

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 9, 2025

8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 76

"An Act relating to education; relating to public school attendance; relating to mobile communication devices in schools; relating to reading proficiency incentive grants; relating to authorization of charter schools; relating to transportation of students; relating to school bond debt reimbursement; relating to funding and reporting by Alaska technical and vocational education programs; authorizing lump sum payments for certain teachers as retention and recruitment incentives; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 76

SHORT TITLE: EDUCATION:SCHOOLS; GRANTS; FUNDING; DEBT

SPONSOR(s): RULES BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNOR

01/31/25	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/31/25	(H)	EDC, FIN
04/09/25	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner

Department of Education & Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of House Rules by request of the governor, presented HB 76 to the committee.

KAREN MORRISON, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Education & Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of House Rules by request of the governor, presented HB 76 to the committee.

HEATHER HEINEKEN, Director
Division of Finance & Support Services
Department of Education & Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered committee questions on HB 76.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:21 AM](#)

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

HB 76-EDUCATION:SCHOOLS; GRANTS; FUNDING; DEBT

[8:03:18 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 76, "An Act relating to education; relating to public school attendance; relating to mobile communication devices in schools; relating to reading proficiency incentive grants; relating to authorization of charter schools; relating to transportation of students; relating to school bond debt reimbursement; relating to funding and reporting by Alaska technical and vocational education programs; authorizing lump sum payments for certain teachers as retention and recruitment incentives; and providing for an effective date."

[8:04:23 AM](#)

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner, Department of Education & Early Development, on behalf of House Rules by request of the governor, presented HB 76 to the committee. She began a PowerPoint presentation associated with HB 76 [included in the

committee packet] on slide 2, which outlined the mission, vision, and purpose of the proposed legislation and moved to slide 3, which described the Statutory duties of the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED). She continued to slide 4, which listed five specific "shared strategic priorities" that the DEED is taking to address education challenges in Alaska and moved to slide 5, which highlighted the primary sectional components of HB 76. She continued to slide 6, which described how the proposed legislation would bring a more targeted and sustained investment in Alaska's education system and moved to slide 7, which outlined HB 76's proposed open enrollment policy.

[8:09:18 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked what the need for open enrollment schools is and asked Commissioner Bishop what she should "tell her communities that only have one school". She asked, "if every school was excellent, why would you choose to leave your neighborhood school".

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said that trust in public education had generally eroded after the Coronavirus Pandemic and said that it is her goal to have people love the school that is within their community. She used an example of teachers and students attending school in the Anchorage School District (ASD) that lived in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley to explain the necessity of school choice in Alaska's public schools. She said that having "everything for everybody" in Alaska's public schools can't work, because it would be unaffordable, but schools can be the "very best school for somebody".

[8:16:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EISCHEID shared his concern with regards to equitability of the notion of school choice, especially concerning school transportation. He commented that transportation funding for public schools has been underfunded by the state in recent years and said that it could be unaffordable for parents living within district 22 to drive large distances for schools outside of their neighborhood.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said that Representative Eischeid's understanding of school choice was a "misnomer" and explained that HB 76 did have language that would allow for school districts to set up a school transportation system that would allow for school choice.

[8:21:59 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked what a "needs-based approach" to school choice might mean.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP answered that there are several programs currently in operation that allow for reimbursement of food and transportation costs created by school choice.

[8:24:55 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT asked if there are any "planned protections" for title I schools to keep science, technology, engineering, & mathematics (STEM), music, and special education resources active.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP explained that "open enrollment is a philosophy that allows choice" and said that it is the goal of the DEED to have neighborhood schools that everyone loves. She said that public schools need to have parent choice and involvement and teachers that love teaching there.

[8:27:42 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked if either the DEED or local school districts would be in control of enrollment numbers.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said that the local school district would be in control of the enrollment numbers.

[8:28:16 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE shared that she appreciates the proposed legislation and the concept of open enrollment.

[8:30:16 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM shared that his children attend a charter school and asked how more parental engagement could be brought about in communities with little to no school choice.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said that neighborhood "brick & mortar" schools are "choice schools too, they're choice by what you can afford to buy. We all know that real estate around excellent schools, people look for it". She said that parental engagement is important with regard to school choice.

[8:36:12 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE UNDERWOOD commented that proximity to parent's work is often a driving factor in the campaign for school choice.

[8:37:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT noted that HB 76's Senate companion bill was heard over a month ago from the date of the current meeting and made clear that the fee to attend a school in a different district is based off of the other school district's local contribution that was made by local attendees of that district. She emphasized the importance of school counselors in preventing bullying in schools.

[8:40:20 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP resumed the presentation on slide 8, which explained how the proposed legislation would provide compensation to school districts that have additional students by their "spring count day".

[8:41:15 AM](#)

KAREN MORRISON, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Education & Early Development, on behalf of House Rules by request of the governor, presented HB 76 to the committee. She picked up the presentation on slide 8 and explained how HB 76 would establish a school mobilization program.

[8:42:21 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY said that the direct compensation for additional students by a spring count date has been in the works with the DEED for "many years" and asked if a district's spring count could be used to calculate class size and teacher compensation for the following year.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MORRISON explained that the DEED currently receives its student population projections from school districts at the same time that actual student counts are received.

[8:43:36 AM](#)

HEATHER HEINEKEN, Director, Division of Finance & Support Services, Department of Education & Early Development, answered committee questions on HB 76. She explained that a rework of statewide school transportation could be paid for by a "in lieu of" program in which a local school board would establish a fee for the utilization of a school transportation system that would be reimbursed by the district at the end of the school year.

[8:46:49 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked if the proposed policies of HB 76 were in alignment with the recently passed HB 57.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP shared her belief that the two pieces of legislation were in political alignment.

[8:47:33 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked if an exception for a student to use their cell phone as a translating device could be amended into HB 76. She said that there is a perception that school district devices are overused and asked if HB 76 might limit the time students spend on district devices. She shared her objection to the statewide regulation of cell phone use in schools and said that she preferred the local management of a school's phone use.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP shared her understanding that there "would be no issues" if a cell phone was utilized for a learning purpose and said that HB 76 was mainly related to social media, not school district devices.

[8:53:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT shared an anecdote that children on field trips would bring their phones with them, which created a negative dynamic with other kids who didn't have them.

[8:54:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE added that her local school board had recently passed a policy that banned all cell phone use during instructional time and remarked that social media is a "systemic problem across our society" that has young people "absolutely" addicted to cell phones.

[8:57:43 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP picked up the presentation on slide 10, which described the HB 76's reading proficiency and learning growth incentive grants.

[8:59:53 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked why HB 76 would withhold funding from school districts that have lower reading scores.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP shared her understanding that the proposed legislation would provide funds to school districts that focus on learning growth and improvement.

[9:05:29 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked if there are any models that support the idea of underfunding students who are underperforming.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP shared her belief that some reward-based funding systems have been utilized in places outside of Alaska that have proven to be effective motivators in improving education outcomes.

[9:09:08 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked if the proposed legislation would increase the number of Individual Reading Improvement Plan (IRIP)s and shared her understanding that HB 76 would incentivize school districts to complete less IRIPs.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP answered that the DEEDs focus is student learning and said that it was "an outreach by teachers" to ask their school districts to not perform IRIPs for kindergarten students. She said that she would not prefer the IRIP be incentivized.

[9:15:14 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP resumed the presentation on slide 11, which outlined the new method that a charter school might be established through a new application to the State Board of Education.

[9:17:17 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked why a new charter school application process is necessary.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP replied that the impetus for a charter school application bill was the need for a streamlined process of charter school application and establishment.

[9:20:39 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT shared her concern that the creation of a state-level charter school application might bring about a conflict of interest between a local and statewide schoolboard.

CO-CHAIR STORY asked if the added layer of bureaucratic processes could add to the already complex affair of a charter school applicant. She asked how many complaints the DEED has received with regard to school boards' lackadaisical attitudes towards charter schools.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP, in response to questions from committee members, explained that the laws surrounding charter schools are "very deliberate" and said that there were "people not being heard" in their desire for certain things within their school district, like a possible want for a new charter school. She said that there had been testimony that claimed local school boards in Alaska to not be attentive to the needs of all schools within their school district and said that "we just want there to be good schools for kids and teachers and families". She said that there have been conflicts with local school boards not listening to their constituents, administrators, or teachers' concerns on charter schools

[9:28:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT asked Commissioner Bishop to list the specific executive agencies that might review a charter school application.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP explained that a local government agency like a municipality or board could hear a charter school's application and said that the goal of the proposed legislation is to create innovative ideas for the success of charter schools in Alaska.

[9:30:54 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked if the Average Daily Membership (ADM) was greater for charter schools and asked if there are any

school districts in Alaska that do not allow for its local charter school to carry a balance.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP answered that there is one school district that does not allow its local charter school to carry a balance and said that charter school funding is not fully determined by ADM, rather the startup was reliant on grants and school district budgeting.

[9:34:06 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM asked if there could be an opportunity within the proposed legislation to apply both positive and negative understandings to local neighborhood schools.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said that there could provide an opportunity to learn from the charter school application and establishment process.

[9:38:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EISCHEID shared his understanding of what charter schools are and commented that "the local folks know the local needs".

[9:40:17 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked how the University of Alaska (UA) would review charter school applications.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said that universities across the country do engage in setting up charter schools within their local communities and explained that the UA would likely partner with local school districts to help to educate teachers working in the district.

[9:42:50 AM](#)

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MORRISON picked up the presentation on slide 12, which highlighted the proposed school debt reimbursement projects and student transportation initiatives as mentioned in HB 76.

[9:44:03 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked how school bond debt reimbursement is related to DEED maintenance applications and asked if a school

could build an entire new school as a "major maintenance" project. She asked if the only method for funding new construction in school districts was to go through the CIP application process or bond locally and asked for further clarification on the school bond debt reimbursement program.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MORRISON confirmed that the bonds are completely separate and said that a school district could apply for the funds to build a new school through the school construction major maintenance Capitol Improvement Plan (CIP) application. She confirmed that the CIP application process and local bonding are currently the only way a school district might be able to pay for new school construction.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP added that bond debt reimbursement was meant to reimburse a school district for a portion of a locally bonded school and explained that prospective a bond would be approved by local voters, where an approved bond would eventually be paid back in half by the DEED. She said that she would follow up with more information later regarding the 50/50 repayment of school bond debt.

[9:48:56 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that HB 76 would be held over.

[9:49:40 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:49 a.m.