

SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
March 4, 2022
9:05 a.m.

[9:05:29 AM](#)

CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Bishop called the Senate Finance Committee meeting to order at 9:05 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Lyman Hoffman
Senator Donny Olson

ALSO PRESENT

Michael Johnson, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development; Senator Roger Holland, Sponsor; Senator Tom Begich, Sponsor.

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."

[9:06:42 AM](#)

MICHAEL JOHNSON, COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT, (DEED) introduced himself. He stated that he did not have a presentation but had read through some of the notes from the previous hearing of the bill. He hoped to assist the committee.

[9:07:55 AM](#)

Co-Chair Stedman noted that Alaska's test scores had declined in the most recent years and queried the reason for the decline. He wondered what would bring the state test scores to at least a middle ground.

[9:09:57 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson replied that it was a big question and felt that he might ramble in response. He felt that there was no reason why Alaska's students could not be at the top of the charts. He pointed out that there could be a statewide reading policy that could bring Alaska to a higher place in the ranking system. He said that identifying a single reason for Alaska's low ranking was challenging. He thought that there were many unpredictable variables. He felt that factors for success could be identified, such as: teaching kids to read, having relevant cultural and career education, having effective teachers in classrooms, having a safe and secure environment for students.

[9:13:44 AM](#)

Co-Chair Stedman asserted that he had not heard a solution in the commissioner's response. He wondered whether the

department had considered solutions to the problem and what the cost of those solutions might be. He understood the issue was multifaceted and queried what the department had considered to improve the scores. He admitted he did not have a background in education, which was why the commissioner had been called in to present solutions that the legislature could then fund.

[9:15:10 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson replied that that SB 111 would be a good place to start. He thought that pre-K and accountability were both needed to raise reading scores. He felt that the pre-K component was evidence based and essential. He pointed out that the bill had reading intervention services that would be provided by the district for children struggling on the reading pathway. He noted that the bill acknowledged that the state was low ranking for academic scores and cited Moore v. State, in which the judge had surmised that the low scores were not a result of lack of funding, but rather the state needed to provide more support and oversight.

[9:17:39 AM](#)

Senator von Imhof pointed to the 'Alaska Department of Education and Early Development Strategic Plan" (copy on file.) She wondered how long the document had been in existence.

[9:17:54 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson replied that it was not a "plan" but a list of priorities.

[9:18:32 AM](#)

Senator von Imhof thought that the priorities were on point; support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade, increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs, close achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources, and prepare, attract, retain effective education professionals, improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes. She

wondered how much progress had been made towards the priorities and how had progress been measured.

[9:18:59 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson thought that there had been a lot of progress. He said that committees had been formed around each of the priorities and had shared their priorities with the legislative Joint Education Committees. He spoke of studies conducted and meetings with stakeholders that could result in future legislation. He said that measuring progress statewide had been a challenge due to Covid-19.

[9:21:06 AM](#)

Senator von Imhof realized that there had been a decrease in revenue over the past few years. She felt that the changes in the priority document were significant. She understood that other states had overhauled their education systems and wondered when education legislation could be expected from the department and administration, rather than legislators.

[9:22:38 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson replied that the department had considered crafting legislation. He contended that SB 111 was in its 4th hearing before the committee and wondered how long a comprehensive education bill would languish in the legislative process. He credited the bill sponsor for the current legislation and shared that the genesis of the bill had been himself asking the sponsor and the governor to meet to discuss the issue. He stressed that the department was working for comprehensive education reform within the authority provided to DEED.

[9:25:34 AM](#)

Senator Wielechowski thought that the bill was positively ambitious. He wondered what other steps need to be taken to get to Number One in the national scores.

[9:26:51 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson responded that focusing on common and shared priorities was important. He reiterated the

importance of the priorities laid out in the strategic plan.

[9:30:55 AM](#)

Co-Chair Bishop spoke of his work with career and technical education. He asserted that real change in education was not a one-year event but needed to be a generational change.

[9:31:53 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson agreed. He said that passing legislation was the beginning and not the end. He mentioned schools and community organizations and businesses partnering to provide meaningful educational experiences for students.

[9:33:27 AM](#)

Co-Chair Bishop invited the bill sponsors to the table.

[9:33:53 AM](#)

SENATOR ROGER HOLLAND, SPONSOR, introduced himself.

[9:34:03 AM](#)

SENATOR TOM BEGICH, SPONSOR, introduced himself.

[9:34:19 AM](#)

Co-Chair Stedman supported the legislation. He was curious about the multi-year, next steps for improvement in education. He clarified that he would not mind that Alaska were at the top for test scores and he acknowledged that movement toward the middle of the list was more realistic.

[9:35:42 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson replied that collaborative education reform effort in the state would be beneficial. He hoped that education could be the dominate issue in the state. He thought that getting more kids reading and improving on career technical education (CTE) opportunities would help in moving Alaska up the list. He said that there was a CTE plan in the state that the department could draw from. He

spoke of Covid-19 funds that had been spent toward CTE programs.

[9:38:57 AM](#)

Co-Chair Stedman remarked that vocational technical programs would be in the budget but that it was dependent on the signature of the governor. He asked whether the governor would support funding for vocational technical programs.

[9:40:05 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson replied that he could not make commitments for the governor. He added that the governor has expressed support for SB 111.

[9:40:54 AM](#)

Senator Holland furthered that the HB 136 and HB 108 were CTE bills. He listed several education bills circulating in the legislature.

[9:42:13 AM](#)

Senator Begich announced that the governor was supportive of the current legislation. He anticipated that any funding attached to the bill would be supported by the governor.

[9:43:05 AM](#)

Senator von Imhof understood that support of CTE was an avenue for improving math and reading scores. She relayed that she had traveled to the Northwestern Alaska Career and Technical Center (NACTEC) in Nome where she had learned of the ill affects of the governor's cut of the Education Tax Credit. She urged Senator Begich to press the governor to reinstate the Education Tax Credits.

Senator von Imhof continued. She considered early childhood education and wondered about the \$6.8 million in Head Start and \$3.2 in kindergarten grants. She queried how those programs were doing and what kind of changes were needed to make the current programs more successful.

[9:46:49 AM](#)

Senator von Imhof believed that the Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools (PEAKS) and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data should be more closely scrutinized and considered.

[9:47:12 AM](#)

Senator Wielechowski asked about CTE. He suggested using incoming federal funds to train the future workforce. He requested a list of things that the department supported that would be helpful in the areas of early childhood and CTE.

[9:48:52 AM](#)

Co-Chair Bishop said that the CTE plan in place included the Commissioner of Labor and the President of the University, not only the Commissioner of Education. He believed that all three people needed to be accountable for the plan.

[9:49:39 AM](#)

Commissioner Johnson spoke of his advocacy for investing in training Alaskans and Alaska hire. He shared his experience on the Broadband Taskforce and relayed that he continuously advocated for Alaska hire on broadband expansion in the state.

[9:51:52 AM](#)

Senator Holland admitted he was not a finance or legislative professional. He thought that there could be some benefit to a local industry investing in the local economy for tax credits. He lamented that tax credits cost the state coffer and considered that projects could be funded directly by the state. He asserted that Alaska had only dropped a few points in PEAKS scoring over the last 20 years but other 48 states had risen as a group.

[9:53:44 AM](#)

Senator Begich said that there was data to support the success and long-term efficacy of high-quality pre-K programs. He spoke of his meetings with the governor and the commissioner. He believed that the bill would be a first step in transformative change in education in Alaska.

[9:55:52 AM](#)

Co-Chair Stedman commented on the tax credit issue, which he did not believe could be incorporated into the bill title. He supported using the tax credit tool in a future education vehicle. He thought it could provide a more stable revenue stream. He stressed that rural areas benefitted greatly from AVTEC centers.

[9:58:02 AM](#)

Co-Chair Bishop reminded the committee that when he left the Department of Labor only 23 percent of graduation seniors were destined for college, the rest would be in CTE or vocational programs. He said it took longer to become a plumber than to become a doctor or a dentist. He advocated for support for CTE programs but admitted that one would need to learn to read in order to be successful in any vocation.

[10:00:36 AM](#)

AT EASE

[10:00:43 AM](#)

RECONVENED

Co-Chair Bishop set the amendment deadline for noon, March 9, 2022.

#

ADJOURNMENT

[10:01:06 AM](#)

The meeting was adjourned at 10:01 a.m.