserved fund balance a school district may carry forward to the next fiscal year from 10 percent to 25 percent.

[9:03:00 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked for the rationale for increasing the allowable unreserved fund balance.

MS. TOBIN explained that many school districts are handling significant unreserved fund balances due to COVID-19 relief, which are to be used in subsequent years to ensure students' health and safety. She then said that Section 28 would add a new subsection permitting a district to carry over more than 25 percent of the unreserved fund balance if the district meets certain stipulations as defined within the subsection. Section 33 would amend AS 14.20.020 by directing the State Board of Education & Early Development to assess and establish passing scores on teacher competency exams, she said, with components in reading, writing, math, and other subject areas.

[9:04:42 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked whether Ms. Tobin was reading from a set of notes.

MS. TOBIN replied that she was reading from the sectional analysis.

[9:05:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK expressed that there is more to being an effective teacher than passing a competency test.

CO-CHAIR STORY asked why a competency test would be included.

MS. TOBIN responded that Mississippi's program demonstrated benefits from working with the local university to establish a competency exam for the educators, though the competency exam was not in statute.

[9:07:30 AM](#)

MS. TOBIN resumed her presentation of the sectional analysis for Version I, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 38 - Directs early education program staff to be included in those organizations required to report evidence of child abuse.

[9:08:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK asked what is meant by "early education program staff."

MS. TOBIN replied that Section 38 would amend AS 47.17.290(12) to add the early education program organization to the list of mandatory reporters. She clarified that anyone who is working within the organization and sees signs of child abuse would be required to report to the authorities.

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK stated that he was "leery" of Section 38.

[9:11:02 AM](#)

KAREN MELIN, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development, said there exist rules regarding mandatory reporting, and she said the existing requirements should be studied for congruency with existing statute.

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK asked whether proper training would be provided to identify whether abuse is taking place.

CO-CHAIR STORY noted that many early childhood education agencies are required to train staff.

[9:12:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND pointed out that Chapter 17 of the statute is about child protection, and that Section 38 of the proposed legislation would add the early education program to the list of mandatory reporters.

MS. TOBIN clarified that Section 38 would simply add the early education program to the list of mandatory reporters, which already includes Head Start and similar programs; she also pointed out that the term "pre-elementary" is already included in the statute. She pointed out that Section 17, on page 16, lines 2-5 of the proposed legislation, would replace the term "pre-elementary school" with "early education program," and that Section 3, on page 2, lines 13-23, states that an early education program would be a public program. She said any educator who receives public funds to provide early education programs, as provided by DEED, would become a mandatory reporter and would, as such, receive all associated training.

[9:15:02 AM](#)

MS. TESHNER pointed out that the fiscal notes are from Version B of HB 164, and should be dated April 15, 2021, so there will be some discrepancies. She first detailed the fiscal note for allocation to Early Learning Coordination, Office of Management & Budget (OMB) component number 2912. She said this fiscal note addresses the operation of the early education program, with three full-time positions to include two education specialists and one education associate beginning in FY 2022 to develop the program. In addition to the salary and benefits for the three positions, there are department chargebacks of \$10,800 per person and one-time costs of \$5,000 per person for equipment, as well as a one-time cost of \$12,000 for legal services for the Board of Education and Early Development to develop the new regulations. The total cost in FY 2022 would be \$381,900, she said, with costs of \$354,900 starting in FY 2023. The fiscal note for the Parents As Teachers program, \$474,400, is already included in the department's budget and the governor's FY 2022 budget; the funding is necessary in order to continue the program, she said, and would be adjusted as necessary through the budget process as the program is implemented. She said the early education grant program would be repealed on June 30, 2034.

[9:19:08 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked what the chargeback of \$10,500 per person covers.

MS. TESHNER explained that chargebacks cover cost of services provided by other departments, such as the Department of Administration or Office of Information Technology.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked whether the Department of Administration charges a fee for each new hire.

MS. TESHNER explained that the Department of Administration relies on chargebacks for services such as phone usage, human resources, and services for which the state can use economies of scale to receive at a lower cost than individual departments would be able to get.

[9:22:19 AM](#)

MS. TESHNER said that while the first fiscal note she discussed was for managing the grants, the fiscal note now under

discussion was for the grants themselves. Page 3 of the fiscal note shows the funding breakdown by fiscal year, she said, and that there have since been changes to the note. The annual cap of \$3 million means DEED determined that a maximum of 624 students per year would be in each cohort, with a total of nine cohorts per year, starting in FY 2023 and ending in FY 2031 before the program repeal date in FY 2034. She said the average per-student cost was derived from costs in FY 2021, with the total average cost calculated to \$4,803 per student. The number of students, multiplied by the average cost per student, totals \$2,997,000.00 for the three-year grant program.

[9:25:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND said she was having difficulty following the figures. She said she would rather work with a revised fiscal note or a presentation. She described the fiscal note as listing 368 students at \$4,803 per student for FY 2025, with a total cost of \$1,767,504. She asked Ms. Teshner whether she was describing a new chart to replace the chart in the current fiscal note.

MS. TESHNER agreed that the fiscal note is difficult to understand without a visual aid, and that she would provide an updated chart based on the terms in Version I of the proposed legislation.

[9:27:03 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that HB 164, Version I, was held over.

HB 173-SCHOOL CLIMATE & CONNECTEDNESS

[9:27:13 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 173, "An Act relating to state education policy; relating to school climate and connectedness; establishing the School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Committee; and providing for an effective date."

[9:28:07 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:28 a.m. to 9:29 a.m.

[9:29:00 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, introduced HB 173.

9:30:30 AM

The committee took an at-ease from 9:30 a.m. to 9:31 a.m.

9:31:15 AM

REPRESENTATIVE TARR paraphrased the sponsor statement for HB 173, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Alaska's approach to education must be updated to reflect our current understanding of the impact of early childhood adversity, toxic stress, childhood trauma, and cultural competency on children's cognitive development. The School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Act would compel the school districts in our state to submit plans for improving their schools' climate and connectedness for their students, thereby shifting Alaska's focus away from punitive discipline and towards trauma-engaged, culturally responsive, and restorative teaching practices.

This act would not simply place this requirement on districts to navigate alone; it would create a multidisciplinary, diverse statewide School Climate and School Connectedness Committee, which would support and inform districts during the planning process.

This idea was not created from whole cloth - this policy recommendation has been the result of over 5 years of collaboration between hundreds of educators from Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Homer, Palmer, Sitka, Kenai, Valdez, Chevak, Wasilla, Bethel, Dillingham, St. Paul, and Utqiagvik

Additionally, practitioners and educators across the globe have denounced zero-tolerance disciplinary practices such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, as removing students from the classroom simply makes it harder for those students to ever catch up academically to their peers. Research has shown that these policies lead to the "school to prison pipeline," where students that have been

suspended or expelled are more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system.

The recommended approach to classroom conflict is a set of strategies known as "restorative practices," which the Schott Foundation defines as, "processes that proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing." In other words, when students have a conflict, rather than ejecting students from the classroom, restorative practitioners would seek to mend the relationships that were harmed.

In fact, the intent of HB 173 would assist the Department of Education and Early Development in achieving the goals listed in its 2025 strategic plan, which specifically states creating a "sustainable and positive school climates that are safe, supportive, and engaging for all students, staff, and communities" as one of its major goals.

In summation, the School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Act would be a concerted effort to have our educators intentionally re-examine their existing educational practices and update them to include our modern understanding of childhood development and learning. Our children are our most precious resource, and we need to make sure that our schools are supportive environments where they can thrive, and which are led by Alaskans, for Alaskans.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR said work on Erin's Law and Bree's Law taught her that educators are being relied upon more than ever, combined with downward pressure on the budget.

[9:35:15 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked for information on Erin's Law and Bree's Law.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR replied that Erin's Law is a child sexual abuse prevention law, and Bree's Law is a "teen dating violence prevention" law. She said evidence shows that prevention-based policies yield the greatest results. She said efforts towards implementing a statewide policy in the public education system taught her that unfunded mandates are not feasible, while engagement from stakeholders shows more promise. She said

federal funding has been linked to the existence of zero-tolerance policies for guns on campus for the past 20 years, and rates of suspension and expulsion has increased during that time; students were suspended or expelled for infractions beyond their control, and thus excluded from the learning environment. She said the "restorative model" relies on a balance between accountability and support to change classroom dynamics.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR shared an example of two fifth-grade boys who were fighting on the playground became friends after attending a seminar in which they discussed their similarities and differences. She said HB 173 would create a committee to assist school districts in adopting restorative teaching practices.

[9:41:25 AM](#)

DAVID SONG, Staff, Representative Geran Tarr, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Tarr, prime sponsor, presented the sectional analysis of HB 173, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1: States the bill may be known as the School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Act.

Section 2: Amends AS 14.03.015, with a new subsection, AS 14.03.015 (b). This subsection states that the state's education policy will consider principles of early childhood and youth brain development, in addition to considering concepts such as early adversity, toxic stress, childhood trauma, and the promotion of resilience when possible.

Section 3: Creates an advisory School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Committee under the Department of Education and Early Development. This committee will consist of 2 current and 2 retired school superintendents, 3 current and 3 retired K-12 teachers, 4 parents of K-12 students, 1 representative from the Department of Health and Social Services, 2 school social workers, and 2 school counselors. These members will be appointed by the governor and will require representation across rural and non-rural communities, as well as representation across grade levels. The committee will also be able to establish sub-committees on various topics, including English language learners, special education, student

athletes, vocational education, and any other topics as deemed necessary by the committee.

Section 4: Requires school districts to develop school climate and school connectedness improvement plans with support from the statewide School Climate and School Connectedness Improvement Committee. This section also provides guidance for concepts that can be included in the districts' school climate and school connectedness plans.

Section 5: Requires that school districts submit their school climate and school connectedness improvement plans to the commissioner of education and early development, the senate secretary, and the chief clerk of the house of representatives on or before January 1, 2023.

Section 6: Repeals sections 1, 3, 4, and 5 on July 1, 2023.

Section 7: Establishes the effective date as July 1, 2021.

[9:45:12 AM](#)

NORM WOOTEN, Director of Advocacy, Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB), testified in support of HB 173. He said AASB has four separate resolutions supporting the goals contained within HB 173: promoting success for social and emotional learning and positive youth development and support; safe, caring, and connected schools; student connectedness; and supporting the adoption of trauma-informed and culturally relevant practices. Utilizing grants from the U.S. Department of Education, AASB works with school districts across Alaska to provide support for students' physical and emotional needs, he said, as students aren't able to leave their problems at home. He said a student experiencing trauma and distress outside the school setting isn't able to effectively learn; however, he clarified, it is not the intent of AASB to advocate supplanting parental responsibility, but rather to work with parents and organizations to supplement classroom support. He said that as school districts across Alaska are already informally doing the work described in the proposed legislation, he expressed that it would not be onerous to formalize the school climate and connectedness plans.

[9:48:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked about the composition of AASB's delegate assembly.

MR. WOOTEN replied yes, school board members from across Alaska meet in a delegate assembly and decide on resolutions.

[9:49:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked how HB 173 would integrate with other bills being considered by the House Education Standing Committee.

MR. WOOTEN responded that HB 173 would strengthen the other pieces of proposed legislation.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked Mr. Wooten whether he thinks some bills should be combined.

MR. WOOTEN said that the committee could consider doing so, but he declined to comment on the suggestion.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX noted Mr. Wooten's comment that school districts are already informally implementing the practices proposed under HB 173, and he asked why it makes sense to require something that's already being informally practiced. He said, "There's always a danger when you dictate something from the top down."

MR. WOOTEN expressed that many of the ideas in the proposed legislation have merit, including the creation of the advisory committee, and that it's important that such practices don't "drop off of the radar" as other issues arise. He said he has no issues with embedding connectedness within state statute, as its impetus is here to stay, particularly in light of the lack of civility in the country.

[9:52:33 AM](#)

TOM KLAAMEYER, President, National Education Association - Alaska Chapter, expressed that Alaska students are most unique and diverse in country, with students in Anchorage alone coming from homes speaking over 100 different languages. An educator's challenge is to provide the best education with the resources available, he said, and must deal with socioeconomic disparity and racial challenges inherent in the public school system.

Students who experience trauma have difficulty maximizing learning, he said, and Alaska has high rates of students who experience homelessness, hunger, maltreatment, and poverty. He said 36 percent of children ages 0-8 live in poverty, one-third of Alaska's children report maltreatment before the age of 8, and children in Alaska are more likely than their peers nationally to die before the age of 8, with children of color being disproportionately impacted compared to white children. Given the statistics, he said, educators must update education policy to reflect knowledge on early childhood and brain development, and provide the appropriate academic, behavioral, and emotional support. He suggested that the development of an advisory committee would help disseminate best practices and provide resources so students who most need assistance could receive it. He expressed concern that reporting requirements would be to the legislature instead of to the Department of Education and Early Development. He suggested that instead of meting out punishments, students would benefit from improving relationships, school environments, and providing strong partnerships between schools and communities.

[10:00:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND clarified that reporting would be to the legislature and to the DEED commissioner.

[HB 173 was held over.]

[10:02:28 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:02 a.m.