

SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE  
January 30, 2024  
1:37 p.m.

1:37:05 PM

CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Olson called the Senate Finance Committee meeting to order at 1:37 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Lyman Hoffman, Co-Chair  
Senator Donny Olson, Co-Chair  
Senator Bert Stedman, Co-Chair  
Senator Jesse Kiehl  
Senator Kelly Merrick  
Senator David Wilson

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Click Bishop

ALSO PRESENT

Senator Cathy Giessel; Senator Forrest Dunbar, Sponsor; Representative Justin Ruffridge; James Holzenberg, Staff to Senator Forrest Dunbar; Sana Efird, Executive Director, Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education; Kerry Thomas, Director of Program Operations, Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education; Representative Andi Story, Sponsor; Miranda Kaagwéil Worl, Staff for Representative Andi Story; Xunei Lance Twitchell, Chair, Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council; Representative Maxine Dibert.

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Dr. Paul Layer, Vice President of Academics, Students, and Research, University of Alaska, Fairbanks; Dr. Walkie Charles, Member, Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council and Director, Alaska Native Language Center; Bernadette Yaayuk Alvanna-Stimpfle, Vice Chair, Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council; Princess Daazhrai Johnson, Self, Fairbanks.

SUMMARY

HB 26 OFFICIAL LANG; COUNCIL FOR AK NATIVE LANG

HB 26 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

SB 56 AK PERFORMANCE SCHOLARSHIP; ELIGIBILITY

SB 56 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

#sb56

SENATE BILL NO. 56

"An Act relating to the Alaska performance scholarship program."

[1:37:42 PM](#)

Co-Chair Olson relayed that it was the first hearing for SB 56.

[1:38:04 PM](#)

SENATOR FORREST DUNBAR, SPONSOR, explained that SB 56 would make improvements to the Alaska Performance Scholarship (APS). He mentioned the difficulty of recruiting young people to the state, and he believed the program was a tool that could be used to keep young people in the state. He explained that the APS was a merit-based scholarship for high-performing Alaskan students to use at post-secondary Alaskan institutions. Currently to qualify for the APS, students must graduate from an Alaskan high school with a minimum 2.5 grade point average (GPA), receive a minimum qualifying score on an approved college/career entrance exam, and take specific courses. Award amounts vary based on GPA and college/career entrance exam score.

Senator Dunbar cited that APS had shown a sharp decline in usage in recent years. He cited the APS Outcomes Report (copy on file) that indicated greater awareness of placement exams, inclination towards better grades, and increased graduate school attendance. He continued that participants consistently demonstrated increased rates of Alaska residency and involvement in Alaska's workforce. He cited that 73 percent of students surveyed in 2023

indicated that APS played a role in attending an in-state school.

Senator Dunbar relayed that his staff would address a Sectional Analysis and specified that there were three primary categories of challenges that the bill sought to address. He highlighted a notification issue and contended that students were notified of the award too late in the [college] decision-making process. He cited that the APS had not kept up with inflation and had become a less powerful tool as the years had progressed. He mentioned a variety of barriers to eligibility. He referenced a number of changes made in the House Education Committee.

[1:41:33 PM](#)

JAMES HOLZENBERG, STAFF TO SENATOR FORREST DUNBAR, read from a Sectional Analysis (copy on file):

Section 2: Adds language to AS 14.43.820(g) defining "career cluster" as a group of jobs and industries that are related by skills or products and renumbering the subsection accordingly.

Section 3: Adds the following new subsections to AS 14.43.820:

- AS 14.43.820 (h) requiring districts to inform students in 9th or 10th grade about the Alaska Performance Scholarship.
- AS 14.43.820 (i)(j)(k) requiring students be notified of their APS eligibility progress by December 31st of their junior year. Award recipients must be notified of their award and level by August 15th of each year. Any communications with students regarding the APS must include information about the ability to increase the scholarship amount outlined in AS 14.43.825(g)-(i).
- AS 14.43.820 (l)(m) establishing that an applicant must be enrolled in any remaining course requirements, must have a qualifying GPA, and once graduating from high school, be enrolled in a qualifying postsecondary institution to receive the award. The applicant's GPA upon graduation will be used to conclude the final award amount. The award would be revoked if requirements were ultimately not met.

Section 4: Amends AS 14.43.25(a) by increasing all award levels and allowing for a GPA or an equivalent rating established by the Department of Education and Early Development or minimum score on a college entrance examination to qualify. The qualifying GPA or minimum score and new award level are as follows:

- Level 1: 3.5 GPA/equivalent rating or above or a very high minimum score, \$7,000 (increased from \$4,755)
- Level 2: 3.0 GPA/equivalent rating or above or a high minimum score, \$5,250 (increased from \$3,566)
- Level 3: 2.5 GPA/equivalent rating or above or a moderately high score, \$3,500 (increased from \$2,378)

Section 5: Amends AS 14.43.25(b) by increasing the number of years a student can use the scholarship after graduating high school from six to eight years.

Section 6: Adds language to AS 14.43.25(c) extending an award recipient's eligibility to use the scholarship by one semester for each semester they are enrolled in part-time status. They are still required to remain in good standing. Currently, a part-time student will only receive half of the award for that semester and forego the remaining funds. This language ensures recipients receive their full award regardless of full or part-time enrollment.

Section 7: Adds two new subsections (g) and (h) to AS 14.43.825.

Subsection (g) directs the Department of Education and Early Development to establish regulations creating a GPA equivalent rating for schools that do not award grades on the traditional 4.0/5.0 grading scale.

Subsection (h) requires postsecondary institutions to review award recipients' grade point averages each time they complete two semesters. If a recipient's postsecondary institution grade point average qualifies for a higher-level award as outlined in AS 14.43.25(a), their award amount will be adjusted accordingly.

Section 8: Adds a conforming change to the definition of "grade-point average" in AS 14.43.849(2) to include the equivalent rating established by Department regulations for schools that do not use the traditional 4.0 or 5.0 grading scale.

1:45:15 PM

Senator Wilson wondered how the ninth and tenth graders were notified of the scholarship.

Senator Dunbar deferred to the invited testifiers.

Senator Dunbar stressed that the award amount had not changed since 2011, even though there had been significant inflation since then.

Co-Chair Olson asked if the APS was available for graduate students.

Mr. Holzenberg answered affirmatively.

Co-Chair Olson asked if the APS was only for Alaska schools.

Senator Dunbar replied that the scholarship was intended for instate schools.

1:47:55 PM

SANA EFIRD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA COMMISSION ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION, cited a survey of the program and anecdotal information that provided a number of reasons for why Alaskans were not using the scholarship. She referenced barriers that were address in the bill, including the standardized test requirement, late award notification, program awareness, and the eroding value of the reward. She elaborated on the barriers to APS use. She explained that from 2018 on, there had been some instability in funding of APS.

1:54:04 PM

Senator Wilson asked how ACPE planned to notify the ninth and tenth graders.

Ms. Efird relayed that the bill outlined that the school district would be responsible for notifying students.

Senator Wilson wondered if the information was in a newsletter. He was concerned about consistency in how students would be notified of the APS opportunity.

Ms. Efird agreed with Senator Wilson.

Senator Merrick cited the barrier of lack of accessibility to testing in rural Alaska. She asked whether testing was available online.

Ms. Efird answered that the tests were not available online.

Senator Wilson asked if there was a cap to how many students were awarded the APS. He asked about competition.

Ms. Efird relayed that there was not currently a cap on the number of students that could receive the award.

Ms. Efird felt that the step-up bill provision would address equity.

[2:01:36 PM](#)

Co-Chair Olson asked about potential penalties if a student was in scholastic trouble.

Ms. Efird stressed that the APS was an academic scholarship.

[2:02:20 PM](#)

Co-Chair Olson asked if students from private schools were eligible for the APS.

Ms. Efird answered "yes," and thought her staff could address the question relating to private schools.

[2:03:53 PM](#)

KERRY THOMAS, DIRECTOR OF PROGRAM OPERATIONS, ALASKA COMMISSION ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION, replied that private school students were eligible for the scholarship, but had a separate process.

[2:05:50 PM](#)

Senator Kiehl asked about the average APS award.

Ms. Efird deferred to Ms. Thomas.

Ms. Thomas asked for time to provide that answer.

Senator Kiehl recalled that in 2012 when the bill passed, there had been guesswork about determining that more than half of Alaskan students would be eligible.

Ms. Thomas noted that the average award amount was \$3,005.

[2:11:12 PM](#)

DR. PAUL LAYER, VICE PRESIDENT OF ACADEMICS, STUDENTS, AND RESEARCH, UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA, FAIRBANKS (via teleconference asserted that the APS worked for students. He discussed eligibility of students and mentioned, and discussed the testing requirement. He noted that all three of the University of Alaska schools had dropped the standardized test for admissions, as had many other schools in the United States.

[2:17:11 PM](#)

Co-Chair Olson OPENED public testimony.

Co-Chair Olson CLOSED public testimony.

#hb26

CS FOR HOUSE BILL NO. 26 (TRB)

"An Act relating to the official languages of the State of Alaska; renaming the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council as the Council for Alaska Native Languages; and relating to the Council for Alaska Native Languages."

[2:17:56 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ANDI STORY, SPONSOR, discussed the bill. Since the bill was heard in Senate State Affairs the previous year, the council had updated its recommendations in a report.

[2:22:31 PM](#)

MIRANDA KAAGWÉIL WORL, STAFF FOR REPRESENTATIVE ANDI STORY, addressed a Sectional Analysis (copy on file):

Section 1: Amends AS 44.12.310(a) to add Cup'ig and Wetał (Ts'etsa'ut) as official languages of Alaska, and divide Tanana into the Benhti Kokhwt'ana Kenaga' (Lower Tanana) and Sahcheeg xut'een xneege' (Middle Tanana) languages.

Section 2: Amends AS 44.33.520(a) to simplify the name of the Council from "Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council" to "Council for Alaska Native Languages."

Section 3: Amends AS 44.33.520(c) by changing voting members from "five" to "seven."

Section 4: Provides the Governor appoint the additional two voting members, under Sec. 3, as soon as practicable after the effective date.

[2:23:48 PM](#)

XUNEI LANCE TWITCHELL, CHAIR, ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGE PRESERVATION AND ADVISORY COUNCIL, emphasized that Alaska Native languages were currently not a priority of the state. He encouraged the governor to look to the Interior of Alaska and people working in the Dine' language field. He addressed the provision that proposed a name change to the council.

[2:29:52 PM](#)

Co-Chair Olson wondered how the funding would work when other funding was needed for other funding.

Mr. Twitchell suggested looking at what could happen with state advocacy. He pondered how to get the governor's office and legislature, and emphasized building a stronger partnership. He pondered the percentage of the budget that was going to the council and considered the amount to be embarrassing.

[2:33:14 PM](#)

Co-Chair Olson queried the successes of the council.

Mr. Twitchell thanked Co-Chair Olson for years of support. Two of the elders on the council had led efforts to support the languages. He mentioned "language nests" and used the

example of the Tlingit language, where there were preschools that had language immersion nests.

[2:35:17 PM](#)

Senator Wilson looked at AS 44.12.320, and asked for more detail.

[2:36:40 PM](#)

AT EASE

[2:37:57 PM](#)

RECONVENED

Representative Story offered to get back to the committee at a later time with a thorough answer.

[2:38:26 PM](#)

DR. WALKIE CHARLES, MEMBER, ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGE PRESERVATION AND ADVISORY COUNCIL AND DIRECTOR, ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGE CENTER (via teleconference), shared that he had been taken from his home and placed in the Wrangell Institute. He spoke on further history with the council.

[2:42:53 PM](#)

BERNADETTE YAAYUK ALVANNA-STIMPFLE, VICE CHAIR, ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGE PRESERVATION AND ADVISORY COUNCIL (via teleconference), addressed the proposed council name change. She discussed adding additional languages, and asserted that all Alaska Native languages were as important as the English language.

Co-Chair Olson OPENED public testimony.

[2:48:01 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MAXINE DIBERT, spoke in support of HB 26. She relayed that her Koyukon Athabaskan name was Neelthdinlo, and shared that her name meant "strong runner." She recounted hearing the Koyukon language in her home growing up. Her father came from Kokrines and her mother came from Rampart.

[2:50:04 PM](#)

PRINCESS DAAZHRAII JOHNSON, SELF, FAIRBANKS (via teleconference), testified in favor of the bill. She gave an introduction in Gwich'in. She shared that her name was given to her by her late grandmother. She thanked the committee for hearing her testimony and for its work. She underscored the concepts of healing and reconciliation. She supported simplification of the council name and expansion of membership, as well as inclusion of an additional three languages.

Co-Chair Olson CLOSED public testimony.

Representative Story mentioned that the bill packet contained a summary of recommendation (copy on file).

Co-Chair Olson discussed committee business.

CSHB 26 (TRB) was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

#

ADJOURNMENT

2:55:31 PM

The meeting was adjourned at 2:55 p.m.