

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

April 10, 2024

3:32 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

SENATE BILL NO. 178

"An Act relating to school terms."

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 221

"An Act relating to cardiopulmonary resuscitation education in public schools; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; and providing for an effective date."

- MOVED CSSB 221(EDC) OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL NO. 158

"An Act relating to funding for school construction and major maintenance; relating to school bond debt reimbursement; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 143

"An Act relating to public school students who are deaf or hard of hearing."

- 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)
03/25/24 (S) Heard & Held
03/25/24 (S) MINUTE(EDC)
04/10/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 221

SHORT TITLE: CPR CURRICULUM

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) GRAY-JACKSON

02/08/24 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/08/24 (S) EDC, FIN
03/13/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/13/24 (S) Heard & Held
03/13/24 (S) MINUTE(EDC)
04/10/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 158

SHORT TITLE: SCHOOL GRANTS AND BOND DEBT REIMBURSEMENT

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) MYERS

01/16/24 (S) PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/24
01/16/24 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24 (S) EDC, FIN
02/28/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/28/24 (S) -- MEETING CANCELED --
03/13/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/13/24 (S) Heard & Held
03/13/24 (S) MINUTE(EDC)
04/10/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 143

SHORT TITLE: EDUCATION FOR DEAF & HEARING IMPAIRED

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) GRAY-JACKSON

05/05/23 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
05/05/23 (S) EDC, FIN
04/10/24 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

MICHAEL MASON, Staff
Senator Löki Tobin
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided the summary of changes for SB 178, version A to S.

MICHAEL MASON, Staff
Senator Löki Tobin
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided the summary of changes for SB 221, version A to B.

MICHAEL MASON, Staff
Senator Löki Tobin
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided the summary of changes for SB 158, version B to S.

LORI WEED, School Finance Manager
School Finance and Facilities
Department of Education
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on SB 158.

DAWSON MANN, Staff
Senator Robert Myers
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided clarification on changes to the sectional analysis for SB 158.

LUMA DIAZ, Staff
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided the sectional analysis for SB 143.

COURTNEY WESTMAN, Chair
Deaf Education Board
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony for SB 143.

CLARA BALDWIN, Director
Alaska School for the Deaf
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation for SB 143.

AMY BOBICH, Teacher
Alaska School for the Deaf
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation for SB 143.

JAMIE KOKOSZKA, Program Coordinator
Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education
Department of Health
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony for SB 143.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided a brief overview of the fiscal note for SB 143.

MICHAEL MERRIT, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 143.

SETH NIELSEN, representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 143.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:32:33 PM](#)

CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:32 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Gray-Jackson, Kiehl, Stevens, Bjorkman, and Chair Tobin.

SB 178-SCHOOL TERMS

[3:34:34 PM](#)

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

CHAIR TOBIN said the committee would hear a committee substitute for SB 178.

[3:35:00 PM](#)

MICHAEL MASON, Staff, Senator Löki Tobin, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided the summary of changes for SB 178, work order 33-LS1077\A:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**SB 178 School Terms
Explanation of Changes Ver. A to Ver. S**

Section 1 - Adds language granting the Commissioner of the Department of Education authority to allow districts to start up to a week before the first Tuesday in September and clarifies that the start date does not apply to districts with alternative schedules approved under AS 14.03.030(c).

[3:35:45 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited a motion.

[3:35:46 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to adopt the committee substitute (CS) for SB 178, work order 33-LS1077\S, as the working document.

[3:35:57 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and CSSB 178 was adopted as the working document.

[3:36:10 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN held SB 178 in committee.

SB 221-CPR CURRICULUM

[3:36:14 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 221 "An Act relating to cardiopulmonary resuscitation education in public schools; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; and providing for an effective date."

CHAIR TOBIN stated that based on committee feedback Senator Gray-Jackson created a committee substitute for SB 221.

[3:36:46 PM](#)

MICHAEL MASON, Staff, Senator Löki Tobin, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided the summary of changes for SB 221, version A to B:

[Original punctuation provided.]

SENATE BILL 221
CPR CURRICULUM

EXPLANATION OF CHANGES
(VERSION A TO CS for SB 221)

"An Act relating to cardiopulmonary resuscitation education in public schools; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; and providing for an effective date."

This version intends to reduce the fiscal note by changing the language in the bill to require the school district to adopt an existing program instead of requiring DEED to develop a new curriculum. It adds language to specify that the CPR program must be taught to students between the grades 9 and 12, to give the school districts a longer time frame to offer the training. It also changes the requirement for the instructor that would present the program, to hold a CPR Certificate rather than a CPR Instructor Certificate.

Section 1: No changes made to this section.

Section 2: Deletes lines 2-11 and adds new language, see note above.

[3:37:54 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited a motion.

[3:37:55 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to adopt the committee substitute (CS) for SB 221, work order 33-LS1135\B, as the working document.

[3:38:05 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and CSSB 221 was adopted as the working document.

CHAIR TOBIN asked if there was objection for purposes of discussion on SB 221.

[3:38:19 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and solicited the will of the committee.

[3:38:27 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to report CSSB 221, work order 33-LS1135\B, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[3:38:40 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and CSSB 221(EDC) was reported from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

SB 158-SCHOOL GRANTS AND BOND DEBT REIMBURSEMENT

[3:39:00 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 158 "An Act relating to funding for school construction and major maintenance; relating to school bond debt reimbursement; and providing for an effective date."

CHAIR TOBIN stated that Senator Myers sponsor of SB 158 worked with the Department of Education and her office to create a committee substitute.

[3:39:30 PM](#)

MICHAEL MASON, Staff, Senator Löki Tobin, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided the summary of changes for SB 158, version S:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**SB 158 - School Grants and Bond Debt Reimbursement
Summary of Changes: Version B to Version S**

Section 1 - AS 14.11.014(d)

This section is amended with clarifying language explicitly stating that the two projects from the major maintenance list will be the top two projects that the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) ranks on the list for each district, and not just two projects that are ranked. Clarifying language is also added to indicate that

districts may apply for reimbursement for one project on DEED's school construction list and the top two projects on DEED's major maintenance list for each district.

New language is also added which would expand the list of funded eligible projects further down the list if a project in the top 20 is funded by a grant. As an example, if four projects in the top 20 projects on the list are funded by grants then projects 1-24 on the list excluding the grant funded projects would be eligible.

Section 3 - AS 14.11.100(h)

This section corrects errors in AS 14.11.100(h), which limited certain types of construction. This subsection should have been amended in conjunction with adding prior reimbursement program approvals in subsection (a). This change was made at the recommendation of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development.

Section 4 - AS 14.11.100(i)

This section is added to make conforming changes in alignment with section three recognizing the additional sections included in AS 14.11.100(h).

Section 5 - AS 14.11.100(s)

This section is amended to add clarifying language that the DEED commissioner may not approve an application for bond debt reimbursement made by a municipality for more than one school construction project listed on the department's ranking of school construction project priorities under the department review of grant applications, and for more than two major maintenance projects listed on the department's ranking of major maintenance project priorities under the department review of grant applications; except that the commissioner may approve an application for bond debt reimbursement made by a municipality for all the major maintenance projects of the municipality that are ranked within the top 20 projects on the department's list of major maintenance project priorities excluding projects funded by grants.

Section 6 - AS 14.11.102(c)

This section is amended to add clarifying language that the DEED commissioner may not allocate funds to a municipality for a school bond debt reimbursement project made by a municipality for more than one school construction project listed on the department's ranking of school construction project priorities under the department review of grant applications, and for more than two major maintenance projects listed on the department's ranking of major maintenance project priorities under the department review of grant applications; except that the commissioner may approve an application for bond debt reimbursement made by a municipality for all the major maintenance projects of the municipality that are ranked within the top 20 projects on the department's list of major maintenance project priorities excluding projects funded by grants.

Section 7 - AS 14.11.100(a)(19)

This section repeals 14.11.100(a)(19) which outlines a classification of projects that would no longer be available for reimbursement should this bill pass. This change was made at the recommendation of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development.

Bill sections eight to ten have been reordered and renumbered accordingly.

[3:44:08 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for clarification on the text of SB 158, version S. He specifically wanted to know whether "except projects that are funded by grants or by a grant" includes state general fund grants for major maintenance projects in Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAA's).

[3:44:40 PM](#)

MR. MASON responded that he did not believe state general fund grants were included, however the sponsor of SB 158 could respond if he is incorrect.

[3:45:09 PM](#)

SENATOR MYERS deferred the question.

[3:45:20 PM](#)

At ease

[3:45:39 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting.

[3:45:52 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked if the language "exclusive of projects funded by grants" includes the general fund spending on major maintenance projects in Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAA's).

[3:46:14 PM](#)

LORI WEED, School Finance Manager, School Finance and Facilities, Department of Education, Juneau, Alaska, replied yes, that grants would include general funds allocated to the major maintenance grants list, inclusive of general funds or REAA funds allocated for that purpose.

SENATOR KIEHL thanked those involved in making this change, stating that it creates a structure incentivizing progress down the major maintenance list for school projects. He opined that it maintains the fiscal restraint intended by the bill sponsor, avoiding an "open checkbook" situation for taxpayers. He expressed appreciation for the balance achieved, considering it an improvement.

[3:47:17 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON stated she wanted to make a comment. Representing Anchorage, she felt it was important to contact the Anchorage School District to ensure there were no issues with the SB 158. For the record, she noted that she reached out to Jim Anderson, Chief Operating Officer of the Anchorage School District, and connected him with Senator Meyer, with whom he had an extensive conversation regarding SB 158.

[3:47:58 PM](#)

SENATOR MYERS confirmed that he had spoken with Mr. Anderson and addressed the concern that the SB 158 was aimed at addressing a Fairbanks-specific issue. He stated that once he clarified that the purpose of SB 158 was to place the school debt program on a more sustainable footing, Mr. Anderson understood and withdrew many of his initial concerns.

[3:48:47 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited a motion.

[3:48:48 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to adopt the committee substitute (CS) for SB 158, work order 33-LS0897\S, as the working document.

[3:48:59 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no further objection and CSSB 158 was adopted as the working document.

[3:49:15 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked Mr. Mann to add clarity to some of the changes to SB 158

[3:49:26 PM](#)

DAWSON MANN, Staff, Senator Robert Myers, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided clarification on changes made to SB 158, Sections 1, 5, and 6. He explained that the changes in SB 158, version S, were intended as clarifications to align it more closely with its original purpose. Discussions with the department revealed some oversights in the initial language, such as referencing "two projects" instead of specifying "the top two projects," which was the original intent. Additionally, the word "or" was changed to "and" to ensure that either one project from the construction list or the top two could be selected. Previously, the use of "or" would have been limiting which was not the original intent of the legislation.

[3:50:20 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN held SB 158 in committee.

SB 143-EDUCATION FOR DEAF & HEARING IMPAIRED

[3:50:41 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 143 "An Act relating to public school students who are deaf or hard of hearing."

[3:50:48 PM](#)

At ease

[3:53:12 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and continued her introduction of SB 143.

[3:53:54 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON, speaking as sponsor of SB 143 provided the following statement:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Sponsor Statement

Senate Bill 143

Education for Deaf & Hearing Impaired

Senate Bill 143 is a deaf and hard of hearing children's bill of rights that establishes consistency in the information provided to parents by the school district, allows parents to choose the best method of communication for their child and requires the school district to provide services using the parent's chosen method of communication.

Deaf children are born with the same ability to acquire language as others. They have the right and capacity to be educated, graduate from high school, obtain further education, and pursue a career. They have the right to have their ability to communicate and acquire language to be treated as a priority.

Lack of access in the classroom leads to students missing essential information in lectures and classroom discussions and can lead to low academic achievement and lower language acquisition. Children who are deaf or hard of hearing have the right to accommodations and access to academic instruction, school services, and extracurricular activities in their primary language. Access in their primary language gives them the opportunity to benefit from all services and programs at their school and to fully access education and society.

Given the unique nature of rural Alaska, some children who are deaf or hard of hearing may require residential services as part of their educational program. SB 143 declares all deaf children have the right to an individualized education program and that their parents will be able to choose the method of communication that will be the most appropriate for their child.

Senate Bill 143 establishes that children who are deaf or hard of hearing have the right to an individualized education program that identifies their primary

language, considers their prognosis for hearing loss, provides instruction in their primary language, provides assistive devices, and services, and provides appropriate and timely assessments in their primary language.

Seventeen states have passed a Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children's Bill of Rights.

[3:56:30 PM](#)

LUMA DIAZ, Staff, Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided the sectional analysis for SB 143:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Sectional Analysis for SB 143

Education for Deaf & Hearing Impaired

Section 1: Amends AS 14.30.272 by adding new subsections:

1. School district must provide parent with comprehensive information regarding,
 - a. Hearing technology.
 - b. Different methods of communication.
 - c. Services and programs designed to help children who are deaf and hard of hearing.
 - d. Information on support and advocacy services offered by public and private agencies.
2. Parent chooses the method of communication that will be the most appropriate for their child.
3. Services are delivered to children through professionals with training, experience, and a background in the chosen method of communication.
 - d. A school district must inform parents of school districts' duties and the parents rights under section c.
 - e. In this section,
 1. Definition of "bilingual approach".
 2. Definition of "cued speech".

3. Definition of "deaf".
4. Definition of "hard of hearing".
5. Definition of "Listening and spoken language".
6. Definition of "total communication".

Section 2: Amends AS 14.30.276 by adding a new subsection that requires the department to establish and operate a centralized program for students whose primary language is American Sign Language, provide residential services as part of the program, establishes that a school district may operate the program under specific requirements, and provide funding for the students who attend the program operated by a school districted under this subsection to that school district.

[3:58:38 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL requested clarification, noting that deaf and hard-of-hearing students have rights under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). He asked for an overview of which provisions in SB 143 align with federal law and which offer additional protections or exceed federal requirements.

[3:59:13 PM](#)

MS. DIAZ said she did not know but would research the answer. She elaborated on SB 143, noting that while school districts currently offer services for deaf students, they vary by location. The state's administrative code addresses education for the deaf, but it is not in statute, and SB 143 seeks to formalize these provisions in state law. She provided a breakdown of Alaska's 140 deaf and hard-of-hearing children by region: 79 in Anchorage, 3 in Annette Island, 12 in Fairbanks, 3 in Galena, 3 in Juneau, 9 in Kenai Peninsula, 5 in Kodiak Island, 14 in Mat-Su, and 9 in Northwest Arctic.

[3:59:58 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked whether the Alaska School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, located in Anchorage, is operated by the Anchorage School District under an agreement with the state or if it is a service the district provides independently with its own funding.

[4:00:18 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON replied she would get back to the committee with an answer.

[4:00:31 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced invited testimony for SB 143.

[4:01:49 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN introduced Ms. Westman.

[4:01:58 PM](#)

COURTNEY WESTMAN, Chair, Deaf Education Board, Anchorage, Alaska, said that for 12 years she has served as chair of the Deaf Education Board. She said she would help introduce SB 143, the Children's Bill of Rights, which advocates for deaf and hard-of-hearing children to receive equal access to all educational options, regardless of where a student lives in Alaska. She shared her personal experience growing up in various places in Alaska as a product of the state's deaf and hard-of-hearing school system. As an elementary school student in Anchorage, she struggled to get an education due to language deprivation, an issue many deaf or hard-of-hearing students face. A student may be 10 years old but have the language level of a 4-year-old. She noted that, in her work within the school system, she has also observed language deprivation. She emphasized that, forty years later, students are still facing the same struggles she did and that it is time to pass SB 143 and implement it so that the state truly educates and advocates for its deaf and hard-of-hearing children, ensuring they have a bright future.

[4:04:40 PM](#)

CLARA BALDWIN, Director, Alaska School for the Deaf, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, stated that she is deaf and uses American Sign Language as her first language. She introduced herself as the Assistant Director of Special Education for the Anchorage School District, where she oversees the Alaska State School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (AKSD). She clarified a question from earlier, explaining that AKSD operates through an agreement with the Anchorage School District (ASD) and is primarily funded by the state of Alaska, with a very small portion of funding coming from ASD. Although housed within ASD programs, AKSD reports directly to Don Enoch, [Special Education Administrator for the State of Alaska]. She noted that AKSD is a large program and offered to provide more details later.

[4:06:04 PM](#)

MS. BALDWIN thanked the committee for its work over the year to advance SB 143. She recognized the compromise and effort

required in bringing SB 143 forward and emphasized its importance. She stressed that "all means all" when it comes to addressing hearing loss, aiming to include everyone regardless of how they identify as deaf or hard of hearing. Baldwin highlighted that hearing loss exists on a spectrum, varying among individuals and evolving as children become adults, underscoring the need to ensure access for all children and address these issues collectively.

[4:07:17 PM](#)

MS. BALDWIN explained that when a child is born with hearing loss, parents typically encounter various professionals. Their child is often the first deaf person parents have met and they are often unsure about the best course of action due to the many options and resources available, especially with medical professionals on the front line. She emphasized the need to support both medical professionals and parents by establishing a foundational language from birth, which she said leads to better outcomes in adulthood. She said AKSD believes it should be a language first model of education because without access to language, curriculum cannot be taught.

[4:08:25 PM](#)

MS. BALDWIN explained that children with hearing loss often lack access to a language they fully understand, missing incidental exposure to their surroundings without anyone to explain events around them. She illustrated this by saying that, unlike her with an interpreter, a child without access to sign language or assisted listening would miss out on such information. She emphasized the importance of ensuring children have access to incidental language and information, whether educational or otherwise, so they can engage with the world around them. She noted that the AKSD supports a child-led approach, following the child's needs—whether spoken language, American Sign Language (ASL), or both—making SB 143 an essential step forward. She noted that although Alaska is geographically large, AKSD wants to capitalize on the state's small population through collaboration and maximizing resources such as special education services (SESA), Deaf Navigator, and Rural Support Deaf Services. She underscored that the goal is to ensure all children with hearing loss can thrive by having access to meaningful language learning that makes sense to them.

[4:10:45 PM](#)

AMY BOBICH, Teacher, Alaska School for the Deaf, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, said that she grew up in a hearing world with a hearing family who, like many families of

deaf children, had never met a deaf person before she was born. Her family went through various experiences as they learned how to support her. She said as a teacher, she observes many parents navigating similar experiences with their own deaf children.

MS. BOBICH stated that she has 12 years of experience as an educator, beginning in Alaska and continuing in California and Colorado, where she gained diverse insights. She noted that many hard-of-hearing students across states are typically behind grade level, leading her to focus on language development and skills. In Colorado and California, she observed the impact of early resource access, with families receiving comprehensive information from birth to make informed decisions for their children. She expressed strong support for SB 143 as a step toward ensuring Alaskan families have access to all necessary information and resources without needing to leave the state.

[4:12:29 PM](#)

MS. BOBICH emphasized the importance of giving children the best possible start to ensure they thrive and stay on grade level academically. As a preschool teacher, she noted that typically, three-year-old hearing children enter her classroom with three full years of language acquisition, often speaking in full sentences. In contrast, deaf or hard-of-hearing students often arrive able to sign or say only one word due to limited language access. She stressed the need for accessible language development before preschool, allowing families to choose the communication method that works best for them. She advocated for aligning Alaska's resources with those of other states to provide comprehensive information and support.

[4:13:34 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked why the responsibility for providing information is placed on the school district under in SB 143. She questioned whether it would be more effective to assign this role to medical providers or early childhood care facilities, which see children earlier and could offer preventive support sooner, ensuring parents receive timely information.

[4:14:06 PM](#)

MS. BOBICH replied that school districts typically begin providing services at age three when children have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). While a Birth to Three program exists, it's essential to offer comprehensive options, as some school districts lack deaf mentors or qualified American Sign Language (ASL) teachers. Access to ASL services by qualified individuals is uneven, though ASL is often a crucial

first step in early language development. She noted that, while some students enter her classroom ready to learn with accessible language skills, others arrive without age-appropriate language, making it challenging to catch them up. She emphasized the need for school districts to ensure they offer complete services and qualified ASL instruction, if that is what parents prefer.

[4:15:49 PM](#)

MS. WESTMAN said, having grown up in Alaska, she has met many deaf individuals from rural villages where professionals are often unaware of available resources for deaf children due to limited communication. She emphasized the importance of ensuring that students receive proper accommodations, as children who don't learn language until they are older fall significantly behind in education and face challenges in employment due to academic gaps. She highlighted the unique difficulties in rural villages, where resources may be nonexistent, underscoring the need for SB 143 to ensure that deaf and hard-of-hearing children, especially in rural Alaska, don't face these struggles. She credited her own success to her involved family and noted that not all families have the same early access to resources, which is why Alaska State School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing is advocating for SB 143—to raise awareness and support all districts and providers in sharing resources with children.

[4:17:37 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted that American Sign Language (ASL) has been mentioned several times as a preferred language or helpful tool, but pointed out that the current legislation does not emphasize ASL specifically. She referenced SB 143 Section 1(c)(1)(B), on page one, line 10, that outlines various communication methods for deaf or hard-of-hearing children. She asked if there should be a priority on providing opportunities to learn ASL, including access to technological supports or other resources, particularly for students in rural Alaska.

[4:18:39 PM](#)

MS. BOBICH clarified that ASL is not suited for everyone and should not be elevated above other language options. She emphasized the goal of offering a full range of choices to parents, whether that includes listening and spoken language, cochlear implants, hearing aids, ASL, or a combination. She noted that, although there can be contentious discussions within deaf education about the "best" method, the key message is that there is no single best way. She advocated for providing accessible language and neutral information to parents so they

can choose what is best for their child and family. While ASL is the language she and other testifiers personally use, she reiterated that SB 143 should clearly support providing resources and information in an unbiased manner.

[4:19:50 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated that SB 143 lacks an entity designated to determine neutral or unbiased language. She asked if there is an organization that could assist in developing neutral or unbiased regulations.

[4:20:12 PM](#)

MS. BALDWIN said she would like to add that parents can choose all the options and use multiple resources at the same time. For instance, a person can use hearing aids and sign.

[4:20:44 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked if there is a third party that could help the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) create unbiased resources for school districts.

[4:21:08 PM](#)

MS. BALDWIN replied she would do research and get back to the committee.

[4:21:15 PM](#)

MS. DIAZ mentioned that a committee substitute will have language changes including the use of a professional who will talk with the school district about methods of communication.

[4:22:02 PM](#)

JAMIE KOKOSZKA, Program Coordinator II, Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education, Department of Health, Anchorage, Alaska, stated that the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community approached the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education in support of SB 143, and as council staff, she testified on its behalf. She shared her personal experience, explaining that she has congenital hearing loss in both ears and wears hearing aids, noting that SB 143 would have been tremendously helpful to her as a child. She confirmed that the testimony given today reflects her own experience and is still relevant for children in Alaska.

[4:22:51 PM](#)

MS. KOKOSZKA stated that growing up in Alaska over the last 47 years, resources and information about American Sign Language (ASL) were never presented to her or her family, leaving her

without access to ASL, which she finds challenging to learn at her current age. She described her childhood in a general education classroom where spoken English was the only communication mode. Her hearing aids fit poorly, had poor sound quality, and were painful. She recalled negative treatment from teachers and students due to her struggles with hearing and fitting in. Teachers often turned away while speaking, which hindered her ability to lip-read.

MS. KOKOSZKA said that despite the school's awareness of her difficulties, she did not receive an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and faced undiagnosed ADHD and cataracts. Her delayed language development severely impacted her communication skills. She recalled asking her mother why she was not in speech therapy, as she only learned enunciation through theater class. Falling behind academically due to misunderstandings in class, she often faced disciplinary issues. She emphasized that children in Alaska continue to experience these challenges. The Governor's Council urges support for SB 143 to ensure deaf and hard-of-hearing children and families receive necessary support and feel valued as community members.

[4:25:28 PM](#)

DEBORAH RIDDLE, Division Operations Manager, Innovation and Excellence in Education, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, said the fiscal note is a one-time cost of \$6,000 for the creation regulations necessary to enact SB 143.

SENATOR KIEHL asked how the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) currently covers housing for non-Anchorage-based students attending the AKSD and inquired if SB 143 would change this arrangement.

[4:26:16 PM](#)

MS. RIDDLE explained that the Anchorage School District (ASD) currently receives funds to cover housing for non-Anchorage-based students, and DEED collaborates with ASD to ensure these students have accommodations.

[4:26:36 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated his understanding that DEED's formula funds include additional funding for specific needs. He asked if a portion of this funding covers residential services and requested a breakdown.

MS. RIDDLE replied she would provide the committee with the information.

[4:27:20 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted from the fiscal note analysis that the bill focuses on creating procedural safeguards and clarified that no additional funds will be allocated to school districts for gathering and disseminating information or providing supportive services to parents. She pointed out that this responsibility will fall on the school districts.

MS. RIDDLE replied that the responsibility would fall to the school districts, but DEED's special education team would collaborate with special education directors in schools to assist in disseminating the information.

[4:27:58 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN sought confirmation of her understanding that the department would not develop a statewide curriculum and provide it to all school districts. Instead, each individual school district would create and distribute that information within their own community.

MS. RIDDLE replied yes, but there are supports that the special education team can provide to help districts.

[4:28:28 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SB 143.

[4:29:08 PM](#)

MICHAEL MERRIT, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 143. He said he works for the Deaf Navigator Program through Hope Community Resources. He shared his educational background, having attended schools in Canada, Minnesota, and Colorado. He explained that he began learning sign language and wearing hearing aids at age three. Although he can speak, he identifies as deaf and navigates both the hearing and deaf worlds. He questioned whether he would have completed high school, attended college in New York City, or graduated from the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) with a degree in social work and criminal justice if his parents had not ensured he had access to language. He emphasized the critical importance of accessible language—whether visual, auditory, or written—for children's development. He expressed hope that Alaska will join other states in enacting a Deaf Children's Bill of Rights.

[4:31:30 PM](#)

SETH NIELSEN, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in support of SB 143. He stated that vocational rehabilitation services support individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing. As a vocational rehabilitation counselor, he helps clients connect with employment, and any assistance from the school system in bridging the transition from school to work is highly valuable. He expressed that SB 143 is a positive step in supporting this transition.

[4:32:27 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN closed public testimony on SB 143.

[4:32:49 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON thanked the committee for hearing SB 143.

[4:33:01 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN held SB 143 in committee.

[4:34:13 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:34 p.m.