

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 24, 2025
8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Co-Chair
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair
Representative Ted Eischeid
Representative Jubilee Underwood
Representative Rebecca Schwanke
Representative Bill Elam

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Maxine Dibert

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 28

"An Act establishing a student loan repayment pilot program; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 12

"An Act relating to free breakfast and lunch in public schools."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 57

"An Act relating to wireless telecommunications devices in public schools; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 28

SHORT TITLE: TEACHER/STATE EMPLOYEE STUDENT LOAN PRGRM

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) STORY

01/22/25	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/25
01/22/25	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS

01/22/25 (H) EDC, FIN
 02/12/25 (H) EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
 02/12/25 (H) <Bill Hearing Canceled>
 02/17/25 (H) EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
 02/17/25 (H) Heard & Held
 02/17/25 (H) MINUTE(EDC)
 02/24/25 (H) EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

BILL: HB 12

SHORT TITLE: FREE BREAKFAST & LUNCH IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
 SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) DIBERT

01/22/25 (H) PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/25
 01/22/25 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
 01/22/25 (H) EDC, FIN
 02/24/25 (H) EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

BILL: HB 57

SHORT TITLE: COMMUNICATION DEVICES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
 SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) FIELDS

01/22/25 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
 01/22/25 (H) L&C, EDC
 01/29/25 (H) L&C AT 3:15 PM BARNES 124
 01/29/25 (H) Heard & Held
 01/29/25 (H) MINUTE(L&C)
 01/31/25 (H) L&C AT 9:15 AM GRUENBERG 120
 01/31/25 (H) Heard & Held
 01/31/25 (H) MINUTE(L&C)
 02/05/25 (H) L&C AT 3:15 PM BARNES 124
 02/05/25 (H) Moved CSHB 57(L&C) Out of Committee
 02/05/25 (H) MINUTE(L&C)
 02/10/25 (H) L&C RPT CS(L&C) 5DP 1NR
 02/10/25 (H) DP: CARRICK, SADDLER, COULOMBE, HALL,
 FIELDS
 02/10/25 (H) NR: NELSON
 02/24/25 (H) EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

KERRY THOMAS, Acting Executive Director
 Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education
POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on HB 28.

SARAH SNOWBERGER, Staff
 Representative Maxine Dibert
 Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Representative Maxine Dibert, Prime sponsor, presented HB 12 to the committee.

MATTIE HULL, Staff
Representative Maxine Dibert
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Representative Maxine Dibert, Prime sponsor, presented HB 12 to the committee.

CLARISSA HAYES
Food Research and Action Center
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on HB 12.

TREVOR STORRS, President and CEO
Alaska Children's Trust
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on HB 12.

REPRESENTATIVE ZACK FIELDS
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented CSHB 57(L&C) to the committee.

KELLY LESSENS, Member
Anchorage School Board
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on CSHB 57(L&C).

DAVID BOOTH, Principal
Palmer High School
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on CSHB 57(L&C).

JB ATKINSON, School Therapist
Windler Middle School
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on CSHB 57(L&C).

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner
Department of Education
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on CSHB 57(L&C).

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:49 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Representatives Story, Himschoot, Schwanke, Elam, Eischeid, and Underwood were present at the call to order.

^#hb28

HB 28-TEACHER/STATE EMPLOYEE STUDENT LOAN PRGRM

[8:04:21 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 28, "An Act establishing a student loan repayment pilot program; and providing for an effective date."

[8:06:08 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE asked if similar types of loan repayment programs have occurred in the past.

CO-CHAIR STORY answered that the Alaska State Legislature has used funds like this for Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho (WWAMI) regional medical programs and directed the rest of her answer to Ms. Thomas of the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education.

[8:07:31 AM](#)

KERRY THOMAS, Acting Executive Director, Gave invited testimony on HB 28. She said that the Alaska State Legislature has used the higher education investment fund to supplement Public Employee's Retirement System (PERS) indebtedness in the past.

[8:09:58 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked if the State of Alaska has historically offered a loan forgiveness program and further questioned what the parameters of such a loan forgiveness program were.

MS. THOMAS answered that the state of Alaska did have a postsecondary loan forgiveness program that was axed in the 1980's. She said that the original loan forgiveness program was not sustainable due to the amount of people who took the loan, left Alaska, and never repaid the loan.

[8:12:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE UNDERWOOD asked why HB 28 has an out-of-state residency requirement and emphasized that Alaska residents often do not claim residency out-of-state while they are studying outside of Alaska.

CO-CHAIR STORY answered that the purpose HB 28's out-of-state residency requirement is to keep original residents in Alaska or bring those people back home.

[8:15:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE UNDERWOOD asked if someone wanting to receive the proposed benefits of HB 28 could rely on their continual flow if they are meant to be appropriated by the Alaska State Legislature and asked how the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) would judge the efficacy of a pilot program of HB 28.

MS. THOMAS answered that the ACPE had not yet established policy guidelines for a pilot program of the proposed policies of HB 28 and said that the ACPE would develop a method of judging the efficacy of the proposed policies of HB 28.

[8:19:32 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that HB 28 would be held over.

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[8:19:47 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:19 a.m. to 8:23 a.m.

^#hb12

HB 12-FREE BREAKFAST & LUNCH IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

[8:23:40 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the next order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 12, "An Act relating to free breakfast and lunch in public schools."

[8:24:10 AM](#)

SARAH SNOWBERGER, Staff, Representative Maxine Dibert, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Maxine Dibert, Prime sponsor, presented HB 12 to the committee. She forwarded Representative Dibert's message that she was listening in on the current committee hearing and "working hard to recover every single day" so she could return to work on the House Education Standing Committee.

8:24:56 AM

MATTIE HULL, Staff, Representative Maxine Dibert, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Maxine Dibert, Prime sponsor, presented HB 12 to the committee. He began by reading the sponsor statement [included in the committee packet] which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

House Bill 12 directs the Department of Education (DEED) to provide funding to school districts allowing them to provide breakfast and lunch to any student requesting one at no cost to the student. The proposed legislation requires that DEED maximize the state's receipt of federal funds available for providing breakfast and lunch to students, thus helping minimize state expenditure.

During much of the pandemic, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided funding to all public schools allowing them to offer free meals to all students regardless of income. Universal school meals were found to be associated with positive outcomes for all economic backgrounds for a relatively low cost considering the associated improvement to student academic outcomes and health.

Currently 46% of students who eat school meals in Alaska, receive them for free. Since September 2024, ten states have passed legislation providing for universal school meals and 23 more have introduced such legislation. Many states are instituting universal meal programs because it has been clearly demonstrated in numerous studies that investing in school meals improves academic performance, student attendance, and physical and mental health. These programs have also been shown to greatly reduce student, parent, and staff stress.

Universal free school meals are associated with:

- Improved diet quality, food security, and reduced hunger.
- Improvement in English language art scores and math scores.
- Reduced stigma and an increase in student participation.

The Food Bank of Alaska, along with several other food, health, and education organizations enthusiastically endorse this legislation. Several Alaska School Districts have informed us that they are full-throated supporters of HB 12.

By implementing universal breakfast and lunch we can help Alaska's families, and we can truly make a difference for Alaska's students. HB 12 will help our state make strides ensuring students are at school and prepared to learn. This initiative will move the academic needle.

I respectfully urge your support for the passage of HB 12 thereby improving student performance and combating food insecurity. Please reach out to my office with any questions or concerns.

[8:27:08 AM](#)

MR. HULL read the sectional analysis for HB 12[included in the committee packet] which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1 AS 14.17.495 amended by adding a new section to article 1: Free breakfast and lunch in public schools. Subject to appropriation, and in addition to the state aid received under this chapter, the department shall provide to a district sufficient funding to allow the district to provide breakfast and lunch to any student in the district who requests the meal, at no cost to the student. The department shall maximize the state's receipt of federal financial assistance that may be available for providing breakfast and lunch to students.

[8:28:39 AM](#)

CLARISSA HAYES, Food Research and Action Center, gave invited testimony on HB 12. She said that the Food Research and Action

Center has been working with state legislatures across the country to address the problem of childhood hunger and emphasized that "offering meals to students free of charge, regardless of their household income is the future of nutrition departments" within schools. She pointed to eight other states in the country that have passed legislation concerning universal free school lunches and highlighted a series of positive outcomes that result from universal free school lunches. She explained that hungry children do not have the energy they need to learn and thrive at school and said that providing free school meals to all students would be an investment in all students.

[8:31:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM asked how many students are anticipated to be helped by HB 12's proposed free lunches.

MR. HULL said "46 percent is just under half a million, about 460,000, however again, I don't have the exact number right here in front of me, but based off of that, I would assume that it would be another half million children that would be participating through this program.

CO-CHAIR STORY commented that "Alaska does not have half a million children".

MR. HULL said that he "must be mixing up his numbers".

[8:34:57 AM](#)

MS.SNOWBERGER answered that the fiscal note associated with HB 12 was received very recently and directed any questions regarding it to Heather Heineken of the Department of Education and Early Development.

[8:35:51 AM](#)

TREVOR STORRS, President, and CEO, of Alaska Children's Trust, gave invited testimony on HB 12. He said that providing free school lunches would improve family relationships and environments in children's health, family economic wellbeing, and stronger communities. He said that students learn better and have the energy to participate in physical activities when they are well fed. He explained that free school meals would drastically alleviate financial pressures placed on families that are living in financial hardship.

[8:40:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM asked if the cost of universal lunches would be greater in rural school districts. He asked how much the state currently pays for student school lunches.

[8:40:52 AM](#)

MS. HEINEKEN answered that the financial statistics that were used to calculate the cost of HB 12 were from 2022-2023. She answered that the state currently does not pay anything for student meals.

[8:42:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT confirmed that the National Student Lunch Program (NSLP)'s funding is the same for all meals served at a school. She asked if the fiscal note associated with HB 12 includes the cost of including school districts who do not already participate in the NSLP and asked how many school districts in Alaska do not currently participate in the NSLP.

MS. HEINEKEN, in response to multiple questions from Co-Chair-Himschoot, said that the current fiscal note does not reflect the cost of school districts who do not already participate in the NSLP. She said about nine school districts currently do not participate in the NSLP.

[8:48:21 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked what the eligibility and income requirements are for students and families that currently receive free school lunches under the NSLP and asked how much school meals currently cost.

MS. HENEKEN answered that she does not have that information currently and answered that she would follow up later.

[8:50:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM opined that it might be useful to understand the cost difference for a school meal in rural, remote, and urban school districts.

[8:51:30 AM](#)

MS. SNOWBERGER replied that her office would work to gather data on the difference in meal prices between urban, remote, and rural school districts.

[8:52:10 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EISCHEID asked the bill sponsor's office to provide more clear numbers regarding the statistics surrounding free school lunches in Alaska.

[8:53:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE UNDERWOOD asked if there are ways that school districts could mitigate food waste if HB 12 were to become law.

MR. HULL replied that he was unaware of specific numbers regarding food waste.

[8:54:36 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked who would pay for a meal if a student were to eat a meal and not fill out the associated paperwork.

MS. HEINEKEN answered that those meals would be paid for by the local school district.

[8:57:06 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE asked if there are other federal grants like the NSLP that school districts could utilize to provide free school lunches to its students. She asked how a school with no kitchen or kitchen staff might be able to provide meals to students.

MS. SNOWBERGER answered that HB 12 is in no way meant to interfere with local and traditional practices and said that she does not currently have a full list of federal grants that are available to school districts in Alaska.

[9:02:42 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE said that she was afraid of creating a program that was "too broad, to put the onus on the state to provide food that is not necessarily needed, and a free program that is available for every single student seems to do that".

[9:04:16 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM asked if the state would still be obligated to send a meal to school districts that opted out of the free school lunch program proposed by HB 28.

MR. HULL answered that HB 28 would only apply to public school students, not correspondence students.

CO-CHAIR STORY corrected Mr. Hull that correspondence students are public school students.

[9:07:00 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EISCHEID requested the bill sponsor's office to create a meta-analysis study on the academic benefits of students who are fed.

[9:08:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that HB 12 would be held over.

^#hb57

HB 57-COMMUNICATION DEVICES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

[9:08:44 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 57, "An Act relating to wireless telecommunications devices in public schools; and providing for an effective date." [Before the committee was CSHB 57(L&C).]

[9:09:30 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZACK FIELDS, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, presented CSHB 57(L&C) to the committee. He explained that himself, Senator Wielechowski, and Governor Dunleavy all have drafted bills in the current legislative session that aim to curb the use of cell phones in public schools. He said that the House Labor and Commerce Standing Committee amended the proposed legislation to have its language be consistent with the DEED and emphasized the overwhelming evidence that cell phone access and use is harmful to schoolchildren in Alaska.

[9:11:23 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM shared his understanding that the restrictions on electronic device use proposed under CSHB 57(L&C) would be limited to personal device use.

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS confirmed Representative Elam's understanding was correct.

[9:12:37 AM](#)

KELLY LESSENS, Member, Anchorage School Board, gave invited testimony on CSHB 57(L&C). She detailed a proposed policy on cell phone use that the Anchorage School Board was considering and emphasized the negatives effects of cell phone use by young people and their impacts on children's learning. She suggested replacing the word "possessing" to "accessing" on page 2, line 1, and replacing "regular school hours, including lunch and passing periods" with "during instructional time" on page 2, line 2. She pointed to a series of studies and research that supported her proposed amendment language and said the proposed changes would make for a more clearly worded bill.

[9:20:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE UNDERWOOD shared an anecdote about her own child's positive experiences in attending a school district that doesn't allow the use of cell phone during its instructional hours.

[9:22:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM shared an anecdote about the benefits of children being away from their cell phones.

[9:23:48 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked if there is currently anything preventing school districts in Alaska from banning cell phones on their own accord.

MS. LESSONS answered that there is nothing stopping school boards from banning cell phones and said that current policy within the Anchorage School District (ASD) is to allow phones as they are needed.

[9:26:33 AM](#)

DAVID BOOTH, Principal, Palmer High School, gave invited testimony on CSHB 57(L&C). He said that his school implemented a total cell phone ban during the school hours and emphasized that the policy has "completely transformed our building". He highlighted research that found that students are distracted by their cell phones and said that there has been a 28 percent reduction in failing grades in his school since the implementation of the total cell phone ban. He said that alcohol and drug related offenses are down and emphasized his observation that students are happier when they are not engaged with phones and social media.

[9:32:59 AM](#)

JB ATKINSON, School Therapist, Windler Middle School, gave invited testimony on CSHB 57(L&C). He highlighted a youth-risk behavior survey from 2023 that found a clear correlation between youths who were on their phone and those who weren't. He emphasized that the mere presence of a phone was enough to cause a negative outcome and explained that there was a "clear difference" between a child that has a phone in a classroom and one that doesn't. He explained that children often are in agreeance that the lack of a phone leads to a more focused and productive learning environment and pointed out that children must not be allowed to access their phones during passing periods due to their capacity to distract a child for at least 15 minutes beyond their time using the phone.

[9:38:00 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EISCHEID requested the college freshmen study that Mr. Atkinson cited during his remarks.

[9:38:50 AM](#)

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner, Department of Education, gave invited testimony on CSHB 57(L&C). She began her remarks by clarifying the general prohibition on cell phone use that currently exists within statewide public education policy in Alaska. She highlighted the numerous ways that cell phones pose as a distraction to schoolchildren in Alaska and emphasized that "social medial algorithms prioritize content that drives engagement, likes, shares, and comments". She pointed to the outsized impact of negative comments, cyberbullying, and body image that social media has on children and adults alike. She said that adolescents are spending an average of 7 hours and 22 minutes on their phones daily, much of which is on social media

platforms and added that the "invasive use of phones is eroding" basic work and focus skills that these students will need to survive and thrive later in life. She explained that limiting cell phone use during the day could help schools establish healthier habits and reinforce the importance of abstaining from cell phone use in the name of mental and physical health. She said that unrestricted cell phone use during school hours "greatly" increases the risk of cyberbullying and online abuse and explained how pervasive and different online harassment from what is more traditionally understood to be harassment. She said that limiting cell phone use during school hours is "not merely a policy decision, but a necessary intervention to protect our student's mental health, attention, and wellbeing".

[9:49:09 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM commented his appreciation for MS. Bishop's remarks about cell phone use and its effect on schoolchildren.

[9:49:48 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE asked if students would be able to take their cell phones off campus with them during lunch.

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS answered that the concept of the proposed legislation's enforcement policy would be "off and away" and said that each district would have their own way of doing that. He shared the books "the Anxious Generation" by Jonathan Haidt and "Stolen Focus" by Johann Hari.

[9:52:35 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked if there are other examples of how school districts around the world and country are dealing with the issue of cell phone use in schools.

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS opined that "other western nations just have much more responsible policy to govern social media for youth in general, so do other states" and said that HB 57 is the "bare minimum" policy directive for cell phone use in schools and said that companies are monetizing the attention of children in a way that is profoundly detrimental to the mental health of children. He explained that social media companies are "fully aware" that the way they drive attention and engagement directly leads to higher rates of suicide, especially among young girls and emphasized that these social media companies are consciously making the decision to drive engagement to make more money.

[9:54:44 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT shared her understanding that a child who uses their cell phone to control their hearing aids would be considered a medical exception under HB 57.

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS confirmed Co-Chair Himschoot's understanding was correct.

[9:55:21 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that HB 57 would be held over.

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[9:55:56 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:56 a.m.