

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT MEETING
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

July 27, 2021
1:02 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair (via teleconference)
Representative Grier Hopkins (via teleconference)
Representative Mike Prax (via teleconference)
Representative Ronald Gillham (via teleconference)
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair (via teleconference)

SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

Senator Roger Holland, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair (via teleconference)
Senator Shelley Hughes (via teleconference)
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

HOUSE MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Tiffany Zulkosky
Representative Mike Cronk

SENATE MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Peter Micciche

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): "Early Learning Policies - Lessons from Mississippi"

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record.

WITNESS REGISTER

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced the presenters.

CAREY M. WRIGHT, ED.D., State Superintendent of Education
Mississippi Department of Education
Jackson, Mississippi

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint titled "Improving Early Literacy in Mississippi."

KYMYONA BURK, ED.D., Policy Director for Early Literacy
ExcelinEd
Jackson, Mississippi

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint titled "Comprehensive Early Literacy Policy: Improving Literacy Outcomes for All Students."

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:02:20 PM](#)

CHAIR ROGER HOLLAND called the joint meeting of the House and Senate Education Standing Committees to order at 1:02 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Begich, Hughes (via teleconference), Stevens (via teleconference), and Chair Holland; and Representatives Hopkins (via teleconference), Prax (via teleconference), Gillham (via teleconference), and Co-Chair Drummond. Co-Chair Story joined the meeting (via teleconference) soon thereafter.

PRESENTATION(S): "Early Learning Policies - Lessons from Mississippi"

[1:02:48 PM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND stated that Alaska is at the bottom of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) rankings and members of both committees are working to put policies in place to give students opportunities to succeed. The Senate Education Committee passed SB 111, which awaits action by Senate Finance. The House Education Committee has debated companion legislation, HB 164. More work is needed in this area and Mr. Johnson,

Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Education Early Childhood Development, requested members hear presentations by Dr. Wright titled "Improving Early Literacy in Mississippi Policies, Strategies and Outcomes" and by Dr. Burk titled "Comprehensive Early Literacy Policy: Improving Literacy Outcomes for All Students."

[1:04:11 PM](#)

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, said he has seen a transformation under the leadership of Dr. Wright and Dr. Burk. Mississippi was ranked fiftieth in the country for education. Its advanced placement participation rate and success rate have nearly doubled. Low-performing and low-income student progress have risen at the fastest pace in the country. The state's graduation rate is at an all-time high of 87.7 percent. Alaska's path to success will not look like Mississippi's. However, it will start with kids learning to read. He stated that Alaskan students are capable of higher levels of achievement. Dr. Wright and Dr. Burk's story of success in Mississippi is inspiring.

[1:10:23 PM](#)

Co-Chair Andi Story joined the meeting telephonically.

[1:10:46 PM](#)

CAREY M. WRIGHT, ED.D., State Superintendent of Education, Mississippi Department of Education, Jackson, Mississippi, stated she will share what has worked to improve education in Mississippi and explain the mechanics of the law.

DR. WRIGHT began the presentation on slide 2 with the vision and mission of the Mississippi Department of Education. She offered that creating a vision for a world-class education system is no small feat. At the heart of everything done, the focus is successful children, regardless of whether they go to college, the world of work, or the military. "If you do not know where you are heading, you're never going to know whether you get there."

DR. WRIGHT said the State Board of Mississippi established six goals for all children and held to them:

- 1) All Students Proficient and Showing Growth in All Assessed Areas

- 2) Every Student Graduates from High School and is Ready for College and Career
- 3) Every Child Has Access to a High-Quality Early Childhood Program
- 4) Every School Has Effective Teachers and Leaders
- 5) Every Community Effectively Uses a World-Class Data System to Improve Student Outcomes
- 6) Every School and District is Rated "C" or Higher

DR. WRIGHT commented that this was the first time Mississippi included early childhood in its goals. She explained that Mississippi has an A thru F school rating system, and the goal is to have all schools be a C or above.

DR. WRIGHT turned to slide 4 and stated that when she arrived in Mississippi in November of 2013, the state ranked fiftieth in education. "Quality Counts," an annual report from Education Week that evaluates all states, gave Mississippi an overall rating of F, with an F in achievement and a D for the chance of success. The graduation rate was the second lowest among neighboring states at 75.5 percent. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment placed all the state's fourth graders reading one whole grade level below the national average. The Mississippi assessment indicated students were 65-70 percent proficient in reading, whereas the NAEP assessment determined reading proficiency was 22 percent.

[1:13:51 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT reported that Mississippi is ranked thirty-ninth in the nation for education. The state's overall rating in "Quality Counts" increased to a C-, with a B for equity and C for the chance of success. The graduation rate is higher than the national average at 87.7 percent. The 2019 NAEP results placed Mississippi first in the Nation for gains in fourth grade reading and math, higher than the national average in math and tied for reading. Mississippi has ranked second for the most improved school in the Nation for the third consecutive year.

DR. WRIGHT turned to slide 6 and said that success is not one strategy but a linking of several that the education department organizes itself around. It is necessary to adopt rigorous college and career-ready standards. Mississippi updated assessments to align with NAEP using teacher involvement and accountability. The final strategy was to build teacher and leader capacity through a major professional development initiative to ensure students master higher standards.

[1:16:29 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT said slide 8 shows that Mississippi passed two laws in 2013. The Early Learning Collaborative Act established the first state-funded pre-K program; it was the first time Mississippi ever put money into pre-K. Due to positive collaboration results, the legislature's appropriation of \$3 million for the first two years jumped to \$16 million in 2021. The other legislation passed was the Literacy-Based Promotion Act that made reading instruction a focus in K-3 learning. In 2014 the department of education was given \$9.5 million. This amount was not enough. The following year the department was given \$15 million. Both pieces of legislation supported Mississippi's strategic plan to improve outcomes for all students by improving early literacy. Early literacy is not just pre-K; it is pre-K thru Grade 3.

Slide 9 lists key components of the Early Learning Collaborative Act.

Key Components

- Provides funding to local communities to establish or expand high-quality early childhood education programs called Early Learning Collaboratives (ELCs)
- ELCs include a lead partner (public school or nonprofit group) and collaborators including school districts, Head Start sites, childcare centers, and nonprofit organizations.
- Enables state education department to establish first Office of Early Childhood Education
- Professional development offered, for free, to all early childhood providers in public and private settings

DR. WRIGHT stated that partners work on some study units together. Ninety-five to ninety-eight percent of all children in childcare enter public kindergarten. Therefore, outreach to private childcare providers allowed the school district to impact programs it otherwise had no control over.

[1:19:08 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT turned to slide 10 Early Learning Collaborative Act. Another key piece of legislation was a tax credit for businesses that donate money to collaboratives. When it first started in

2014-15 donations totaled \$278,850. In 2020-21 donations to collaboratives totaled \$5.6 million. Children who attend high-quality early childhood programs have less involvement in drugs, less involvement with the police, are more likely to graduate on time, and are more likely to sustain higher-paying jobs. Businesses consider this a good return on investment.

[1:20:10 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT referring to slide 11 said the Mississippi State Department of Education was limited in the number of positions it could hire but wanted early childhood education coaches. To obtain funds, she said she approached the Kellogg Foundation for financial support, and Kellogg offered a \$6 million grant to hire coaches and other staff. The department kept data on the program, and when the grant ended, the department obtained funding for the coaching program from the legislature:

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Grant

- \$6 million grant from W.K. Kellogg Foundation awarded to MDE to build early childhood education infrastructure in Mississippi (state dollars will fund when grant ends)
- Funds support 10 early childhood education coaches and other staff who build the capacity of early childhood education professionals in a variety of pre-K settings statewide
- Family engagement strategies provided to help programs increase parents' participation in their children's education

[1:21:16 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT stated that coaches are sent to schools where data is the worst. Coaching is a key component of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act: [slide 12]

Role of Coach

- Establish relationship, trust, and respect among teachers and coach
- Observe classroom and teacher practices
- Set goals and action steps for Quality Implementation Plan
- Help teachers identify strengths, areas for growth, and steps to improve instruction
- Provide supportive and constructive feedback

- Model developmentally appropriate practices supported with early learning standards and guidelines
- Share research- and evidence-based knowledge and practices
- Provide resources and support strategies for teachers

[1:21:55 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT commenting on slide 13 added that teachers received twenty hours of reading training in LETRS, for general classroom students and Phonics First training for special education students. Reading assessments are given three times during the school year, and letters are sent to the parents of struggling students quarterly:

Literacy-Based Promotion Act:

Key Components

- Trains educators statewide to be more effective at teaching reading (teachers trained using Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling/LETRS)
- Deploys literacy coaches to lowest-performing schools to support teachers
- Adds K-3 monitoring and assessment system, including a 3rd grade reading test for students to qualify for 4th grade promotion
- Requires schools to engage parents and communicate with them regularly
- Enables state education agency to establish first Office of Elementary Education and Reading

[1:23:41 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT stated that the following enhancements were made to the Literacy-Based Promotion Act:

Laws & Amendments to Enhance Literacy-Based Promotion Act

Teacher Certification

- Law enacted in 2016 requires elementary education candidates to pass "a rigorous test of scientifically research-based reading instruction and intervention"

to ensure they know effective practices for teaching reading

- Mississippi requires candidates to pass the Foundations of Reading Assessment Individual Reading Plan
- Amendment in 2016 required educators to create Individual Reading Plans for students to improve reading

[1:24:50 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT moved to slide 15 and stated that the department's special education director is nationally known. Since a lot of training is needed to identify dyslexia, a Microsoft Teams meeting with the Alaska Legislature could be arranged if there is interest.

Dyslexia Awareness Training (2021)

- Requires districts to conduct four hours of awareness training for dyslexia and other related disorders to all licensed educators and paraprofessionals responsible for instruction

Dyslexia Scholarships (2012)

- Requires local adoption policies to screen students for dyslexia in kindergarten and first grade
- Provides funds for students to attend special purpose non-public school offering Orton-Gillingham based instruction by a licensed dyslexia therapist five days a week

Dyslexia Grants (1997)

- Three-year grant to districts to support students with dyslexia and/or related reading disorders in general education
- Grant funds dyslexia screener, dyslexia interventions, instructional resources, assessments, professional development, and up to 80% of dyslexia therapist salary

DR. WRIGHT explained that Mississippi has a 5-level assessment system for determining reading proficiency. Students needed to rank at a level one or higher before the law was changed. The legislature rewrote the law to assist the goal of proficiency, and students must now achieve a level 3. Slide 15 read as follows:

Laws & Amendments to Enhance Literacy-Based Promotion Act

Higher Expectations for 3rd Grade Reading

- Amendment passed in 2016 to raise the passing score on the 3rd grade reading test starting in the 2018-19 school year
- Students are now required to score above the lowest two achievement levels, which shows they are approaching proficiency
- 3rd grade students who fail to meet the academic requirements for promotion to 4th grade may be promoted for good cause (included in original law)

[1:27:04 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT emphasized that Mississippi needed to ensure that requirements for teacher certification included the science of reading. Teachers needed to understand the science of reading and how to provide instruction. She opined that the key to making sure kids are reading on grade level by the end of third grade is prevention and intervention. A provision in the law allows for retention, but the focus is on prevention and intervention.

Key Decisions Enacted through Legislation and Support:

- Teacher Certification Requires Test of Knowledge of Research-Based Reading Instruction and Intervention (2016)
- Individual Reading Plan (2016)
- Higher Expectations for 3rd Grade Reading Assessment (2018-19)
- Early Childhood Education Coaches (2018-19)

[1:28:04 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT moved to slide 18 and said Dr. Burk would share updated information regarding.

DR. WRIGHT skipped to slide 20 and stated that the implementation of literacy strategies takes time. The key to success is staying focused on critical elements. Knowing how to read is fundamental. Mississippi has not veered from LETRS

training or coaching. The department hired coaches based on the candidates' understanding of pedagogy and adult learning theory. Schools that welcomed coaching saw the fastest improvement.

[1:31:12 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT said the bulk of Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA) program funding goes to literacy coaching (61%) followed by professional development (17%). Teachers must have the skill sets to foster improvement in grades pre-K thru Grade 3.

DR. WRIGHT said that slide 22 shows that key strategies, and parent communication are essential to literacy-based learning. The department's policy director traveled the state to inform parents of the law, what to expect and how to work with schools. She reiterated it is a pre-K-3 focus.

DR. WRIGHT reported that more than 15,000 educators had completed LETRS training, including K-3 general education teachers, K-8 special education teachers, elementary principals, and institutions of higher learning reading faculty.

The eight points in slide 23 are what teachers learn during training. All sections are essential to teach the science of reading. Teachers must realize the mistakes they made, but it is more critical they become better teachers by applying the information they have been taught. The slide read as follows:

Educator Training: LETRS:

Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS)

1. Challenges of Learning to Read
2. Speech Sounds of English - Phonetics, Phonology, and Phoneme Awareness
3. Spellography for Teachers
4. Building Vocabulary and Oral Language
5. Developing Fluency
6. Teaching Text Comprehension
7. Teaching Phonics, Word Study, and Alphabetic Principle
8. Teaching Beginning Spelling and Writing

[1:33:19 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT stated the Mississippi Department of Education hired the Regional Educational Laboratory at Florida State University to confirm that the improvement in students' assessments was due to teacher implementation of the LETRS program. The study confirmed teachers were implementing the program as taught and further stated teachers reported being more knowledgeable.

[1:34:17 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT said the department needed to figure out an organizational structure to implement the coaching program. The best way to reach everyone was a multi-layered structure with the State Literacy Director at the core. Other areas within the department are now replicating the layering structure.

[1:35:10 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT turned to slide 26 and stated there are only a few positions in her department's organizational structure, so it was important to have talented people working in the positions.

DR. WRIGHT explained that the legislature appropriated money but not enough job positions, so the department developed the Educator in Residence (EIR) model. The department gave funds to the University of Mississippi to hire seventeen Professional Development Coordinators (PDs). They then work with the department to offer English Language Arts (ELA), Math, Special Education, and Early Childhood training. When a school district identifies an area where training is needed, they request professional development. A PD coordinator then works with the school district to develop and present the training.

[1:37:30 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT commented that many coaches return to the classroom, which allows new coaches to be recruited.

DR. WRIGHT moved to slide 29 and emphasized that the role of a coach is to improve student achievement by building the capacity of teachers. For the pre-K-3 reading program it is important to work together, stay focused, and keep legislation clear.

[1:39:14 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT stated that in addition to the ongoing support of statewide stakeholder meetings, regional literacy professional development, and literacy coaching support, the department used

the company Amplify to instruct teachers on using assessment data to improve instruction.

DR. WRIGHT displayed slide 31 and mentioned that it has been hard to get institutions of higher learning to make changes quickly to educator craft. Education students coming out of college need to be ready to teach. They paid for a teaching degree, yet the state is paying to teach them how to do their job. Mississippi has in place a new university evaluation system for education students, is considering redesigning its reading sequence, and is deciding whether graduates should teach for one full year before receiving a license.

[1:41:04 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT stated that it takes the legislature to write a solid bill that the Department of Education then implements. The Department of Education then works with district superintendents, who work with principals, and the principals work with teachers. All the parts are needed and must work together.

DR. WRIGHT stated that the Mississippi Department of Education has a lot of resources that superintendents can use.

[1:42:09 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT moved to slide 34 on instructional resources and stated that teachers needed a place online to find high-quality educational materials when the pandemic hit. The department put up a website with high-quality digital content and digital learning. They started with math and social studies and then added English Language Arts (ELA).

[1:42:41 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT shared that Strong Readers Strong Leaders Mississippi is a website the department has been enhancing for several years. It provides reading activities and resources for children from birth thru fifth grade.

[1:43:06 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT stated that the Family Guide for Student Success has been popular. The guides are available in English and Spanish to inform parents what their children should learn at each grade level.

DR. WRIGHT turned to slide 39 and shared that Mississippi is one of four states that meet all ten quality standards set by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) in 2020. She opined that early learning collaboratives work. Mississippi instituted a kindergarten readiness assessment when the Literacy-Based Promotion Act was passed. When kindergarteners registered for school, parents reported the name of the child's care provider when they were four years old. She stated that having this information allowed her to disaggregate data and determine how students from different childcare options fared coming into school. Students coming from collaboratives outperform all other childcare options.

DR. WRIGHT stated that two out of three children coming into Mississippi kindergarten were not ready. Early learning collaboratives changed that, and now seventy-seven percent of collaborative students meet kindergarten readiness standards. Public pre-K classes have a sixty-nine percent readiness score.

[1:45:24 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT referred to slide 41 and stated that this was the most current data on kindergarten readiness scores. Head Start was only one point above children who stay home. Pre-K private and public childcare are where collaboratives are placed. The scores for students attending these two types of childcare centers are consistently at or above the readiness score of 530.

[1:46:04 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT said that third-grader retention was a concern when Mississippi raised its reading level requirement. Mississippi gives third graders three opportunities to pass a reading exam. In 2019, eighty-six percent passed, which was a significant improvement.

DR. WRIGHT referred to slide 43 and said while the progress over the past ten years has not put Mississippi students where they need to be, the focus on literacy has paid off.

[1:47:08 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT reported that in 2019 when the NAEP scores came out, Mississippi was first in the nation for fourth-grade reading and math. It was third in the nation for gains in eighth-grade math and fourth in the nation for gains in eighth-grade reading.

Mississippi was second in the nation for eighth-grade math, fourth-grade math, and fourth-grade reading over the ten years.

DR. WRIGHT stated that NAEP is not a census test. It is the only assessment that has been administered across the nation for the purpose of comparing scores. The state commissioner receives a letter from the National Assessment Governing Board listing the randomly selected districts, grades, and schools to be tested. The federal government does the testing. There is no way to prepare for the NAEP. When the children of Mississippi outperformed their peers, Mississippi had the highest level of poverty in the nation, which is proof that all children can learn.

DR. WRIGHT moved to slide 45 and stated Mississippi's Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) results show that every year scores keep rising.

[1:49:27 PM](#)

While the pre-K-Grade 3 strategy was in place, a secondary and middle school strategy was happening simultaneously, including advanced placement, dual credit, dual enrollment, early college high schools, revising course offerings, and GED expansion. Keeping more kids in school to graduate is vital.

[1:50:30 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT stated Mississippi had come a long way from having an F. It was hard work, but it was the right work to be doing.

[1:51:23 PM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH referenced goal 4 on slide 3 and asked what specifically was done to meet the goal of every school having effective teachers and leaders.

DR. WRIGHT replied a key element was professional development in all content areas. Special education teachers work side-by-side with general education teachers. Students with disabilities are the lowest performing. Therefore, it is essential they be fully included when possible. The graduation rate of special needs students was twenty-two percent when the program first started; it is now forty-eight percent.

DR. WRIGHT said Mississippi has redone its professional board system. The old method of giving an effectiveness score was not

helping. Teacher evaluations now center on areas for growth. The Southern Regional Education Board established a task force eighteen months ago to evaluate teacher recruitment and retention and the state's Educator Preparation Program. As a result, the state will be developing a professional ladder system where teachers enter at one level and move up in a leadership capacity based on their knowledge and skills. The formation of a teacher leadership group provided fantastic feedback before and during the pandemic and enables the department to know what is needed. She stated her belief that the department's role is to serve Mississippi's districts, principals, and teachers by using their input for future professional development.

[1:55:04 PM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH related that the requirement that elementary-endorsed teachers be trained in evidence-based reading was eliminated from HB 164. A second change weakened the bill's accountability and data collection elements by making them optional. He asked for a response to these changes.

DR. WRIGHT replied, "Oh, Lord," training and accountability requirements should not be optional. There is a science to reading and a way to teach it that teachers welcome. Teachers want professional flexibility but within guardrails of what is known to work. Research is available on what works; there is no need to guess.

She stated she is a firm believer in accountability for all involved in the process. Data must be transparent and used to guide decision-making. An accurate idea of what is happening across the state is needed if issues are to be addressed. Do not retreat from doing what is required or posting results when the goal has not been accomplished. The state needs to help teachers figure out what is happening and how to fix it. Data leads to informed decision-making.

[1:59:30 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked what type of investments companies made to receive tax credits.

DR. WRIGHT answered that businesses could give cash or materials to collaboratives. Donations increased when results were noticed.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND commented that some businesses have a preschool for employee use, which might require an independent action. She asked if coaches are assigned to school districts.

DR. WRIGHT replied that coaches are deployed to schools with the lowest performance, and school size is a factor in how many coaches are assigned. Collaboratives were deliberately sent to underserved areas of the state so that more children could have access to high-quality early childhood programs.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked if it is possible to drive to every school in Mississippi.

DR. WRIGHT replied yes. She agreed it is a difference between the two states.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND referenced slide 28 and asked the total number of elementary schools in Mississippi instead of the total number served by 2020.

DR. WRIGHT replied there are around four hundred thirty to four hundred fifty elementary schools in Mississippi.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND responded that about half of the schools were served.

[2:02:23 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT replied that about one-third of Mississippi elementary schools were served, but service is money-dependent. If there was twice the amount of money, twice as many coaches could be hired, but funding has not increased above \$15 million.

[2:02:51 PM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES stated that due to resistance from education and teacher organizations, Alaska has no teacher legislation at the university level that requires a training score before being licensed. There has also been resistance against strict student promotion requirements. She stated research shows that states with more substantial promotion requirements saw more student growth. Legislators want Alaska's students to excel but having a strict promotion policy is difficult. She asked if Mississippi faced resistance to licensing requirements and firm promotion policy.

[2:05:00 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT replied that there was anxiety when retention was implemented. Many children were going to be retained. Rather than focus on retention, the department focused on making students successful through prevention and intervention. Professional development was implemented to help the third and fourth-grade teachers who received retained and below-grade level students. Teachers are central to making progress happen, which is why a feedback loop is essential. Children in a classroom have a wide range of abilities, so it is necessary to develop a master schedule that incorporates intervention into a classroom's daily reading period. A lot of teachers needed help designing master schedules. Success in Mississippi has happened by creating professional development around teachers' needs and feedback.

[2:07:23 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked if additional support was given to students who tested low before third grade and if students receive one on one assistance outside of the classroom.

DR. WRIGHT replied that individual schools might have staff working with students one on one one-on-one, but coaches are designed to work with teachers. Data needs to be gathered, so schools know who needs additional help, which is why assessments are done three times a year. Interventions are then designed as required. Special education has come alongside general education in working together to establish interventions that are good for students with disabilities and students performing below grade level.

[2:08:42 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked on behalf of Co-Chair Story if there are alternative assignments for English language (EL) students.

DR. WRIGHT replied Mississippi has a growing population of EL learners and not enough EL teachers. Mississippi provides additional professional development and resources to general education teachers because that is where EL students are primarily placed. The department has developed a guidebook for teachers with resources and lessons to assist in teaching EL students. Mississippi does not want EL students separated from the general education students because they need to hear spoken language, learn other subjects, and have role models.

[2:10:01 PM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND asked Dr. Burk to begin her presentation

[2:10:07 PM](#)

KYMYONA BURK, ED.D., Policy Director for Early Literacy, ExcelinEd, Jackson, Mississippi, stated she would be sharing early literacy data.

DR. BURK stated reading is not just an educational issue. It is also an economic issue. Businesses say new hires are unprepared. Eighty-eight percent of students who failed to earn a diploma were struggling readers in third grade. She read slide 2:

Students who are not reading proficiently in third grade:

- Are four times more likely to not to graduate high school.
- If African American or Hispanic, are six times more likely to drop out or fail to graduate from high school.
- If low-income minority, are eight times more likely to drop out or fail to graduate from high school.

High School Dropouts:

- Are not eligible for 90% of the jobs in the economy.
- Have yearly earnings that are less than 50% of someone who earns a Bachelor's Degree.
- Make-up nearly 50% of all heads-of-households on welfare

DR. BURK said understanding how reading affects the nation and a child's quality of life is important.

[2:12:46 PM](#)

DR. BURK stated the US Department of Education has statistics related to adult literacy. The Barbara Bush Foundation recently released a literacy study and its impact on the economy. The nation could be losing up to \$2.2 trillion annually due to low adult literacy rates. Nationwide low-literate adults struggle to earn a living wage, participate in the democratic process, and have difficulty managing their family's health and finances.

DR. BURK introduced the five components of reading as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. All five pieces are needed to be a proficient reader. Decoding-Dyslexia Chapters from around the country are the force behind policy changes. Parents want to ensure their children's challenges are identified early, and teachers know how to address them.

[2:15:04 PM](#)

DR. BURK moved to slide 6 and offered that about five percent of students learn to read effortlessly with structured reading. These students are from homes with rich oral language and parents who expose them to books at a young age. Thirty-five percent of students will find reading to be easy with comprehensive instruction. Yet, sixty percent of students must have a structured approach to reading to crack the academic language code.

[2:16:11 PM](#)

DR. BURK explained phonics is only one piece of learning to be a proficient reader. The simple view of reading is word recognition and language comprehension, but reading is not simple; it is challenging for most students. Secondary teachers who end up with students who struggle to read are less equipped to help since they have not graduated from teacher prep programs and courses related to the science of reading. Teaching English is different than teaching a child to read. Children should enter middle and high school as confident experts in reading.

There are two major parts to reading comprehension. Word recognition, which is phonics and decoding, is the students' ability to transform print into spoken language. It is the ability to see the word cat, know that the word is "cat," retrieve it quickly, and speak it. Word recognition also includes the ability to identify word families.

The second part of reading is language comprehension. It is defined as understanding what a word means and includes spoken language. Language comprehension is understanding what is heard and knowing that sentences have grammar, structure, and syntax. Both word recognition and language comprehension are needed for reading comprehension.

[2:19:52 PM](#)

DR. BURK referred to slide 9 and stated she credits the pandemic for the increase in states having comprehensive K-3 reading policies because it created concern that kids would not learn to read if not in school. Parents at home noticed a discrepancy between what their children were able to do and what teachers reported. Connecticut, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arizona passed comprehensive reading legislation this session.

DR. BURK said that NAEP, also known as the Nation's Report Card, is a standard measure of student achievement administered every two years. It was not administered in 2021 due to the pandemic. However, it will be administered in spring 2022.

[2:22:12 PM](#)

DR. BURK turned to slide 11 and said Florida was the first state to pass early literacy laws in 2002. Mississippi was placed on the chart because it experienced sustained gains. Before reviewing Alaska's data, she commented that the purpose of collecting data is to learn and make changes, not shame. For all students in Alaska, the scale score is 204. The national average is 219. Alaska currently ranks fifty-first in the nation for fourth grade reading on the national assessment. Alaskan Natives are a population unique to Alaska. There is a thirty-one-point scale score gap between the All Students score and the Alaskan Natives score. White students scored 221, which seems great until compared to other subgroups. She stated that Alaska spends more per pupil than Mississippi or Florida when comparing student population to per-pupil expenditure. Alaska cannot throw money at a challenge; it takes work, commitment, and intentionality. Although necessary, money will not solve Alaska's reading crisis.

[2:24:53 PM](#)

DR. BURK noted that Alaska's scores have remained about the same for sixteen years. Change must be desired, and there must be intentionality to how Alaska shapes education to ensure that students get what they need.

DR. BURK referred to slide 13 and stated that scale scores for white students in Alaska stayed consistent until 2015 when they took a seven-point drop below the national average. Why this happened needs to be determined because fifty percent of students in Alaska are white.

[2:27:36 PM](#)

DR. BURK stated that there is no state comparison for Alaskan Natives because of their uniqueness to Alaska, but compared to the national average, the gap is thirty-one points.

[2:28:16 PM](#)

DR. BURK stated that growth was inconsistent for Alaskan Hispanic students from 2009 to 2015. Since 2015 growth has declined. The national average is 208, and Alaska's average is 206.

[2:28:44 PM](#)

DR. BURK explained that scores are suppressed when states have a category with a low student population and the percentage falls below a specified number. This happened to the 2019 score for black students in Alaska. She pointed out Mississippi's scale scores have sustained gains after literacy laws were passed.

DR. BURK turned to slide 17 and stated demographics and other circumstances do not impact a child's ability to learn to read. Components of early literacy, laws, knowledgeable teachers, professional development, and support from parents impact how well children learn to read. Teachers cannot teach what they do not know. A common language of what it means to teach all students how to read needs to be developed. The scale score for economically disadvantaged students in Alaska has not improved in almost twenty years.

[2:30:56 PM](#)

DR. BURK stated that Peggy Carr, the Associate Commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), made these points to show that struggles with reading do not discriminate:

- Reading struggles are not just limited to Black or Latino students.
- Lower-performing readers scored by NAEP tests came from a variety of backgrounds, and the pandemic could have worsened gaps between low- and high-scoring students.
- Across the board, NAEP has shown that lower-performing students are struggling with reading more now than they were a decade ago.
- "It's not a problem just for poor students, or students with special needs. We all are represented

in the bottom. Perhaps disproportionately for some relative to their representation in the population. But nonetheless, we're all there."

[2:32:03 PM](#)

DR. BURK surmised that although there is still work to be done, Mississippi has put structure and leaders in place to accomplish it. The department is keeping an eye on the prize. Planning with intent allows for reflection, assessment, and informed decision-making to best support school districts, leaders, and families.

DR. BURK concluded the presentation on slide 18 and suggested Alaska leverage what was learned from the pandemic, especially in the area of technology, to provide innovative ways to improve student learning. For example, a highly successful reading teacher at one school could remotely teach a lesson while an in-person classroom teacher helped facilitate learning. There are changes Alaska can make right now to give Alaska's children the best opportunity for reading proficiency.

[2:33:48 PM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND said he appreciated hearing about the spring 2022 test date because he is eager to see how the pandemic has affected education.

[2:34:23 PM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH noted that Florida's numbers slipped while Mississippi's numbers went up. Mississippi has learned from the experience of other states and enhanced its NAEP score. The economy of scale and no road system should be recognized as factors in Alaska's per-student expenditure.

Mississippi invested \$31 million into pre-K-3 reading with accountability as a cause for the investment of cash. He opined that any money spent should be accountable. He stated he was curious to know why Florida's numbers slipped and what might account for it. He also asked what conclusions were drawn about Alaska's scores decreasing in all categories except black students.

DR. BURK replied that Mississippi's state chief had been the same for eight years. Mississippi's governor had dyslexia at the time reading legislation passed. Governor Bryant's lieutenant governor is now the governor, so Mississippi has consistency

with leadership. The state has kept its eye on the prize and its focus on literacy statewide. Florida has not had that. Recently, Florida recommitted itself to literacy using CARES Act funds. There must be someone who intentionally keeps an eye on the ball, or the ball drops.

[2:37:26 PM](#)

DR. WRIGHT stated she could not speak to the reason for the drop in Alaska's scores.

SENATOR BEGICH asked the chair if Alaska's commissioner might know the answer.

DR. BURK replied that some context would need to be provided to determine what was happening at that time. For example, new initiatives or changes in leadership.

SENATOR BEGICH stated the reason for the drop would be of concern for the legislature so that proposals address the cause.

SENATOR HOLLAND stated agreement that Alaska should investigate the rise and decline in Alaskan students' performance. He commented that excellence fatigue might be the reason for Florida's score dropping.

DR. WRIGHT replied that consistency is vital to keep scores up. She added that she has not seen specific analysis for Alaska scores.

[2:39:13 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND, on behalf of Representative Hopkins, asked for a discussion of the scale, score, and statistical significance of the chart on slide 12.

DR. BURK replied that scoring on NAEP goes up to 500, and the nation hovers around two hundred to two hundred thirty. The graph is for students on this scale who are scoring at the basic level of proficiency. A statistically significant increase occurs when a state achieves four or five scale points above its previous score.

SENATOR HUGHES asked for an explanation of the color differences on the map on slide 9. She also wondered if greater growth and success are indicated by dark blue.

DR. BURK explained that dark blue represents states considered to have a comprehensive K-3 reading policy. Many dark blue states also have a promotion/retention component. Research from Florida and Arizona mentioned that K-3 teachers self-reported working harder to ensure students were not retained. The medium shade of blue represents states that have instituted some fundamental principles of the K-3 reading policy. Lighter color indicates fewer fundamental components of reading. She stated that components of screening for dyslexia and teacher preparation were added to the policy last year.

[2:41:31 PM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES asked if a darker color means a higher score.

DR. BURK replied the map is not intended to represent scores. From 2017-2019 most of the scores in the nation went down or remained flat; before that, the six states that showed gains had comprehensive early literacy policies.

DR. WRIGHT said Mississippi's scores were always at the bottom. This caught the attention of other states who requested Mississippi share its method for improvement. She reiterated that success is a K-3 policy. It is not just a third-grade issue. Teachers in K-3 need to work closely together. LETRS training is so popular that middle and high schools ask for the training to help their students.

DR. BURK stated that policy is only as good as its implementation. Once you have a policy, know who will be in charge to lead the effort and do the work. Accountability belongs to everyone.

DR. WRIGHT stated that the department's accountability program is a thousand-point system designed to focus on the growth of the bottom twenty-five percent. This system makes principals and teachers look at who is failing. While growth points are given for all children, additional points are awarded for lifting the bottom twenty-five percent. When schools identify the faces behind the data, intervention can occur. Intervention is not one size fits all. For principals not trained in elementary education, the department created walk-through documents. These documents enabled administrators to be accountable when doing classroom observations.

[2:51:11 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND on behalf of Co-Chair Story commented that Alaska's per-pupil expenditure is not as much an outlier as it appears. The nearly eighteen thousand dollars per student is from the latest audited US census in 2017, where Alaska is the sixth highest in spending per student in the nation. When adjusted by the federal government's 29.67 percent COLA for Alaska, Alaska's per-student total expenditures are \$12,507. This adjustment places Alaska twentieth among the fifty states, well within the mid-range for spending. Money is not the only element for success, but it does matter.

[2:52:19 PM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH stated that the Senate's comprehensive bill addressed the accountability issues of consistency, shared responsibility, and early intervention having a focus on individual reading plans. He opined that Alaska has learned from the experiences of other states but wonders if the bill will pass into law. He stated that Dr. Wright reinforced the movement and process that Chair Holland, Co-Chairs Drummond and Story, and House members have been trying to accomplish.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND expressed appreciation to school administrators and others who listened to the presentation.

[2:54:52 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committees, the House Education Standing Committee and Senate Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 2:54 p.m.