

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 8, 2023

8:01 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Jamie Allard, Co-Chair
Representative Justin Ruffridge, Co-Chair
Representative Mike Prax
Representative CJ McCormick
Representative Tom McKay
Representative Rebecca Himschoot
Representative Andi Story

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Alyse Galvin
Representative Dan Ortiz

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): ALASKA READS ACT BY THE ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION & EARLY DEVELOPMENT

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

HEIDI TESHNER, Acting Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-offered a PowerPoint presentation
entitled "Alaska Reads Act by the Alaska Department of Education
& Early Development."

SUSAN MCKENZIE, Director
Division of Innovation and Education Excellence

Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-offered a PowerPoint presentation entitled "Alaska Reads Act by the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development."

DEBORAH RIDDLE, Operations Manager
Division of Innovation and Education Excellence
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-offered a PowerPoint presentation entitled "Alaska Reads Act by the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development."

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:01:55 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR JUSTIN RUFFRIDGE called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:01 a.m. Representatives Prax, McCormick, McKay, Himschoot, Story, Allard, and Ruffridge were present at the call to order.

PRESENTATION(S): Alaska READS Act by the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development

[8:02:38 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE announced that the only order of business would be the presentation on the Alaska READS Act by the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development.

[8:03:36 AM](#)

HEIDI TESHNER, Acting Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) explained there would be updates on the Alaska Reads Act, passed via House Bill 114 during the Thirty-Second Alaska State Legislature, on July 15 2022, with an effective date of July 1, 2023. The Act created four new programs: an early education grant program, a department reading program, a district reading and improvement program, and a virtual education consortium - all discussed today. Ms. Teshner began on slide 2, titled "Mission, Vision and Purpose," and continued on to slide 3, titled "Agenda," which covered implementation and overview, and regulation review. She proceeded to slide 4, titled "Strategic Priorities: Alaska's Education Challenge," and focused on number 1 on the slide:

"Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade" - this being the Reads Act top priority.

[8:05:51 AM](#)

SUSAN MCKENZIE, Director, Division of Innovation and Education Excellence, DEED, joined the presentation and explained the Alaska Reads Act is aligned with priority number 1 on slide 5, titled "Alaska Education Challenge: Priority 1 Aligned Focus," and she reiterated the goal of reading proficiency by the third grade. Ms. McKenzie continued on to slide 6, titled "Alaska's Strategic Reading Plan," which shows the components of the Alaska Reads Act are imbedded into the Strategic Reading Plan. She noted that additional components would be added as the need arises. She moved on to slide 7, titled "Alaska Reads Act Implementation Supports," and immediately followed on to slide 8, titled "Alaska Reads Act Webinar Schedule," which highlights the Reads Act components, dates, and presenters. She added that all content is available on DEED's website.

[8:09:22 AM](#)

MS. MCKENZIE proceeded to slide 9, titled "Alaska Reads Act Timeline and Resources," where she began her focus on website resources. She described the website as [user friendly] and accessible, and pointed out there are recordings of the webinars. She summarized the points on the left side of the slide, "Timeline," which highlights DEED's work on proposed regulations going to the State Board of Education, dates of public comment, and an anticipated adoption of the regulations in April 2023. She continued on to slide 10, titled "Communication." She stressed the focus on active communication, including presentation requests, a monthly newsletter that provides updates on DEED's efforts on the Strategic Reading Plan, and the implementation of the Alaska Reads Act. She noted that the subscribers for the newsletter had gone from 100 to over 1,000.

[8:12:15 AM](#)

MS. MCKENZIE skipped to slide 12, titled "Alaska READS Act Components," with two focus areas: "Reads Act Programs," and "Other Requirements," which will be summarized during the following slides. She continued on to slide 13, titled "Alaska Reads Act: Department Reading Program," - a voluntary part of the Act. She explained the program is offered to the lowest performing 25 percent of schools, and upon acceptance,

participants would be connected with a department reading specialist for one year with renewal options.

[8:14:12 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT asked if the schools in the lowest 25 percent are in different districts, how many specialists would be housed at DEED. She further inquired how many schools are in the 25 percent.

MS. MCKENZIE answered yes, the schools are in various districts and that there are plans for 5 department reading specialists that would take on caseloads, and during implementation, would take 2 schools so that 10 schools could be supported the first year. The goal is to support more schools moving forward. She confirmed that it is 25 percent of about 500 schools. In response to a follow-up question, she explained each year the lowest 25 percent are identified, they are invited each year to apply, and the goal is to serve as many schools as DEED is able to.

[8:17:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX stated his concern about schools being labeled low-performing, and then not having the resources to improve that. He pointed out the Department Reading Program is being offered, but not required, resulting in confusion.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked for clarification on the assessment that designates the 25 percent lower performing schools.

[8:18:49 AM](#)

DEBORAH RIDDLE, Operations Manager, Division of Innovation and Education Excellence, Department of Educational and Early Development, explained the accountability system is called the System for School Success, creating an index value for each school based on various assessments, attendance, and third grade proficiency.

[8:19:34 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked if the districts currently know whether they will be offered the program.

MS. MCKENZIE replied yes, but through the accountability system it could be slightly different, and some schools already have a good indication on if they fall into the category of 25 percent.

[8:20:33 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCKAY questioned why any school would refuse the assistance.

MS. MCKENZIE answered there are several factors that play into decisions, including what the schools may have going on currently for development. She also noted there are parts of the Reads Act that are required.

[8:21:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT pointed out there is nothing in the bill stating the reading specialists for schools in the 25 percent would live in the community where the school is located.

MS. MCKENZIE confirmed no.

[8:22:09 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE, regarding the lowest performing in the 500 schools, asked if it includes all schools, or just elementary.

MS. MCKENZIE confirmed for all schools.

MS. MCKENZIE continued the presentation on slide 14, titled "Alaska Reads Act: District Reading Intervention," and explained this is the part of the Act that is required of all districts receiving state funds. The components include department-approved plans, literacy screeners, and that all intervention needs to be based on the science of reading.

[8:25:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked whether the literacy screener is still in development.

MS. MCKENZIE responded that DEED has already adopted a literacy screener to use for fall, and it will be piloted with a number of schools.

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CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE referred to the pilot programs, and asked how many students were identified as students with reading deficiencies.

MS. MCKENZIE responded that DEED is just getting feedback on what went well and what needs work in the pilot programs.

[8:30:22 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE asked if it is the children's teachers that are developing the individual learning plans. He also asked if it would vary by district.

MS. MCKENZIE explained that the Alaska Reads Act states the parents need to be part of putting the plan together along with the principal, a reading specialist, and the teacher; there are different tiers and people involved within the school environment. In response to a follow up question, Ms. McKenzie stated it could possibly be different depending on the district.

[8:31:45 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT asked how many mandates have been added to districts.

MS. MCKENZIE replied that the proposed regulations would be adopted in April and enacted in July.

[8:33:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY commented on the assessments, and asked for an estimate of how many kids K through 3 are not proficient in reading.

MS. MCKENZIE replied that DEED does not have the data, and until the Act is enacted, literacy screeners were not required.

[8:34:35 AM](#)

MS. TESHNER added to Ms. McKenzie's response and explained about 80 percent of students are not proficient, based on The Alaska System of Academic Readiness (AK STAR) assessment.

[8:34:49 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE asked of the 80 percent, approximately how many students were in the third grade.

MS. TESHNER replied about 10,000 students, and noted she can follow up with the committee on the exact number.

[8:35:26 AM](#)

MS. MCKENZIE moved on to slide 15, titled "Alaska Reads Act: District Reading Intervention Supports," and explained DEED is implementing several required supports to districts.

[8:36:48 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE questioned the assessment that there are 5 specialists planned, that the poorest performing 25 percent of schools are being looked at, but possibly 8,000 students may need intervention.

MS. MCKENZIE explained that the requirements of the Alaska Reads Act and support are multi-faceted, and the 25 percent being referred to is voluntary and lasts for one year with a school that chooses to participate.

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE acknowledged that there is nothing built in to help a district or student, and help pay for that student.

MS. MCKENZIE responded that the multi-tiered framework supporting each student, with the intervention needed, is a framework the Alaska Reads Act requires.

[8:43:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCORMICK asked if there is a plan of support for the challenges of very rural communities.

MS. MCKENZIE responded that she does not have information on specific schools.

[8:45:02 AM](#)

MS. MCKENZIE re-stated answers to questions from Representative Ortiz, which were topics of discussion earlier in the hearing.

[8:46:48 AM](#)

MS. RIDDLE rejoined the presentation on slide 16, titled "Alaska Reads Act: Early Education and Parents as Teachers," which is also a voluntary program, and the purpose is to help districts

build or improve early learning programs. She explained there will be a series of 3-year grants, providing the districts have an insufficient number of programs available to support area students. She then focused on the "Parents as Teachers" part of the slide, which is a partnership between DEED and the Department of Health - the latter for which DEED supports its work with children from birth until age 5, going into parents' homes with a variety of educational and health-related services to prepare the children for Kindergarten.

[8:51:26 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE inquired whether the early education program grants only go to the 25 percent lowest performing districts.

MS. RIDDLE replied that the grants are for any district that wants to implement a Pre-K program, but priority would be given to those districts who have a lower index score.

[8:52:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY commented that other states that do very well in reading and have a strong early learning component have funded early learning. She stated the Alaska State Legislature has an opportunity to increase funding of early education if it chooses.

[8:53:57 AM](#)

MS. RIDDLE continued on slide 17, titled "Alaska Reads Act: Virtual Education Consortium," and noted this section of the Act will be implemented in July 2024. Before the implementation, she explained, DEED is working to create an oversight committee titled the Alaska Virtual Consortium Oversight Committee, to be able to offer professional development and courses for students on a virtual platform.

[8:56:13 AM](#)

MS. MCKENZIE joined the presentation on slide 19, titled "Alaska Reads Act: Educator Qualifications." The Reads Act requires that there be training, coursework, [and] testing in a variety of areas, and the training is approved by the State Board of Education and Early development, in regulations. She proceeded to slide 20, titled "Alaska Reads Act: Educator Qualifications." Early education, K-3 educators, and a district reading teacher are requirements she briefly summarized. She moved on to slide

21, titled "Proposed Regulations Educator Qualification Tracking," and explained DEED will add endorsements to an educator's certification which would prove the educator has met the requirements of the Alaska Reads Act.

[8:58:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX questioned if it would be a certified educator per district.

MS. MCKENZIE responded, "Any teacher who teaches grades K through 3."

[8:58:41 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked who pays for the endorsement and if the courses would be through the university.

MS. MCKENZIE responded that DEED is working on using some COVID-19 Relief funds, but some teachers or administrators may need to pay for the training. In response to a follow-up question, she explained DEED is setting up a process for the approval of the courses, and it could occur through a university.

MS. MCKENZIE continued to slide 23, titled "K-3 Educators," that highlights two endorsements that would be phased in over the next two years under specific requirements.

[9:00:49 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY acknowledged the trouble hiring teachers, and questioned if it is common for teachers hired to have this reading endorsement, and if it is allowed that a district hire a person without "the early childhood hours."

MS. MCKENZIE answered that DEED anticipates this will be phased in over the next two years. She pointed out that the Alaska Reads Act does not require a reading endorsement.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked whether teachers who are hired but do not obtain this reading endorsement within 2 years would not be allowed to teach.

MS. MCKENZIE confirmed that is correct.

[9:02:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE asked if the certification is a proposed regulation from this endorsement.

MS. MCKENZIE replied that the endorsement, or process, is through regulation; the requirement of the course work is in the Alaska Reads Act.

CO-CHAIR RUFFRIDGE questioned the educational need, with the assumption K-3 teachers would have had some experience, and asked if there are teachers that could be endorsed already.

MS. MCKENZIE responded DEED does not have the exact data. Some educators have taken courses that are aligned with the requirements of the Reads Act, but it is unknown if the course work included the science of reading-based training.

[9:05:47 AM](#)

MS. MCKENZIE moved forward to slide 22, titled "Early Education," which focused on an "Early Educator Lead" endorsement that takes two years to complete, and its requirements were briefly summarized.

[9:06:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX commented on small school districts where the educator lead is the same person doing the teaching, and he expressed concern about implementation problems for the smaller districts.

[9:08:21 AM](#)

MS. MCKENZIE proceeded to slide 24, titled "District Reading Teacher." It featured the last requirement for educator training in the Act, resulting in an Alaska Reads Act-verified reading teacher, which is different from a reading specialist. She moved on to slide 25, titled "Proposed Regulations Evidence-based Reading Exams," that featured four examination types and their requirements. She continued to slide 26, titled "Proposed Regulations Evidenced-based Reading Training Courses," which reviewed in regulation what is proposed.

[9:11:02 AM](#)

MS. TESHNER joined the presentation on slide 28, titled "Alaska Reads Act: Regulation Review," which highlighted a link to proposed regulations and a 4-page summary document.

9:12:29 AM

REPRESENTATIVE MCKAY questioned how many in the 25 percent non-performing group were in Anchorage. He also asked when the determination of the 25 percent was made, and if there was any correlation with "the COVID-19 pandemic."

MS. MCKENZIE replied that the information on Anchorage schools would be provided on a future date. In reference to performance and the pandemic, she explained a pattern of non-proficiency preceding "the Covid years".

9:15:15 AM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:15 a.m.