

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

May 8, 2021  
9:03 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

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

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Tiffany Zulkosky  
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

**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
05/07/21	(H)	Heard & Held
05/07/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
05/08/21	(H)	EDC AT 9:00 AM DAVIS 106

**WITNESS REGISTER**

TIMOTHY BARTO, Vice President of External Relations  
 Alaska Policy Forum  
 Eagle River, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 164.

DEBORAH RIX  
 Alaska State Literacy Association  
 Chugiak, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 164.

REBECCA HIMSCHOOT  
 Sitka, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 164.

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director  
 Best Beginnings  
 Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 164.

JESSICA WILLIS  
 Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 164.

TERESA WROBEL  
 Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 164.

DANYELLE KIMP, President  
Alaska Coalition of BIPOC Educators  
Eagle River, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 164.

PETER HOEPFNER, Vice President  
Cordova School Board  
Cordova, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 164.

DORA WILSON, Member  
Anchorage School Board  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 164.

TAMMY SMITH  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 164.

JOY LYON, Director  
Association of Education of Young Children, Southeast Alaska  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on HB 164.

BARBARA RAGAN  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 164.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[9:03:10 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR ANDI STORY** called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order 9:03 a.m. Representatives Cronk, Gillham, Drummond, and Story were present at the call to order. Representative Prax arrived as the meeting was in progress.

#### **HB 164-EARLY ED PROGRAMS; READING; VIRTUAL ED**

[9:03:57 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR STORY** announced that the only 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").]

[9:04:34 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY re-opened public testimony on HB 164.

[9:04:55 AM](#)

TIMOTHY BARTO, Vice President of External Relations, Alaska Policy Forum, testified in support of HB 164. He read his testimony, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Reading improvement legislation, what we have come to refer to as K-3 Literacy or Read By 9, has been introduced and debated in the Legislature since 2013. In that time, Alaska's fourth grade students have consistently ranked dead last in reading competency when measured against fourth graders in the other 49 states and the District of Columbia.

Alaska has good teachers, and our students have the same potential for learning as do children in the rest of the country, yet our children are still not learning the most basic of educational skills - reading. This despite Alaska ranking among the five highest spending-per-student states in the country.

We spend heavily on education, but our children cannot read. For the sake of our children and the future of our state, this must change, and that change can be made through a robust K-3 literacy program.

Reading should be the fundamental educational objective in our public schools. All other curricula

are secondary. Children's brains allow them to learn to read at a more efficient rate prior to age nine. Children who learn to read by age nine then use their reading skills to continue learning other subjects. Children who are not competent readers by age nine are more likely to fall behind in their studies, drop out of school, live in poverty, or end up in prison. There is plenty of data that supports these unfortunate realities.

There are several aspects to making sure students are keeping up with expectations. These include early and continuous parental notification of struggling readers, pairing the weakest readers with the most highly effective reading teachers, and instruction in phonological awareness. Student reading progress will be closely monitored, and those who are not attaining proficient reading scores prior to third grade will be afforded these interventions. Students who attain proficient reading scores by the end of third grade will be promoted to the fourth grade. But, if a student's reading scores are not to standard by the end of third grade, that student should not be promoted to fourth grade. Yes, this sounds harsh, and it goes against society's prevailing ideals of promoting self-esteem, but the child who has to repeat third grade will, in that repeated year, get the focused attention he or she needs to attain a proficient reading level. Holding students back is not punishment. It provides them an opportunity to catch up and help avoid all those resultant issues mentioned earlier - dropping out, living in poverty, serving time in prison.

Many other states have been hugely successful with K-3 literacy programs, Florida and Mississippi among them. Both states passed early reading legislation and their students' reading competency levels dramatically increased. Alaska can do the same, and we can do it with legislation that is now before this committee in House Bill 164.

Alaska Policy Forum encourages this committee to pass reading intervention legislation this session. The education of our public-school children and the future of our state will be greatly enhanced by it.

[9:07:58 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GILLHAM asked Mr. Barto for his thoughts on the early education and virtual education components of the proposed legislation.

MR. BARTO replied that the Alaska Policy Forum is focused on the reading component, but the organization has no problems with the other components.

[9:09:33 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked whether the Alaska Policy Forum has studied Alaska's education system in terms of the challenges of implementing the programs proposed under HB 164.

MR. BARTO responded that the Alaska Policy Forum is of the opinion that teachers, while perhaps in need of specialized instruction, are equipped to teach reading, and that there doesn't need to be any "great overhaul."

[9:12:06 AM](#)

DEBORAH RIX, Alaska State Literacy Association (ASL), testified in support of HB 164. She read her testimony as follows:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify for educational improvements that will impact all of Alaska's students. We particularly want to express our support for the inclusion of quality, voluntary pre-k programs. Today I'd like to highlight particular parts of HB 164 that our members have expressed comments or questions about. The Alaska state standards identify English language arts as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. We are concerned that writing is not addressed in this bill. From a position statement from the International Literacy Association, titled "Teaching Writing to Improve Reading Skills," published in 2020, the research has found that there is scientific evidence that supports the belief that reading contributes to learning how to write. The question that was then asked was whether the relationship is reciprocal. By analyzing published research it was found that writing, and the teaching of writing, enhances comprehension, fluency, word recognition, and decoding. With the recommendation that students in

elementary grades are given at least thirty minutes daily dedicated to writing, we would then suggest that any intervention program being considered also contain a writing component to help in developing reading proficiency.

Our organization believes that the partnerships with our students' families are critical to success. Thank you for emphasizing this in the bill. However, the size of staff varies considerably, from small village schools to our larger urban areas. We worry that teachers and paraprofessionals do not have the capacity to implement the individual reading improvement plans, intensive reading intervention services outside of school hours, provide parent resources and training workshops, and possibly plan for 20-hour summer intervention services.

If you could please provide clarify around the midyear advancement piece. We know that students do not all learn to read at exactly the same grade or chronological age. If a child is retained in one grade level, then makes developmental growth, which results in them catching up, then will they be promoted, midyear, to the original grade? This seems highly disruptive to the students' well-being, and impacts the whole class. We're wondering if this is a practice that's being used in other districts, and what related research has shown for using this practice. What would this look like?

Our members of ASL live and work around the state; some of us are working in districts right now with prescribed reading programs. Educators need to consider the importance that background knowledge plays in language and literacy acquisition. Often the measures used to label readers are disconnected from their indigenous life experience. Standardized tests don't capture the fortitude, problem solving skills, creativity, and methods of observation that our rural Alaskan students display every day. We're concerned that the use of assessments and programs that haven't been normed on an Alaskan population will negatively impact students and districts by identifying a larger percentage of this population as deficient.

[9:16:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND expressed agreement regarding the importance of writing, and said she wishes schools would focus more on handwriting. She then asked whether the members of ASL are educators.

MS. RIX replied that they are, and she said there are three active local councils.

[9:17:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX noted the point about assessments of students who live indigenous lifestyles. He then asked whether ASL has considered how the issue could be addressed.

MS. RIX shared her observation that standardized tests given to children in village schools don't provide an accurate picture of what the kids know.

[9:21:00 AM](#)

REBECCA HIMSCHOOT testified in support of HB 164. She paraphrased her testimony, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

HB 164 is a good bill and it will make a difference for the vast majority of Alaska's struggling readers.

I want to provide two considerations today. One is expectations management, and closely tied to that is attention to an important and overlooked group of learners.

First, as policy makers you are charged with carefully considering how public funds are spent, or in the case of schools, how funds are "invested." You are looking for accountability for the investment you're making in this bill, and I applaud that. Alaska's schools and educators must stand ready to deliver on the promise of this bill.

However, I would invite you to carefully consider the data you are using as the baseline measure from which schools and students will grow with this legislation. I have heard the NAEP referenced countless times, and as the nation's oldest test I support it as a measure of our schools' successes. However, I strongly urge

you to disaggregate the data you see in the NAEP for Alaska - when you do, you will discover how very much Alaska Native students are struggling to learn to read. With this in mind, I ask you to manage your expectations for the outcomes we hope this legislation will deliver - the time it will take to improve outcomes for Alaska Native learners will need to be measured in decades, not years.

Perhaps the greatest mandate our schools have, from federal funders to the local level, is to provide equity. It is a well-documented fact that English Language Learners are most successful when they can draw on fluency in their first language. Alaska Native students are English Language Learners who are also learning their first language - a heavy but critical lift as we seek to preserve and perpetuate Indigenous languages across the state. And that heavy lift is being asked of 10 year olds.

Research is very clear: a child who is learning a second language without deep fluency in their first language will struggle. In a gross oversimplification I will illustrate my point this way: if words were crayons, we are asking Alaska Native students to use the full palate of the 64- crayon box when they are equipped with only the 8-crayon box.

In correspondence with DEED I have found we have little expertise in the department on how best to develop second language skills in Indigenous learners, however, I believe that expertise may exist in other places such as Arizona, New Mexico, or Australia.

As you temper your expectations for the outcomes this bill will bring, I strongly urge you to convene a task force of world experts, alongside Alaska's incredible experts in immersion programming and language revitalization to help us learn what is known about best practices for Indigenous English Language Learners. It's a matter of equity, and it's a belated but important step in the right direction.

[9:25:33 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked whether it is possible to separate urban assessment scores from rural ones.

MS. HIMSCHOOT replied that it is possible and is an important tool to identify areas in which students need more support.

[9:26:41 AM](#)

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director, Best Beginnings, testified in support of HB 164. She discussed how early learning and literacy begins at birth, as well as support for parents and caregivers as children's first teachers. She said in the past several years, typical first grade curriculum has been pushed into kindergarten, and kindergarten into preschool. She said she is pleased to see the inclusion of "developmentally appropriate objectives for children four and five years of age" in the preschool section of the proposed legislation, rather than academic standards appropriate for older children. She said she hopes the "developmentally appropriate" designation is considered when school boards begin working to establish standards, along with the standards including reading fluency, vocabulary, and oral language skills.

MS. HENSLEY commented that "reading at grade level" seems to be the only criteria considered in sections regarding retention and progression, and she asked whether a child with skills above their grade level in all subjects except reading would be retained. She discussed the definition of "culturally responsive," expressing that it should be expanded to include the many cultures represented in Alaska. She encouraged the committee to include adequate funding for additional professional staff who could help ensure the success of the early childhood program, and she encouraged cooperation to consult early childhood education leadership, including Head Start, as the program begins development. She said the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that parents start reading with their children beginning at birth, as befitting the first three years of brain development, and she said research shows that parents who read with children are less likely to employ harsh parenting practices.

[9:33:05 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked Ms. Hensley how many books Best Beginnings has distributed to families in its 15 years of operation, and how many children have been reached.

MS. HENSLEY replied that the program reaches 117 communities, and as of September 2018, approximately 2 million books had been distributed.

[9:34:30 AM](#)

JESSICA WILLIS shared that she teaches first grade, and she said she has experience teaching early education in an Inupiat community. She voiced support for the voluntary early education and reading education programs, and stated her agreement with a comprehensive literacy program that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, which are referred to as the "Big 5" by the National Reading Panel. She said the teaching of writing is a missing component of the proposed legislation, and that given the complete tools, a teacher can provide an enriching curriculum in literacy. She said children who are excited about reading and writing want to experience it with their peers, and she shared an anecdote of an advanced reader sharing her skills with a friend who was a struggling reader. She said, "Reading helps writing. Writing helps reading," and she said both are important to a comprehensive literacy program.

[9:38:23 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked how writing relates to the "Big 5" in daily academics, and what defines the teaching of writing.

MS. WILLIS explained that phonemic awareness is hearing, recognizing, and manipulating sounds and words, and that she uses it daily in her teaching. She discussed phonics and sight words, which can't be sounded out and must be memorized, and she said that as children write, they use outside resources to make phonemic connections.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND said another testifier had noted the exclusion of writing in the proposed legislation. She discussed "writing" as sentences and paragraphs instead of using phonemic manipulators to learn words.

CO-CHAIR STORY suggested asking Ms. Willis to email her thoughts regarding writing.

[9:42:42 AM](#)

TERESA WROBEL, testified in support of HB 164, expressing her appreciation of the educational opportunities she as a child.

[9:44:35 AM](#)

DANYELLE KIMP, President, Alaska Coalition of BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] Educators, testified in support of HB 164. He said the mission of the coalition is to champion equity in education for communities of color, prioritizing the health and safety of educators and students, equity in academic opportunities, and hiring and retaining educators of color. He discussed the need for flexibility for smaller communities, as well as the need for additional support for struggling students. He offered to help with the proposed legislation.

[9:47:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Mr. Kimp whether he had any comments on the bill's shortcomings.

MR. KIMP replied that he was just introduced to the bill yesterday, and that he didn't see anything regarding speech and language services. He asked Co-Chair Story to "speak to that."

CO-CHAIR STORY explained that a child with speech or language issues would have an individual education plan (IEP) with a special education teacher as part of their curriculum.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND said children with speech and language deficiencies are eligible for special education services starting at the age of three.

[9:49:23 AM](#)

PETER HOEPFNER, Vice President, Cordova School Board, expressed approval for the reading program in HB 164, saying that he appreciates the inclusion of DEED assistance for teacher development. Regarding the grant for early education, he expressed doubt regarding the repealers, as early education has been proven to ready students for learning; pre-k needs to be fully included and funded, he said. He expressed that Cordova is "gasping" from the lack of funding, and that the Cordova School District is eliminating pre-k programs. Education funding has increased by 8 percent in 10 years, he said, while the consumer price index has increased by 27 percent and health insurance has increased 326 percent.

[9:51:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked whether Cordova has the ability to provide pre-k.

MR. HOEPFNER responded that Cordova does not have the ability to provide pre-k, explaining that it costs \$100,000 to hire a teacher for eight pre-k children, and if that maximum of eight children is exceeded, another \$50,000 is needed to hire a paraprofessional. He said he understands the importance of pre-k, and he said what used to be learned in first or second grade is now learned in kindergarten. He said it's "pretty sad" that this is the state of education in Alaska.

[9:53:08 AM](#)

DORA WILSON, Member, Anchorage School Board, testified in support of HB 164. She said universal access to pre-k is of "critical importance," and she said children who enter kindergarten without pre-k experience are at a disadvantage compared to those who had quality pre-k education, in which instruction was guided by developmentally appropriate curricula. She said the proposed legislation is an opportunity to support a long-term plan for reducing the achievement gap.

[9:55:55 AM](#)

TAMMY SMITH shared that she is currently a special education teacher and has a background in reading development for grades one through three. She expressed support for the pre-k program, the "culturally responsive" portion of the bill, and for professional development in reading for teachers. She said questions of retention must be left up to the school, teacher, parents, and sometimes a healthcare provider, and she said writing components are a part of any suitable reading program.

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked Ms. Smith whether she would recommend including language for retention in the proposed legislation.

MS. SMITH replied, "I do not support retention in the bill, at all." She expressed that conversations about retention are private and should remain at the local level.

[9:59:58 AM](#)

JOY LYON, Director, Association of Education of Young Children, Southeast Alaska, testified in support of HB 164. She commented on the value of the Parents As Teachers program and paraphrased

a portion of her written testimony, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Though a small part of this complex bill, I invite you to highlight the section in gold regarding building a statewide system of Parents as Teachers. This evidence based program is proven to increase parents reading with children, and to increase parent's involvement in their child's education straight through to high school graduation. Every visit celebrates what the parent notices their child is learning, and includes books, information, and activities to support their development, as well as health and developmental screenings. The program is cost effective, at about a quarter of the cost per child as a year of PreK. Recommending school districts provide space for Parents as Teachers is an excellent part of the bill. This connects families from the start with their local neighborhood school community.

[10:04:33 AM](#)

BARBARA RAGAN testified in support of HB 164. She said she is a third-grade teacher with a master's degree in language and literacy, and a K-12 reading endorsement. She said each child has different needs, and that language in the proposed legislation regarding retention, as well as regarding a statewide screening tool, is concerning. She discussed some of the shortcomings in online reading tests, sharing that students often become overwhelmed by the formatting difficulties. She described a type of assessment test during which she sits with a child, and the child shares their thought process; she then uses the data to plan for differentiated literacy instruction. She pointed out that reading intervention, as described in the text of the proposed legislation, would be delivered in addition to regular reading instruction, and she said asked where the reading teachers and funding will be found.

[10:09:27 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY, after ascertaining that no one else wished to testify, closed public testimony on HB 164.

[HB 164 was held over.]

[10:11:45 AM](#)

**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:12 a.m.