

SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
January 25, 2022
12:57 p.m.

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CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Bishop called the Senate Finance Committee meeting to order at 12:57 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Click Bishop, Co-Chair
Senator Bert Stedman, Co-Chair
Senator Lyman Hoffman
Senator Donny Olson (via teleconference)
Senator Natasha von Imhof
Senator Bill Wielechowski
Senator David Wilson

MEMBERS ABSENT

None

ALSO PRESENT

Senator Roger Holland, Sponsor; Senator Tom Begich, Sponsor; Shelley Hughes, Senator, Juneau; Deena Bishop, Superintendent, Anchorage School District; Michael Johnson, Commissioner, Department Education and Early Development, Juneau.

SUMMARY

SB 111 EARLY EDUCATION; READING INTERVENTION

SB 111 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

#sb111

SENATE BILL NO. 111

"An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to public schools; relating to early education programs;

relating to funding for early education programs; relating to school age eligibility; relating to reports by the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to reports by school districts; relating to certification and competency of teachers; relating to assessing reading deficiencies and providing reading intervention services to public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; relating to textbooks and materials for reading intervention services; establishing a reading program in the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to school operating funds; relating to a virtual education consortium; and providing for an effective date."

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SENATOR ROGER HOLLAND, SPONSOR, discussed the presentation, "Senate Bill 111; Alaska Academic Improvement and Modernization Act; Presentation to Senate Finance on May 14, 2021" (copy on file). He discussed slide 2, "2019 NAEP Scores by State (4th grade reading)." He addressed slide 3, "This Isn't a New Issue."

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Senator Holland highlighted slide 4, "Florida The First Mover." He stated that after enacting the program, Florida went from 32nd place to among the top five in the nation in fourth grade reading. He stressed that the program was so successful that it was commonly referred to as the "Florida model" as the idea circulated through the states.

Senator Holland pointed to slide 5, "Mississippi A Recent Success." He furthered that Mississippi had taken similar action that in turn improved their overall reading scores.

Senator Holland discussed slide 6, "Recent K-3 Reading Survey Finding":

"Clearly this report shows that there is an inconsistent approach to reading instruction across our state with inadequate measures for quality control. Alaska's students need focused, comprehensive reading legislation grounded in science based reading instruction and intervention for pre k through third grade students"

-Department of Education and Early Development
SB 111 is that legislation.

Senator Holland addressed slide 7, "Senate Bill 111 (Committee Bill)":

- Product of significant and spirited debate
- Developed from previous legislation
- Includes key components of Senate Bill 42 and Senate Bill 8
- Which were built from the legislation going back to at least 2014
- Features three main components
- Early education
- Evidence based reading instruction
- Virtual consortium

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SENATOR TOM BEGICH, SPONSOR, discussed slide 9, "Early Education":

- Ensuring Students are Prepared to Learn
 - Rewards districts for having high quality Pre K by allowing qualifying programs to count students at one-half an ADM
 - Establishes a grant program for districts to develop a high quality pre K program
 - Recodifies the Parents as Teachers program
 - Available to four and five year old children that are not ready for kindergarten

Senator Begich highlighted slide 10, "Reading Intervention Services":

- Testing with Purpose
 - Up to three assessments per year for all K 3 students
- Helping students in need
 - District designed interventions
 - Individual reading improvement plans
 - Delaying progression as an intervention of last resort
 - Parents always have the final decision

Senator Hoffman wondered whether it would be a funded or unfunded mandate.

Senator Holland replied that it was "the job of education." He stressed that teachers must assess their students, and believed that the proposal was simply a part of the teachers' jobs.

Senator Begich furthered that the department would fund and create a universal testing for students. He stated that it was a funded mandate because the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) would create a universal assessment tool.

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Senator Wilson wondered about social promotion as it related to the delayed progression of some students.

Senator Begich replied that the promotion did not affect the current promotion policies within the districts. He stated that the exception was that parents have the final say within the bill.

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SHELLEY HUGHES, SENATOR, JUNEAU, explained that social promotion would be damaging to a child on an emotional level, because once they reach the higher grades there would be a negative impact. She stated that studies showed that the impact on social emotional development was minimal, when applied at the kindergarten or first grade level. She stressed that parents had the final decision.

Senator Wilson recalled that the states that had adopted the policy early on had a strict promotion policy, which was not in the current bill.

Senator Begich agreed. He stated that the bill preserved the local control over promotional decisions. He stated that the promotion policies in the other states were not "stricter", because there were numerous exemptions. That information was applied to the bill based on the other states' best practices.

Senator Holland remarked that there was variation state to state and agreed to provide the information about progression from other states.

Senator Hughes reiterated that it was a policy call. She shared that there was hesitation around a strict promotion policy because the other states had a sudden hard adjustment related to promotion which resulted in many exceptions.

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Senator Holland addressed slide 11, "Reading Specialists Program":

- Providing direct assistance and training for teachers
 - DEED funded positions building expertise within schools
 - Evidence based training and testing requirements for teachers
 - DEED purchased textbooks for students
 - Pilot program in 5 of the lowest performing schools

Senator Hoffman stressed that teacher retention was possibly the largest problem facing the lower performing schools, particularly in his district. He wondered whether the legislation addressed teacher retention.

Senator Begich stated that it was not, because there would be separate legislation related to teacher retention. He explained that the bill would provide support, which in turn would be good for teacher retention.

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Senator Hughes stressed that the bill would provide support for teachers. She stated that Mississippi teachers stated that the program was very rewarding, so therefore they did not leave the profession.

Senator Holland furthered that a large component of the bill was the virtual consortium.

Senator Hughes pointed to slide 12, "Virtual Consortium":

- Leveraging Technology Gains
 - Maintains a statewide learning management system
 - Clearing house for professional development courses
 - Live assistance and training for teachers

- Synchronous, asynchronous, and blended course offerings across districts
- Builds off investments, training, and success gained through the recent experience with virtual instruction

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Senator von Imhof felt that the legislation had lofty goals and great ideas. She also felt that some of the objectives would require great cost to the state.

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Co-Chair Bishop remarked that there were current efforts in the budget to address internet broadband. He wondered whether maybe there could be a utilization of some of the new satellites to address access to teacher training.

Senator Hughes agreed that the bill was comprehensive, but was merely the first step in addressing the main issues.

Senator Wilson remarked that he was not a large fan of virtual learning, and noted that there were some learning gaps with e-learning. He wanted to ensure that there was a higher focus on ensuring that students do not fall behind because of the e-learning issue.

Senator Hughes commented that there would be a serious "hiccup" due to the learning during the pandemic. She remarked that the bill required a standard.

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Senator Begich addressed one of the many areas of the needs in education. He stressed the need to address the issue of reading. He remarked that the virtual education component was due to "mixing and matching" of resources.

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Co-Chair Bishop remarked that the governor's budget had an over \$30 million increase in the Department of Public Safety (DPS), and no one seemed to have an issue what that funding. He felt that increasing the focus on reading education might result in shrinking the public safety budget.

Senator Holland highlighted slide 13, "Parents and Districts in Control":

- Parental engagement and choice
 - Required notification when a deficiency is located
 - At least 10 updates per year
 - Encouragement for parent student reading plans
 - Required parent teacher conference in the spring if the student is still behind
 - Parents always have the final say on progression decisions
- Local Control
 - Programs and policies are locally designed and culturally responsive
 - The Department provides oversight and support

Senator Holland pointed to slide 14, "Required Review of Programs":

- All new programs sunset in 2034 unless extended
 - Early education programs, reading intervention services, reading specialists, and virtual consortium
- Required annual reports to the legislature
 - Parents as Teachers
 - Reading progress of students
 - Count of promotion with a deficiency or delayed promotion
 - Use of virtual consortium
- Required final report and recommendation to 38 the legislature

Senator Wilson remarked that Parents as Teachers was one of the only programs required in order for the state to receive money from the Family First Services Act. He wondered whether there was another program to supplement that funding.

Senator Holland stressed that there were no easy answers for the education problems in the state. He noted that the proposal was based on what works in other states, and noted that there would be cost, but something needed to be done to stop failing the students in the state.

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RECONVENED

DEENA BISHOP, SUPERINTENDENT, ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT, testified in support of the bill. She responded to some testimony. She stressed that literacy was a fundamental right of all students in the state, and must become a no-fail mission for all classrooms. She explained that children were tougher and smarter than assumptions. She felt that sometimes empathy for a child's home life stripped the rigor from the classrooms. The family status should not be the reason for their failure.

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Senator von Imhof asked whether the state had set standards for reading and writing.

Ms. Bishop replied in the affirmative.

Senator von Imhof wondered whether those standards were disseminated in all the districts in the state.

Ms. Bishop replied that the understanding of the standards by all districts was marginal.

Senator von Imhof wondered who was responsible at the district level for assimilating the standards.

Ms. Bishop said that an articulation in expectation ensured that things got done. She remarked that the education personnel turnover left the children without a clear focus.

Senator von Imhof asked whether the bill would change that issue.

Ms. Bishop replied that the accountability outlined in the bill would "ensure that things get done."

Senator von Imhof wondered whether the accountability included other curriculum outside of reading.

Ms. Bishop hoped that the government and community would already have the expectation. She stressed that measurements ensured accountability.

Senator von Imhof understood that pre pandemic and annual statewide assessment exam had been changes to online. She wondered whether it had been successful.

Ms. Bishop said that in 2016 the online assessment was online.

Senator von Imhof asked whether all districts could successfully administer and electronic test.

Ms. Bishop stated that her district had a paper and pencil test, and an electronic test.

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Senator Wielechowski asked whether kids who liked school did better academically.

Ms. Bishop said that success bred success.

Senator Wielechowski spoke to children who said they did not like school. He was curious if more testing would make school more enjoyable for children.

Ms. Bishop responded that the assessment were "simple." She stated that they were mostly based on observation.

Senator Hoffman expressed concern about the "level playing field", because many rural schools were considered "substandard."

Ms. Bishop replied that there will never be a level playing field, so a system needed to be responsive to that unlevel playing field.

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Senator von Imhof felt that the pilot project that brought rural students to the cities. She remarked on grassroots efforts where students were traveling to larger hubs. She noted that the bill would bring reading teachers to communities.

Ms. Bishop agreed.

Senator von Imhof wondered whether the bill could integrate with the behavior of moving the students to larger hubs for learning.

Ms. Bishop replied that older students traveled to the hubs, so younger students would not be the best option for plane travel.

Senator Wielechowski queried the research for top indicators of student performance.

Ms. Bishop replied that top indicators of performance were high expectations of teachers and strong support of teachers to gain the knowledge needed to teach.

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Senator Wielechowski wondered how much the state would get to that effort within the bill.

Ms. Bishop replied that policy established the expectations.

Co-Chair Stedman asked about whether the mandate was had current funding.

Ms. Bishop responded that the state funded public education. The program offered support that was shown as a need in education. Therefore, there was already funding to teach the basics of education.

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Senator von Imhof stressed that districts had the ability to prioritize a specific subject.

Ms. Bishop remarked that it was important that the state policy on reading is essential to ensuring educational success.

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MICHAEL JOHNSON, COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT, JUNEAU, shared some history of the importance of reading education in the state. He stressed that every state should have high national standards.

Senator Hoffman wondered whether the intervention in the Yupik School District was successful.

Commissioner Johnson replied that the intervention occurred before his tenure, but stated that the Yupik School District was still struggling.

Senator Hoffman wondered how SB 111 would help the Yupik School District with reading, and asked if that district would get special attention due to low performance in that district.

Commissioner Johnson replied that the bill had funding for four-year-old children to attend preschool to ensure they have a head start on reading. The bill had several requirements for appropriate cultural language and components.

Senator Hoffman wanted to ensure that the statements had a change to be proven true for the Yupik School District.

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Senator von Imhof remarked that there was deficit spending in the governor's budget, and required reductions in spending. She wondered whether the Headstart programs were preschool programs that were funded by the federal government.

Commissioner Johnson replied in the affirmative.

Senator von Imhof queried the number of Headstart programs in the rural districts.

Commissioner Johnson agreed to provide that information.

Senator von Imhof surmised that there were more than ten programs.

Commissioner Johnson agreed.

Senator von Imhof wondered whether those students had assessments to determine kindergarten readiness.

Commissioner Johnson stated that those districts could provide assessment data.

Senator von Imhof wondered whether the bill would replace the Headstart program, as well as other evaluations of the Headstart program in order to determine the need for another preschool option.

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Senator Wilson wondered whether the Parents as Teachers program was eliminated, and asked if the bill was merely mandating that program.

Commissioner Johnson replied that Parents as Teachers was still in existence, and remarked that it was an effective program.

Senator Wilson asked how much federal money was provided in order for the program to exist in the state.

Commissioner Johnson agreed to provide that information, but believed it was a state-funded program.

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Senator Wielechowski queried the reasons that Alaska was the worst in the country for fourth grade reading.

Commissioner Johnson replied that it was based on national data. He did not believe that there was one reason, but many variables that did not compare well with the other states. He stressed that the intent of the bill was to cover the issue of Alaska potentially may not have policy attached to funding like other states.

Senator Wielechowski did not want to assign blame, but wanted to ensure that the problem was addressed. He felt that it was important to know how to fix the problem.

Commissioner Johnson remarked that there were many things that could be done to address the problem, but currently it was important to apply just a number of solutions to begin the process.

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Co-Chair Bishop wondered whether the ranking was based on an "apples to apples test" across all fifty states.

Commissioner Johnson replied in the affirmative, but it was a statistically sampled test.

Co-Chair Stedman asked whether there were discussions about setting aside the FY 23 funds for reading enhancements.

Commissioner Johnson replied that DEED was encouraged that the administration continued to support reading education in their fiscal notes. He stressed that the State Board of Education continued steadfast in urging continued support for comprehensive reading legislation.

Co-Chair Bishop discussed the following day's agenda.

SB 111 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

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ADJOURNMENT

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The meeting was adjourned at 2:48 p.m.