

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 22, 2024

3:31 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Jesse Kiehl
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: AK READS ACT UPDATE TO SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

KATHY MOFFITT, Director
Division of Innovation and Education Excellence
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the Alaska Reads Act Update to the Senate Education Committee.

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on the Alaska Reads Act Update to the Senate Education Committee.

GENE STONE, Superintendent
Lower Yukon School District (LYSD)
Mountain Village, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of increased funding and support for literacy.

HEATHER CONN, Principal
Stedman Elementary
Petersburg School District
Petersburg, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concerns on the Alaska Reads Act.

TOBIAS FRIEB, representing self
Craig, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

MIKE BRONSON, Volunteer
National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

JAMES PARKIN, representing self
Angoon, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

CHRIS OPITZ, Senior Director
Assessment and Evaluations
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

NICOLE SOMMERVILLE, Director
Teaching and Learning
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

JOSHUA GILL, President
Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

LEE ANN JENKINS, Special Education Interventionist
Petersburg School District
Petersburg, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

MARY KRETZSCHMAR, Decoding Dyslexia Alaska
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

NICK HIGSON, Principal
Fawn Mountain Elementary
Ketchikan, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns on testing instruments.

ROZLYN GRADY-WYCHE, President
Alaska Coalition of Black Indigenous
People of Color (BIPOC) Educators
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

BECKY ZAVERL, Principal
Denali Elementary
Fairbanks North Star Borough School District
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on funding for Title I and the Walk to Read program.

HEATHER SNELL, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

LESA MEATH, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testifies on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

STACY DIOUF, Principal
Gastineau Community School
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

SUSAN MCCAULEY, Principal
Birchtree Charter School
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

JESSICA VAUDREUIL, representing self
Shishmaref, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

MOLLY HICKOX, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:31:12 PM](#)

CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens, Kiehl, Bjorkman, Gray-Jackson, and Chair Tobin.

PRESENTATION:

AK READS ACT UPDATE TO SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

[3:32:05 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of an update on the Alaska Reads Act to the Senate Education Committee.

SENATOR TOBIN stated that while working as a staff member for former Senator Begich, she participated in creating the Alaska Reads Act. It was challenging to strike a balance between local control and building strong public policy to ensure every child has the opportunity to learn to read. She stated she is looking forward to feedback from DEED and the public on perfecting the legislation.

[3:34:04 PM](#)

KATHY MOFFITT, Director, Division of Innovation and Education Excellence, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Anchorage, Alaska, stated she is new to her position with DEED but has worked in education for many years. She stated that the mission, vision, and purpose of DEED references

students because that is who DEED serves. She said she is passionate about the Alaska Reads Act legislation:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mission

An excellent education for every student every day.

Vision

All students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them.

-Alaska Statute 14.03.015

Purpose

DEED exists to provide **information, resources, and leadership** to support an excellent education for every student every day.

[3:34:49 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 3 and stated that in 2016 the State Board of Education developed Alaska's Education Challenge:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Five Shared Strategic Priorities:

1. Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade.
2. Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs.
3. Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources.
4. Prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals.
5. Improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes.

[3:35:05 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 4 and shared DEED's agenda for the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- State Board of Education's (SBOE) Alaska's Education Challenge
- Alaska's Strategic Reading Plan
- AK Reads Act
- Alyeska Reading Institute (ARI)
- Alaska Data Share, mCLASS DIBELS 8 Data Share
- Question & Answer

[3:35:23 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 5 and shared a list of acronyms that DEED would use in the update. The individual reading improvement plan (IRIP) and the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) are integral to the Alaska Reads Act:

[Original punctuation provided.]

ARI - Alyeska Reading Academy and Institute, Alyeska Reading Institute

DIBELS - Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills

IRIP - Individual Reading Improvement Plan

MTSS - Multi-tiered System of Supports

[3:36:15 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 6 and said the Alaska Reads Act embodies the first shared strategic priority of Alaska's Education Challenge:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Alaska's Education Challenge

Five Shared Strategic Priorities:

1. Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade.
2. Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs.
3. Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources.
4. Prepare, attract, and retain effective educational professionals.
5. Improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes.

[3:36:37 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 7 and said the Alaska Reads Act was signed into law in June 2022. It entails a set of programs aimed at improving K - 3rd grade literacy education. The Division of Innovation and Education Excellence (IEE) provided a road map for districts regarding Alaska's Strategic Reading Plan which includes:

- Professional Development
- Evidence-Based Materials
- Early Learning
- Frameworks for Success
- SOR Resources, Data, and Communication
- Teacher Preparation

She said DEED's update is based on the work of Susie McKenzie and IEE. She mentioned that this is the first year of implementation for the Alaska Reads Act so there are areas for improvement.

[3:38:00 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 8 and said Alyeska Reading Institute (ARI) is a division under DEED that backs IEE. Its primary purpose is the implementation of the Alaska Reads Act.

[3:38:46 PM](#)

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Anchorage, Alaska, stated that IEE is a division of DEED, within it are assessment, career technical education, federal programs, and reading. ARI gives additional support and helps lift reading through outward focus to

districts. It supports districts by helping to establish regulations and funds.

[3:39:38 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked what IEE stands for.

[3:39:43 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT replied it stands for Innovation and Education Excellence.

[3:39:59 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP stated IEE is the instructional or school side of the department.

[3:40:07 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 9 and said the Alaska Reads Act has four different programs and two other requirements:

[Original punctuation provided.]

AK Reads Act Programs:

- 1) Early Learning & Parents as Teachers (VOLUNTARY)
- 2) Department Reading Program (VOLUNTARY)
- 3) Virtual Education (VOLUNTARY)
- 4) District Reading Improvement (REQUIRED)

Other Requirements:

- 1) Reporting/Data Collections
- 2) Educator Preparation

[3:40:27 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 10 and said there are four elements to district reading improvement:

- MTSS Framework
- Literacy Screener
- Individual Reading Improvement Plan (IRIP)
- Progression

She said there is a lot that needs implementing in each area.

[3:40:51 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP clarified that it is not only a heavy lift for the department but for every school and school district. It is big work.

[3:41:04 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT said it is a new way of doing business that impacts everyone involved in education.

CHAIR TOBIN referred to slide 10 and asked what funds were attached to help school districts achieve the heavy lift for each of the four areas.

MS. BISHOP replied she would submit an answer to the committee. She said funds flow through the Recovery Act, IEE, ARI, and the Alaska Reads Act.

[3:41:54 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 11 and discussed the first element of district reading improvement, the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework. MTSS plans were submitted to DEED in September, and all were approved. She said the department has learned that compliance does not mean understanding so ARI was tasked with helping districts:

[Original punctuation provided.]

MTSS Framework

- Districts and individual schools submit plans to DEED for approval
- Plans articulate elements of tiered instruction within multitiered system of supports (MTSS)

ARI Support:

- Assistance in writing plans as needed
- Ongoing help in understanding and implementing plans
- Recognizing framework as proactive and preventative
- Utilizing data and maximizing instruction
- Supporting students - social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs

[3:43:27 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 12 and discussed the role of the literacy screener:

[Original punctuation provided.]

District staff receive explicit training for implementation of mCLASS DIBELS 8 Literacy Screening Assessment (DIBELS: Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills)

- Districts follow the assessment window ARI Support:

- Assists with implementation-ensuring accuracy (administration calibration)
- Facilitates ongoing data dialogue
- Understanding data
- Questioning data
- Planning next steps

She said mCLASS DIBELS 8 is the state's screening tool. Only two districts have not adopted it. The middle of the year assessment was recently completed and DEED is looking forward to receiving the data.

[3:44:23 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 13 and said DIBELS 8 was developed through the University of Oregon based on criteria and sets a bar of expertise for students to achieve. It is a set of 1 minute fluency measures used for universal screening, benchmark assessment, and progress monitoring for grades K-8. DEED pays for grades K-5 monitoring.

[3:44:57 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 14 and said the criteria of the assessment are grouped into levels. Each level predicts success at the next level. DEED used the Below Benchmark level to define deficiency. After monitoring was done at the beginning of the year, DEED received feedback from districts that defining deficiency as Below and Well Below was problematic. After looking at national trend data and inquiring with the University of Oregon, it was determined that Below Benchmark was supposed to indicate concern not deficiency, therefore the department changed its definition of deficiency to the Well Below benchmark.

[Original punctuation provided.]

**mCLASS DIBELS 8 Literacy Screening Assessment:
Risk Categories**

<u>Status</u>	<u>Level</u>	<u>Instructional Support</u>
Above Benchmark	Negligible risk	Core
At Benchmark	Minimal risk	Core
Below Benchmark	Some risk	Strategic

Well Below
Benchmark

At risk

Intensive

[3:46:41 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 15 and stated the data given in the slide which shows the percentage of students in each performance level uses the Alaska Beginning of Year (BOY) mCLASS DIBELS 8 Literacy Screening Assessment 2023-24. She said adults should use the information as a light not a hammer. In response to teacher inquiries, the commissioner of DEED stated teachers should postpone writing Individual Reading Improvement Plans (IRIPs) until results from the mid-year assessment were available. She commented that students' scores improved by the second assessment.

[3:48:21 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP stated the department desired to provide mid-year scores, but the testing window had just recently ended, and scores were not available. She stated she would provide the data to the community when it becomes available.

[3:49:22 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL said judging from his understanding of the chart, Alaska has tremendous success teaching reading in grades K-2 because students are behind when they enter kindergarten but are on par nationally by 3rd grade.

[3:49:59 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP stated that by third grade Alaska children are similar in scale to their peers nationally.

[3:50:14 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT commented on the great observation and added that over time the state will notice trends developing. A rural teacher reported that 11 out of 14 students scored at the Well Below benchmark level at the beginning of the year. However, by the end of the year the ratio decreased to 4 out of 14.

[3:50:58 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP moved to slide 15 and noted that the DIBELS assessment is for screening and does not measure comprehension or reading ability. It evaluates students' skills and abilities, such as saying a sound, word, or sentence. Screening tools do not assess comprehension. The theory is that recognizing sounds helps in vocabulary building. The first comprehension assessments students take are the Measures of Academic Progress

(MAP) Growth and the Alaska System of Academic Readiness (AK STAR).

[3:52:46 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked about the five components of the science of reading and whether comprehension is one of them.

[3:52:53 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP replied that while comprehension is one of the five components of the science of reading, the DIBELS assessment does not measure it. The five components are phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency.

[3:53:09 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated her belief that the bill requires that screening assess all five components of the science of reading.

MS. BISHOP stated that the building blocks of reading and reading are different constructs. The department does have assessments for reading, however DIBELS does not make a screener for comprehension.

CHAIR TOBIN replied that a component of the Alaska Reads Act was to adopt a screener that addressed all five components of reading. She suggested the department could be out of compliance.

MS. MOFFITT stated that instruction in grades K-2 focuses on ensuring students acquire the skills necessary to break the code. Once students achieve fluency, it becomes easier for them to learn to read, enabling them to read to learn. She opined that third grade is a pivotal year; if teachers have effectively taught foundational skills, students can then build comprehension and vocabulary through reading. At this stage, instruction shifts, and more robust assessments like AK STAR and MAPS are used.

[3:55:01 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 16, Beginning-of-Year (BOY): Districts with Above 90 Percent Completion, K-3 and mentioned that the department reviews completion data. She noted that outcomes rely on completion. At the beginning of the year, several districts achieved over a 90 percent completion rate, which she commended, acknowledging the challenges of implementation. The slide lists school districts in Alaska, the number of students in grades K-3, and their percentage of completion.

[3:55:33 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked why the Kenai School District is not listed.

MS. MOFFITT replied that only the districts that scored 90 percent or above were listed on the slide. Kenai must have fallen below 90 percent completion. She stated she would provide the committee with Kenai's percentage of completion.

[3:56:04 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 17 and explained the Individual Reading Improvement Plan (IRIP), which was developed for students in the Well Below category. She clarified that "must do's" refer to students in the Well Below risk category, while "may do's" are students in the Below category. The IRIP is a communication tool to detail to a parent the student's status, the plan for improvement, and progress monitoring. She highlighted the importance of regular communication to avoid situations where parents are unaware of their child's struggles until the end of the year.

MS. MOFFITT emphasized the significant effort required from teachers, schools, and districts to implement IRIP plans. She mentioned that the Alaska Reading Institute (ARI) has provided substantial support and resources, including materials from the University of Florida Literacy Institute and Haggerty, with over 20 districts and 145 schools participating. She stressed the necessity of ongoing professional development to address implementation challenges and ensure effective coaching.

[3:58:57 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN raised a question regarding the balance between educator discretion and statewide policy in the Alaska Reads Act. She noted that while the bill mentions a deficiency, it does not specify the type or level of deficiency, and she is curious about how this interpretation was reached. She inquired about potential changes to ensure strong educator support and flexibility, while also guaranteeing that every parent is notified if their child shows a deficiency, whether it results in an optional or mandatory plan.

[3:59:43 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP explained that the department consulted the University of Oregon's assessment designers. They advised that low proficiency should not be defined as deficiency, emphasizing that children are not deficient but may need some skills without

intensive intervention. The experts suggested looking at other data, like behavior, to avoid misrepresenting students' abilities. She clarified that this approach does not exclude informing parents but differentiates when an Individual Reading Improvement Plan (IRIP) is necessary, based on expert advice that Below proficient falls within the normative range.

[4:01:34 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN remarked that there might be further questions when discussing potential legislative changes and improvements to that aspect of deficiency.

[4:01:42 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT noted that after each screening period, parents receive a newsletter indicating their child's progress and what they can do at home to strengthen skills. She emphasized that communication with parents is now much better than she has seen in many years of working in Alaska, ensuring parents are informed regardless of their child's risk category.

[4:02:21 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 18 and explained that the final component of the Alaska Reads Act is progression, which builds on the IRIP discussion. The aim is to facilitate conversations between the educational team and guardians about the student's readiness for the next year. Additionally, districts are required to offer summer learning opportunities, which many already do.

[4:03:17 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 19 and stated there are other three programs within the Alaska Reads Act:

[Original punctuation provided.]

AK Reads Act: Early Learning & Parents as Teachers

Early Education

Voluntary grant program for eligible districts (three year)

- Purpose: to develop high-quality early education programs
- Standards adopted by State Board of Education
- .5 ADM (Average Daily Membership) for eligible districts

Parents as Teachers

Voluntary

- Purpose: enhance school readiness and increase parental involvement
- For children younger than five years old
- Evidence-based early childhood program that involves parents

[4:03:56 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 20 and spoke about the second program within the Alaska Reads Act:

[Original punctuation provided.]

AK Reads Act: Department Reading Program

Voluntary through application and acceptance

- Offered to the lowest-performing 25 percent of schools
- One year support (renewal options)
- Reading specialist support
- Reading improvement plan

CHAIR TOBIN said she looks forward to hearing more about the Department Reading Program in the future as it was a key component of the Alaska Reads Act.

[4:04:34 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL inquired about the uptake and whether all available funds have been allocated for district early education programs.

[4:04:50 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP replied she didn't think so because only one district took advantage of the .5 ADM given the work involved. DEED is currently working with other districts to build-out capacity.

[4:05:13 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated that following up on why the districts are not taking the money is a good idea.

[4:05:25 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP replied there are three other programs for PreK that districts may be utilizing instead of ADM. She stated she would provide the committee with a report of the PreK grants that districts are utilizing.

[4:05:46 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL said he was confused by the comment regarding the Department Reading Program, specifically that applications are out for lower-performing schools, but the department does not know the capacity of the program. He asked how a district can decide whether to apply for a program if they don't know whether the department can accommodate them.

[4:06:07 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT explained that the department knows there are about 74 schools in the 25 percent lowest-performing group. So far, five different districts have applied, with some districts having more than two eligible schools. This could have a broader district impact rather than just a standalone school impact. She noted that districts are asking questions, and that the department is providing webinars to help districts determine the impacts of applying as standalone schools or as a district.

[4:06:57 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP replied that the program is responsive, aiming to collaborate with school districts to tailor it to their needs rather than using a prepackaged approach. She emphasized that the program would vary for each district and possibly each school.

[4:07:26 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS noted that summer learning opportunities are particularly important for some students and districts. He asked what support the department can provide to districts and how the process works.

[4:07:40 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP replied that she has finalized nearly a million dollars in American Recovery funds for grants to districts. The Alaska Reads Act mandates summer learning programs for third-grade students to progress, and the department is designing individualized programs with these funds. The grant applications are being formed, and since districts vary, they will receive support tailored to their capacity and needs. The goal is to provide necessary revenue for summer programming specialists, and the funds should be available soon.

SENATOR STEVENS asked for clarification that it is after a student finishes third grade that summer school becomes available.

MS. BISHOP replied yes. The Alaska Reads Act states that if a third-grade student is far below proficiency, they would receive 20 hours of individualized instruction before moving to fourth grade.

[4:09:57 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT stated that some districts are also providing the summer reading program to other grades who need a boost.

[4:10:20 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 21 and said the third program within the Alaska Reads Act is virtual education, which is also in the building stage. She discussed the following points:

[Original punctuation provided.]

AK Reads Act: Virtual Education

Voluntary

- Purpose: to provide virtual education and professional resources to students and teachers
- Consortium formed between AK DEED and school districts
- Teacher training on virtual instruction delivery
- Reading specialist available to provide virtual reading intervention services
- Must be available on or before July 1, 2024

[4:10:56 PM](#)

MS. MOFFITT moved to slide 22 and spoke to the following points:

[Original Punctuation Provided.]

AK Reads Act: Educator Qualification

The department is working to add specific AK Reads endorsements to an educator's certification verifying qualification requirements have been satisfied

- AK Reads Act K-3 Teacher
- AK Reads Act Early Education Lead Teacher
- AK Reads Act Reading Teacher
- AK Reads Act K-3 Administrator

ARI Support:

- Assists and supports implementation and facilitation of multiple course offerings in support of qualification requirements to enable endorsements

[4:11:45 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if the department has any idea how successful third-grade teachers were at improving students' reading.

MS. MOFFITT replied she was unable to access any numbers prior to the presentation but would present the information to the committee as a report.

[4:12:35 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked if the department could comment on the capacity of ARI as well as the number of teachers and length of training.

[4:12:52 PM](#)

MS. BISHOP replied that she would provide the information to the committee.

[4:13:19 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on the Alaska Reads Act.

[4:14:22 PM](#)

GENE STONE, Superintendent, Lower Yukon School District (LYSD), Mountain Village, Alaska, testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns, advocating for increased funding in Alaska to specifically meet the educational mandates of the Alaska Reads Act, emphasizing support for the previously approved \$680 BSA increase. He highlighted that the Lower Yukon School District (LYSD) spent over a million dollars to comply with the Alaska Reads Act in the first year, covering costs through competitive grants but still facing a \$600,000 annual shortfall. He noted significant achievements, including professional development and increased literacy proficiency, but stressed that sustaining these efforts requires additional funding of at least \$600,000. He urgently requested increased base student allocation to support mandates like summer school and professional development, emphasizing the necessity for adequate resources to ensure quality education. He noted that his district has already cut many programs deemed necessary for healthy schools and hopes that basic literacy and reading are funded.

[4:18:20 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked how the LYSD elementary classroom teachers are experiencing the Alaska Reads Act, focusing on their adoption of new pedagogy and the increased workload. He inquired further about how teachers in LYSD are faring overall with these changes.

[4:18:52 PM](#)

MR. STONE replied that he knows the intent of the act is to make kids better readers and shore up deficiencies. He acknowledged funding challenges but noted that teachers were focused on doing the work with fidelity, leading to better teaching practices and positive results. He highlighted that 50 percent of teachers had undergone training to be considered proficient. He said he continually encourages them to focus on their work, assuring them he would handle financial concerns.

[4:20:47 PM](#)

HEATHER CONN, Principal, Stedman Elementary, Petersburg School District, Petersburg, Alaska, testified with concerns on the Alaska Reads Act. She gave a brief overview of her work history in education and described the grants and funding the school district received, but questioned how grants can sustain schools. She provided details of how the Petersburg School District met the requirements of the Alaska Reads Act and spoke about the extra duties and time it took for teachers and staff to create individual reading plans. She opined about the shortfalls of the Act and the late communication from the Department of Education. She said the Alaska Reads Act is a great plan with good intentions, but who will do the work, and who will pay for it.

[4:24:59 PM](#)

TOBIAS FRIEB, representing self, Craig, Alaska, testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. He stated that he is a kindergarten teacher in Craig. Schools need funding. Alaska wants children to learn to read but doesn't provide the necessary funding to ensure it happens. He encouraged increased funding for the base student allocation.

[4:26:09 PM](#)

MIKE BRONSON, Volunteer, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Anchorage, Alaska, testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. He highlighted that schools, particularly K-3 classrooms, are underfunded due to the Governor's veto, and recent guidance from the Commissioner has led to shortcuts in required reading interventions, which resulted in failure to meet the program's

stated goals. Braun emphasized the urgency of maintaining strong reading intervention efforts to meet the state's goal of doubling reading proficiency by 2025.

[4:28:57 PM](#)

JAMES PARKIN, representing self, Angoon, Alaska, testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. He stated he is a 30-year Alaska educator and emphasized the importance of involving teachers and workers in program implementation decisions. He raised concerns about adding new programs to teachers' already full workloads without cutting other services and questioned the financial wisdom of developing a new assessment tool when sufficient ones already exist. He also highlighted the lack of instruction on pre-learning and personal awareness skills in the Alaska Reads Act, stressing that without these, the program might frustrate students with deficiencies in these areas.

[4:32:52 PM](#)

CHRIS OPITZ, Senior Director, Assessment and Evaluations, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. He stated he is the Senior Director of Assessment and Evaluation for the Anchorage School District and praised the intent of the law, particularly its focus on identifying and meeting students' needs and effective parent communication. He highlighted the district's challenges, including the costs associated with ensuring the reliability and validity of assessments, and emphasized the necessity of resources for proper training to maintain data literacy among staff. He stated that data is useless without analysis, yet there is no method of electronic calibration. He concluded by underscoring the importance of investing in people, as well-trained staff are crucial for the successful implementation of any educational program.

[4:36:38 PM](#)

NICOLE SOMMERVILLE, Director, Teaching and Learning, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She stated she is the Director of Teaching and Learning for the elementary division within the Anchorage School District and emphasized the district's commitment to the Alaska Reads Act. She highlighted their efforts and investment in high-quality reading materials for K-3, noting they have 100 percent teacher implementation of materials, which is amazing. She noted the challenge of scaling these efforts to accommodate 12,000 K-3 students, including the potential impact of non-progression, and the high costs of providing adequate summer school programs, which exceed

available funding. She expressed appreciation for the support from ARI and DEED and emphasized their ongoing efforts to address these challenges.

[4:39:59 PM](#)

JOSHUA GILL, President, Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals, Bethel, Alaska, testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. He stated he is the principal of Ayaprun Elitnaurvik in Bethel, Alaska, part of the Lower Kuskokwim School District. He praised the Alaska Reads Act for its valuable tools and resources but emphasized the need for cultural sensitivity in the legislation, particularly for indigenous languages. He highlighted the challenges of implementing the Act in diverse linguistic environments and stressed the importance of flexibility in regulations, support for indigenous language programs, and reducing administrative burdens on teachers to allow them to focus on teaching.

[4:43:25 PM](#)

LEE ANN JENKINS, Special Education Interventionist, Petersburg School District, Petersburg, Alaska, testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She testified that the Alaska Reads Act is a well-written bill that ensures the success of every student reading in Alaska. Drawing on her experience with Response to Intervention (RTI) in Tennessee, she emphasized the importance of structural and procedural fidelity in reading programs, highlighting the need for adequate funding and resources, including dedicated reading interventionists. She praised Alaska's educators for their commitment to implementing the bill and urged the committee to provide the necessary funds to support these efforts and ensure all students receive effective reading interventions.

[4:47:19 PM](#)

MARY KRETZSCHMAR, Decoding Dyslexia Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She said she has advocated for those with reading difficulties for over 12 years in Alaska. She thanked Chair Tobin for the committee's work and highlighted the importance of early identification of reading deficiencies, noting that while DIBELS is a respected screening tool, it does not assess all essential components of reading instruction. She emphasized the need for consistent and comprehensive evaluation tools to identify and address reading deficiencies early, suggesting that additional assessments might be necessary to ensure students receive the support they need to become proficient readers.

[4:50:31 PM](#)

NICK HIGSON, Principal, Fawn Mountain Elementary, Ketchikan, Alaska, testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns on testing instruments. He said he supports the Alaska Reads Act but raised concerns about the mClass assessment tool. He pointed out that mClass includes developmentally inappropriate questions for early grades, such as timing kindergarteners and testing first graders on three-syllable words, which exceeds state standards. He emphasized the need for the assessment tools to be tested for validity and reliability, aligning with state standards and developmental appropriateness. He highlighted frustration from parents and teachers and stressed the importance of modifying the mClass tool to better meet students' needs.

[4:54:15 PM](#)

ROZLYN GRADY-WYCHE, President, Alaska Coalition of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) Educators, Anchorage, Alaska, testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. As a parent of three young children, she emphasized the shared responsibility of parents and educators in addressing the challenges of implementing the Alaska Reads Act. She highlighted the critical need for adequate resources, including materials, staff, and funding, to effectively carry out the law's requirements. Citing feedback from a teacher, she pointed out issues with the compatibility of current programs with the needs of students, especially those with IEPs, and stressed the urgency for more support to ensure the success of all students. She concluded with a personal note, underscoring the importance of education for the future.

[4:57:53 PM](#)

BECKY ZAVERL, Principal, Denali Elementary, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She said she is a third-generation Alaskan and fourth-generation teacher. She emphasized the success of her school's Walk to Read program, which was honored with a National Distinguished School award. Using Title I funds to reduce class and group sizes, her school saw significant progress, employing seven additional monitors and running 26 intervention groups for their 300 students. She highlighted the importance of investment in public schools to ensure adequate resources and support for students, arguing that smaller group sizes and dedicated programs like Walk to Read can make a tremendous difference in students' educational outcomes.

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At ease.

[5:01:06 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting.

[5:01:06 PM](#)

HEATHER SNELL, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She said she is a second-grade teacher at Boreal Sun Charter School. She highlighted the benefits and challenges of teaching in a charter school, including smaller class sizes but less funding and limited legislative input. She expressed concerns about being strapped for time due to progress monitoring and planning extra activities, exacerbated by staff shortages. She noted the difficulty her students face with developmentally inappropriate assessments, such as reading two or three-syllable words and comprehension tests with unfamiliar names, which can be discouraging and emotionally challenging for young learners.

[5:05:10 PM](#)

LESA MEATH, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testifies on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She stated that before starting her testimony of the Alaska Reads Act, she would like to dispel the myth of "learning to read and reading to learn," which oversimplifies the reading process that begins at birth.

MS. MEATH stated that as a volunteer, coach, and mentor with family members who are students, she has observed communication challenges affecting the implementation of reading improvement plans. She noted that while there are many resources available online, navigating and selecting the best, most culturally relevant materials require a significant amount of time from teachers. She emphasized the need for professional development that supports language immersion classrooms and small schools, and pointed out that paraeducators, who are crucial to student success, are often excluded from collaborative meetings and data discussions.

[5:08:51 PM](#)

STACY DIOUF, Principal, Gastineau Community School, Juneau, Alaska, testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She stated that the awareness and communication for parents is outstanding, giving them a better understanding of their child's reading level and progress. She praised the premise of the Alaska Reads Act as fantastic but expressed concerns and offered solutions, such as additional assessments to determine a child's reading ability, funding for after-school transportation and

summer school, and extra intervention for students who were in third grade during COVID. She also opined that graduates of the University of Alaska's teaching program are not adequately prepared.

[5:12:02 PM](#)

SUSAN MCCAULEY, Principal, Birchtree Charter School, Palmer, Alaska, testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She stated that Birchtree Charter School started 13 years ago and follows the Waldorf educational approach, which integrates subjects and begins formal instruction in first grade. She noted a lack of alignment between the Alaska Reads Act and the Waldorf approach since reading is not taught in kindergarten. Alaska Reads Act assessment for first grade aligns with traditional first-grade instruction, resulting in the school's first graders scoring below average. The school is working with DEED to establish flexibility in meeting the requirements of the Alaska Reads Act. She questioned whether there should be a revision to the legislation.

[5:15:19 PM](#)

JESSICA VAUDREUIL, representing self, Shishmaref, Alaska, testified on the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She stated that she has taught for twenty years and speaks Korean, and that while she teaches in public school, she also homeschools her children. She shared her frustration that her opinions on the best way to teach children are often met with hostility. Her 15-year-old son, who studies through Raven and IDEA correspondence schools, is in the 99th percentile on the PSAT, and receives an annual allotment to purchase books at his reading level. She highlighted the problem of students being given the same level of books regardless of their abilities, and the expectation for classroom teachers to act as reading specialists and special education teachers. She noted that there is no curriculum for third and fourth graders who cannot read and criticized the Alaska Reads Act for increasing teacher workload without providing real solutions, only bureaucracy. She expressed frustration that children who cannot read are not retained and that allocating one level of curriculum per grade is unacceptable.

[5:19:14 PM](#)

MOLLY HICKOX, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of the Alaska Reads Act with concerns. She stated her support for the intent of the Alaska Reads Act, noting that her school has been addressing its provisions. She highlighted the challenges of resource shortages, explaining that the best

practice of small intervention groups of 5-6 students is unattainable, with current groups being 8-10 students due to insufficient staff, resulting in other teachers having class sizes of 30 students. She emphasized the need for more teachers and paraprofessionals to meet the Act's requirements and noted that a significant part of her role has become shielding teachers from increasing demands, which affects teacher retention. She concluded by stressing the urgent need for more resources.

[5:22:44 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN closed public testimony on the Alaska Reads Act.

[5:23:55 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 5:23 p.m.