

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 25, 2024

3:31 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair  
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair  
Senator Jesse Bjorkman  
Senator Jesse Kiehl

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

SENATE BILL NO. 178  
"An Act relating to school terms."

- HEARD & HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: SB 178  
SHORT TITLE: SCHOOL TERMS  
SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) BJORKMAN

01/16/24	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/12/24
01/16/24	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24	(S)	EDC
03/18/24	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/18/24	(S)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
03/25/24	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

**WITNESS REGISTER**

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

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions and provide an overview of the fiscal note for SB 178.

LON GARRISON, Executive Director

Association of Alaska School Boards  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified with concerns on SB 178.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

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**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 Bjorkman, Stevens, Kiehl, and Chair Tobin.

**SB 178-SCHOOL TERMS**

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CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 178 "An Act relating to school terms."

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SENATOR JESSE BJORKMAN testified as the sponsor of SB 178 and paraphrased the following statement discussing the reasons for changing the start date of schools to September.

[Original punctuation provided.]

**SB 178 School Terms  
Sponsor Statement**

The creation of a school calendar that supports the character and culture of Alaska is essential to building thriving communities surrounding our public schools. A commonsense calendar should allow students and families to take advantage of school terms," would establish the earliest start time for K-12 public schools in Alaska as the first Tuesday in September.

In recent decades, school calendars have shifted earlier into August to maximize the number of instructional days before high stakes testing occurs in April. With more flexibility in testing dates, the time is right to realign school calendars. August is Alaska is a time up abundant economic and outdoor opportunities. Starting K-12 classes in August severely reduces a family's ability to fish, hunt, pick berries, and travel within Alaska. Going back to school in September will allow families to meaningfully engage in subsistence activities and pass

down our cultural heritage of natural harvest to the next generation of Alaskans.

Currently, many students are forced out of summer employment because of August school start dates. High school students are less desirable job candidates when they can only work for part of the season before needing to be replaced. Beginning school in September would allow high school students to remain at their summer jobs during the peak construction and tourism season. States such as Michigan have implemented similar school start date laws based on studies of the economic benefits to their intrastate tourism industry.

September school start dates allow for families go to state and local fairs with 4H projects and Junior Market Livestock animals, travel, hunt, hike, camp, fish and take in the beauty of late August and the first few days of September. Moving the start date to September does not mean that school would have to be in session after Memorial Day. Districts have the flexibility within state law to meet the required amount of student contact time between Labor Day and Memorial Day.

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SENATOR STEVENS asked for clarification on the current rules for school start and end dates. He shared his experience growing up in Oregon, where school never started until after August. He expressed concern about different districts facing varying issues, such as his own district needing to release students early to help with the fishing season in May. He questioned why districts cannot decide their own schedules.

SENATOR BJORKMAN explained that the current system requires at least 180 school days, and historically, Alaska schools started in September. He noted that the shift to an earlier start date was driven by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, which required more instructional time before mandatory testing in April. He emphasized that there is no current rule preventing districts from starting later, but inertia and the preferences of a small group of bureaucrats maintain the earlier calendar. He shared that many Alaskans, especially those who value outdoor activities like hunting and fishing, support a return to a later start date.

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SENATOR STEVENS confirmed that districts could adjust their school calendars if they chose to, with no restrictions in place.

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CHAIR TOBIN mentioned conversations with colleagues in the Anchorage School District who have observed significant learning loss and are exploring ways to address it. She shared that one idea discussed informally is transitioning to a year-round school model, with shorter breaks of six to eight weeks while maintaining a continuous learning schedule. She questioned why the current approach is favored over such a model.

SENATOR BJORKMAN suggested that Anchorage's experience might differ from the rest of Alaska regarding the connection to the land. He acknowledged that while there have been discussions about year-round schooling summer is an economically important time for many educators who take on summer jobs in industries like construction, tourism, and commercial fishing. He noted that if year-round school were implemented, districts would need to significantly increase compensation to retain staff, as many rely on summer employment. He also pointed out that year-round school would limit outdoor activities for both students and families during the summer, fundamentally changing the education system.

CHAIR TOBIN stated that, based on the recent Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISSER) report, there is agreement that teachers across the state are severely underpaid.

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SENATOR KIEHL raised a question about how different regions of the state have varying harvest times. He noted that three of the four districts he represents would have to change their start dates under SB 178, and only one of those districts aligns with a moose hunting season that begins on September 15. He pointed out that in Southeast, the salmon berries are picked by July, with blueberries peaking in August. He asked if a regional or seasonal approach had been considered to allow flexibility for each district's unique harvest schedule.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN stated that a waiver process could be considered, similar to what other states have done, allowing schools to start a week earlier with specific criteria for receiving the waiver. He acknowledged that, while some

harvesting activities in Southeast might be diminished, the tourism industry remains strong in August, providing job and travel opportunities. He expressed openness to a waiver process and noted that certain collective bargaining agreements, like in Dillingham, have even restricted school during the first week of moose season. He added that such flexibility could be available, with the potential for a waiver to adjust the start date by a week.

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SENATOR STEVENS asked how many districts across the state would be affected by the proposed changes to the start date. He mentioned that it would be helpful to have that information, noting that three of the four districts represented by Senator Kiehl would have to change their dates.

SENATOR BJORKMAN said it would affect the start dates of most schools and that he would provide the committee with the exact number.

CHAIR TOBIN stated her belief that a waiver process for school calendars already existed and was used by the Yupiit School District to follow a subsistence calendar.

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DEBORAH RIDDLE, Operations Manager, Division of Innovation and Education Excellence, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, confirmed that a waiver process is already in place. She explained that districts, such as the Lake and Peninsula School District, follow a subsistence calendar. This approach allows for longer school days with an earlier start and end, aligning with regional subsistence activities.

CHAIR TOBIN asked if schools could use the waiver process to start later, or if that option is not permitted under statute.

MS. RIDDLE clarified that there is no set start date in statute. The only requirement is that schools must be in session for 180 days.

CHAIR TOBIN shared that in her home community of Nome, many local businesses offer subsistence leave, allowing employees to take time off specifically for hunting, gathering, or preparing food, separate from personal or sick leave. She questioned why a similar structure couldn't be created within the school calendar, not just for agrarian activities in the fall, but also

for winter subsistence activities like whale hunting, seal hunting, or line crabbing.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN stated that subsistence leave could work for staff and could be negotiated through agreements, but it does not address students' responsibility to be in school and engaged in their lessons. He emphasized the importance of a school start date that accommodates regional and cultural differences, allowing students and families to participate in outdoor activities or seasonal jobs. He argued that setting a start date is essential to breaking the inertia of sticking to traditional schedules and shifting to a calendar that aligns more with Alaska's character and provides both economic and recreational opportunities, such as fishing and hunting.

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MS. RIDDLE stated that the fiscal note from the OMB Component 2796, dated January 15, 2024, from the Department of Education and Early Development, is for \$6,000. This amount would cover the cost of organizing regulations to enforce the statute.

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CHAIR TOBIN found no further questions from committee members and asked that the sectional analysis for SB 178 be reviewed independently.

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CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SB 178.

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LON GARRISON, Executive Director, Association of Alaska School Boards, Juneau, Alaska, testified with concerns on SB 178. He paraphrased his following statement adding that schools in Alaska can request waivers. He also mentioned in closing that the school he attended growing up started before Labor Day causing him to miss many events and activities, but it worked out fine in the end:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Chair Tobin and members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Lon Garrison. I am the Executive Director of the Association of Alaska School Boards, a nonprofit association serving 52 of Alaska's 54 school districts. I am testifying today regarding **SB 178 School Terms**.

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MR. GARRISON continued:

AASB does not have a current resolution recommending when and how long school terms should be. Because of that, I cannot comment in favor or in opposition to the proposed legislation, but I would like to offer some perspective regarding local impacts on school terms.

Presently, the school term is defined in AS 14.03.030 as "A school term begins and ends on the dates fixed by the governing body of a school district. A school term shall include not less than 180 days in session unless, with the approval of the commissioner, ....". This particular language preserves local control for school districts to determine when is best for them to begin classes and instruction. This broad language does not prohibit a district from choosing a start date that may be more appropriate for their district or region.

AASB recognizes that districts and regions may have unique cultural and seasonal opportunities or limitations that might affect a school term. A few districts have adopted terms that permit subsistence calendars that allow students to participate in important community and cultural events. While these still need to be approved by the Commissioner of Education, this flexibility can be critically important to improving student attendance and engagement.

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MR. GARRISON continued:

AASB advocates that the committee consider carefully the broad impacts that including the language (e.g., **A school Term may not begin before the first Tuesday in September**) may have on the variety of school districts across the state. AASB recognizes the intent of the bill is to potentially have a positive effect on both students and local businesses in those areas that are more heavily impacted by a

tourism-based economy. AASB also recognizes this committee's continued advocacy for maintaining local control, and we hope that you will analyze this proposal with that perspective in mind.

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CHAIR TOBIN closed public testimony on SB 178

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SENATOR BJORKMAN emphasized that SB 178 can offer flexibility and a framework to encourage school districts to start later. He expressed concern that starting school on August 15 or 16 contradicts the Alaskan way of life, which values outdoor activities and making the most of the summer light. He stated he is open to suggestions for additional flexibility. He stated his belief that guidance from the state legislature is necessary to help local districts move past the inertia of maintaining calendars that may benefit school bureaucrats but not Alaskan families.

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CHAIR TOBIN held SB 178 in committee.

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SENATOR KIEHL expressed his pleasure in meeting with everyone in the William Beltz Committee Room. He highlighted that the room is named after William E. Beltz, a notable territorial legislator who served in both the House and Senate and became the first president of the State Senate. William E. Beltz was from Unalakleet.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 3:57 p.m.