

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 24, 2025

3:31 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair  
Senator Jesse Bjorkman  
Senator Jesse Kiehl  
Senator Mike Cronk

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

SENATE BILL NO. 82

"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

SENATE BILL NO. 41

"An Act relating to mental health education."

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 22

"An Act establishing a financial literacy education program for public schools; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 23

"An Act relating to civics education, civics assessments, and secondary school graduation requirements; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: SB 82

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

SPONSOR(s): RULES BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNOR

01/31/25 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS  
01/31/25 (S) EDC, FIN  
02/21/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)  
02/21/25 (S) -- MEETING CANCELED --  
02/24/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 41

SHORT TITLE: PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

SPONSOR(s): GRAY-JACKSON

01/17/25 (S) PREFILE RELEASED 1/17/25  
01/22/25 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS  
01/22/25 (S) EDC, FIN  
02/03/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)  
02/03/25 (S) -- MEETING CANCELED --  
02/12/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)  
02/12/25 (S) Heard & Held  
02/12/25 (S) MINUTE(EDC)  
02/21/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)  
02/21/25 (S) -- MEETING CANCELED --  
02/24/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 22

SHORT TITLE: FINANCIAL LITERACY PROGRAM IN SCHOOLS

SPONSOR(s): WIELECHOWSKI

01/10/25 (S) PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/25  
01/22/25 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS  
01/22/25 (S) EDC, FIN  
02/05/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)  
02/05/25 (S) -- MEETING CANCELED --  
02/12/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)  
02/12/25 (S) Heard & Held  
02/12/25 (S) MINUTE(EDC)  
02/21/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)  
02/21/25 (S) -- MEETING CANCELED --  
02/24/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 23  
SHORT TITLE: CIVICS EDUCATION  
SPONSOR(S): STEVENS

01/10/25	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/25
01/22/25	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/25	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/05/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/05/25	(S)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
02/12/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/12/25	(S)	Heard & Held
02/12/25	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/21/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/21/25	(S)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
02/24/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

**WITNESS REGISTER**

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner  
Department of Education and Early Development  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Introduced SB 82 on behalf of the administration.

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

**POSITION STATEMENT:**

HEATHER HEINEKEN, Director  
Finance and Support Services  
Department of Education and Early Development  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered question on SB 82.

Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson  
District G  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Sponsor of SB 41.

JONNI MYERS, Vice-President  
Kodiak College Student Government  
Kodiak, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 41.

KATHLEEN WEDEMEYER, Deputy Director

Citizens Commission on Human Rights  
Seattle, Washington

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in opposition to SB 41 as written.

HUNTER LOTTSELDT, Staff  
Senator Bill Wielechowski  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a brief review of SB 22.

FLORA TEO, President  
Junior Achievement of Alaska  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 22.

KARI NORTE, Director  
External Affairs  
Alaska Chamber of Commerce  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 22.

TIM LAMKIN, Staff  
Senator Gary Stevens  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a brief summary of SB 23.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:31:07 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Kiehl, Cronk, and Chair Tobin. Senator Bjorkman arrived shortly thereafter.

CHAIR TOBIN announced that Senator Bjorkman joined the meeting at 3:32 p.m.

#### **SB 82-EDUCATION:SCHOOLS; GRANTS; FUNDING; DEBT**

[3:33:16 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 82 "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."

[3:34:11 PM](#)

DEENA BISHOP, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, provided the following introducing of SB 82 on behalf of the administration:

We thank you for the opportunity to present Senate Bill 82. It's an honor to introduce this transformative legislation, which reaffirms our unwavering commitment to education, student success, and the future of our great state. This bill is not merely a step forward; it is a bold leap towards ensuring that every Alaska student, regardless of their background, community, or education setting, has access to the best possible learning opportunities. Investing in our children's education is our highest priority, with over \$180 million in funding for school districts annually. With a change to the formula, this bill strategically allocates resources towards targeted initiatives that enhance student learning and success, addressing the full scope of the educational equation. Education inputs must be matched with student learning outputs.

The Governor and I share a strong commitment to a focused approach to education funding—one that prioritizes strategic investments over simply increasing the base student allocation. Public education funding must be coupled with strong policies to drive meaningful change and improve student outcomes. SB 82 reflects this philosophy, making deliberate investments in areas that directly impact student achievement, teacher support, and long-term educational success. This bill expands school options, establishing equal access for students in Alaska's public schools through open enrollment, and provides support to educators and parents who wish to innovate education through the development of charter schools, empowering families to make the best educational decisions for their children.

[3:36:18 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP continued her introduction of SB 82:

It incentivizes early literacy success, invests in student transportation, enhances vocational and technical education, supports teacher recruitment and retention through direct payments, provides districts with access to special education services, English Language Learning services, and gifted education to those districts who have correspondent students, and ensures the financial sustainability of our schools.

I want to express my gratitude to Governor Dunleavy for his leadership and dedication to Alaska students, educators, and communities. As a former educator, he understands firsthand both the challenges and opportunities within our education system. His commitment to fostering excellence in education has been instrumental in shaping this vision. This is our moment to make a strategic investment in Alaska's future.

[3:37:22 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP moved to slide 2 and provided the mission, vision, and purpose of the Department of Education and Early Child Development (DEED):

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mission - An excellent education for every student every day.

Vision - All students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them. - Alaska Statute 14.03.015

Purpose - DEED exists to provide information, resources, and leadership to support an excellent education for every student every day.

[3:37:41 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP moved to slide 3 and said DEED has a duty to review statute; it is how the department supports schools:

[Original punctuation provided.]

## **Statutory Duty of the Department**

**AS 14.03.010.** Establishment of the school system. There is established in the state a system of public schools to be administered and maintained as provided in this title.

**Chapter 07. Administration of Public Schools. AS 14.07.010.** Department of Education and Early Development. The Department of Education and Early Development includes the commissioner of education and early development, the state Board of Education and Early Development, and the staff necessary to carry out the functions of the department.

**AS 14.07.020.** Duties of the department. (a) The department shall (1) exercise general supervision over the public schools of the state except the University of Alaska;

[3:37:54 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP moved to slide 4 and said the work of DEED is grounded in the five shared strategic priorities of Alaska's Education Challenge:

[Original punctuation provided.]

### **Five Shared Strategic Priorities:**

1. Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade.
2. Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs.
3. Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources.
4. Prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals.
5. Improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes.

[3:38:04 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP moved to slide 5 and said the sectional analysis would provide talking points on the following primary items found in SB 82, an omnibus bill:

[Original punctuation provided.]

## **Primary Sectional Components**

- Open Enrollment
- District Compensation
- Cell Phone Free Schools
- Reading Proficiency and Learning Growth Incentive Grants
- Application for Charter School to the State Board of Education • Transportation of Students
- School Debt Reimbursement
- Formula Funding for Districts Operating Residential Schools
- Formula Funding for Career and Technical/Special Needs for Districts Operating Correspondence Schools
- Teacher Lump-Sum Payments • Report to the Legislature

[3:38:18 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP moved to slide 6 and said SB 82 is focused on targeted and sustained investment in education and read the following statement:

[Original punctuation provided.]

With over \$180 million in recurring education funding through the foundation formula, grants, and direct teacher payments, this legislation provides sustained financial resources with strategic policies to enhance student achievement, strengthen teacher retention, and improve long-term student outcomes while empowering local communities and families.

[3:38:45 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced Senator Gray-Jackson joined the meeting.

[3:38:54 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP moved to slide 7 and spoke to the first provision of SB 82, open enrollment:

[Original punctuation provided.]

### **Open Enrollment**

Families will be permitted to enroll their children in a public school outside their assigned district or zoned school, generally during an application period.

This gives parents more choice in selecting a school that best fits their child's needs.

School districts set policies for student acceptance, including:

- School capacity
- Placement preferences
- Enrollment data
- School capacities by grade

[3:39:31 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked if there was a problem the administration was trying to solve with this section of SB 82.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated the intent was to offer families choices regardless of their location or current school. She explained the bill supports families who wish to attend a different school by creating a wide open and transparent education system. She added that mobilization grants are included to help families needing assistance with access. She emphasized this process allows families to apply and transfer through an open and transparent system.

[3:40:18 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL remarked that the use of the term "statewide" was interesting, noting that in his region districts are far apart, so a student wanting to attend another district would need to move, which is already allowed. He stated he was unclear how SB 82 applies statewide. He said he did not see a definition of "capacity" and asked what kinds of limitations a district could consider when determining capacity.

[3:40:47 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP explained that capacity refers to the number of students that can be accommodated in a classroom. She noted many districts already have capacity limits based on the programs they offer, and under SB 82, those limits would be set and communicated transparently by each district. She added that in areas without nearby districts, open enrollment could still apply within a single district—for example, within Juneau—allowing families to apply to schools outside their zoned area. She emphasized the goal is to ensure all families have the option to choose the school they believe will best support their child's success.

[3:41:32 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated his belief that the option already exists. He asked whether the definition of capacity involves a department-approved square footage per student, or if it relates to the school board setting a student-teacher ratio for a program, classroom, or age group.

[3:41:56 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that those items may be included and clarified that capacity would be defined through local district policy. She explained that districts determine how many students can be in a classroom, often setting lower pupil-to-teacher ratios (PTR) for primary grades—such as 18 to 21 students per class. If a classroom had 15 students and the district's limit was 20, the school could accept five more. She added that capacity limits vary by course type; for example, high school, band, or AP (Advanced Placement) courses often accommodate more students. She noted that both teacher capacity and space availability factor into local determinations, similar to current practice.

[3:42:52 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN referred to slide 7 and stated that the information presented appears to describe a general application period, but SB 82 on page two specifies that a school must accept any student at any time during the year. She observed this language suggests a rolling admissions process based on available capacity, rather than a defined application window. She asked for clarification, noting that the slide content seems inconsistent with the actual language in the legislation.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP explained that open enrollment would involve an application process, with applications considered based on established capacity limits. She stated districts would set timelines for receiving applications through their board. She acknowledged that transferring into a school often requires preparation, so applications could be accepted throughout the school year, either in writing or online. She emphasized that if capacity is available, the goal is to allow students to transfer when feasible.

[3:44:13 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted that the legislation requires "a school district to accept students upon application throughout the school year," which indicates applications are to be accepted at any time during the year. She questioned whether this means students are accepted continuously throughout the year or only

at specific periods. She asked for clarification on whether she was misunderstanding the intent of the language.

[3:44:38 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP replied that districts would have an open application period and accept applications on an ongoing basis. She stated that as space became available, and if capacity allowed, districts could admit students throughout the year.

CHAIR TOBIN stated that no one wants to disrupt students in classrooms, acknowledging that the arrival of a new student can cause challenges. She noted that in the Alaska's five largest districts, transferring into a school at any point often raises issues related to school sports participation. She shared that some organizations currently allow mid-year transfers for sports only under specific conditions, such as bullying, to prevent displacing existing varsity athletes or students transferring solely to join a team. She asked for clarification on how SB 82 addresses transfers motivated by sports participation.

[3:45:40 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP confirmed that was correct and explained that athletic eligibility is governed by the Alaska School Activities Association (ASA), which regulates competitive high school sports. She stated that even in cases involving bullying or other reasons, transfer requests must go before the ASA board. She clarified that ASA rules apply only to high school-level competitive sports and not to other grade levels. She emphasized that open enrollment does not guarantee a student can play sports at a new school or continue playing at their previous school.

[3:46:25 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked about the potential impact on charter schools, noting that some—such as in Fairbanks—require attendance at an orientation meeting before applying. She said her reading of SB 82, Section 1, suggests the policy would override that type of local control by the charter school. She asked for further explanation on how SB 82 would affect such requirements.

[3:46:46 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that was correct and affirmed that all schools would be required to participate in the same manner to ensure the success of open enrollment.

[3:46:57 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said that SB 82 also includes other language concerning Alaska's charter school system. She asked whether the proposal could negatively impact charter schools, which are governed by parent boards that often set specific criteria. She expressed concern that a state policy might override the authority of those boards to establish expectations for the educational communities they are trying to create.

[3:47:19 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that the policy would likely affect all schools, especially considering that some districts currently do not allow mid-year transitions. She emphasized that SB 82 applies to all public schools, including charter schools, correspondence schools, brick-and-mortar schools, neighborhood schools, and special mission schools. She described it as a strong policy aimed at ensuring open enrollment across all public-school types, giving parents the opportunity to enroll their children in schools of their choice. She added that enrollment would still be subject to capacity limits, which are set by the schools and districts.

[3:47:57 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN stated that SB 82 includes a first-come, first-served provision, and stated her belief that it would eliminate current lottery systems intended to promote fairness for families. She expressed concern that this change could disadvantage local students. As an example, she described a scenario where a family unable to access a Japanese immersion program in one area—such as Sand Lake—might apply early to a similar program in Palmer. She asked whether, under this policy, that early applicant could displace a local Palmer student from attending their neighborhood charter school.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP responded that she would need to further consider the scenario to fully understand the issues and factors involved in such a transfer. She said the outcome would depend on how regulations are established. MS. B emphasized support for all schools across Alaska and noted that some families already navigate the system informally by withholding address information to access schools in other districts. She stated that SB 82 aims to level the playing field for families who may not have the same cultural knowledge of how to navigate the education system, ensuring equal access to schools that best meet their children's needs.

[3:49:29 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked for clarification on the statement that first-come, first-served levels the playing field.

[3:49:33 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP clarified that the goal is to allow open enrollment across Alaska, enabling students to attend any school they choose. She explained that the first-come, first-served approach refers to when an application is submitted and that systems can be designed to account for factors like keeping families together. She emphasized that creating additional barriers to entry is inappropriate and that initial interest should be seen as positive. She added that some existing lottery systems already function similarly, where late applications are not prioritized, noting that this approach aligns with practices currently used in Anchorage.

CHAIR TOBIN stated that SB 82, Section 1, represents a radical new policy for the state. She acknowledged that some school districts already participate in open enrollment and referenced testimony from the Mayor of Anderson, who noted that students in her area can attend schools outside their district to access social opportunities like dating and prom. She remarked that it is interesting to compare the proposed approach in SB 82 with current practices.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP commented that Section 1 would guarantee open enrollment for all students in the state.

[3:51:04 PM](#)

KAREN MORRISON, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, moved to slide 8 and discussed district compensation:

#### **District Compensation**

##### **District Compensation for additional students by a "Spring Count Day"**

Any district that has a larger end of year brick and mortar average daily membership (ADM) than established in the fall count will receive a funding increase for the additional students.

##### **Mobilization Fund**

The department will establish a **limited** mobilization plan to support transportation for students attending a school that their local bus does not serve.

MS. MORRISON stated that SB 82 provides approximately a \$438,100 investment for districts with a higher end-of-year brick-and-mortar average daily membership than reported in the fall count. She explained that the bill addresses concerns from districts about the lack of funding for students enrolled after the 20-day count period by adding a spring count day. MS. M noted that this change allows districts to receive additional funding for increased enrollment later in the school year. She stated that SB 82 does not include funding for increases in correspondence student enrollment.

MS. MORRISON explained that SB 82 supports a Department mobilization plan to establish transportation options for students attending schools outside their local district or boundary area. While the exact scope and demand of the mobilization plan are still being determined, initial projections estimate an annual investment of \$3.37 million. She emphasized that the goal is to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities regardless of a student's location, marking a significant step toward expanding access and supporting student mobility across Alaska.

[3:52:20 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated that while the discussion emphasizes equity, statewide access, and support for all students, it remains unclear whether SB 82 would cover the daily transportation costs for a student living in Willow to attend a school in Anchorage.

MS. MORRISON explained that the fiscal note for the mobilization plan is estimated at \$3.37 million, based on a daily transportation rate of \$15 per student over 180 school days. She noted that future costs would depend on actual participation in the program.

[3:53:03 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated the transportation solutions could vary, including buses between towns, gas cards, or contracting with smaller transportation providers, as some districts currently do. She clarified that daily transportation from Willow to Anchorage is unlikely to be fully funded, though small offsets might be available if transportation is a barrier. She added that the mobilization grant was included in response to families identifying lack of transportation as a key obstacle to school access.

[3:54:16 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked what districts would be required to fund in terms of transporting students from one school to another, including situations where travel involves long distances or even air travel, as may be the case in some districts. He asked to know more about the transportation funding stream in SB 82.

[3:54:54 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that the specific transportation requirements and options would be addressed through regulation, depending on interest and feasibility across the state. She clarified that transporting students by airplane would not be a solution considered under SB 82. She explained that large-scale ground transportation could be used, such as buses traveling between common pickup points—for example, from Kenai to Soldotna. Families would bring students to a central location, and a district could use additional funds to operate a bus for longer-distance travel. If that solution does not work for a family, alternatives like gas cards or small-scale transportation options coordinated by parents could be considered. She emphasized that SB 82 does not guarantee transportation but expresses the belief that students should have the opportunity to attend the school of their choice, and that, when possible, mobilization funds could help address transportation barriers.

[3:56:41 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated that having the assumptions behind the fiscal note would be helpful for establishing clear sideboards. He noted that, based on his experience, embedding broad visions and aspirations into legislation without limits can result in an open checkbook. He emphasized the importance of setting boundaries and said it would be useful to understand what DEED envisions for implementation.

[3:57:09 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked for clarification on the funding outlined in SB 82, Section 1, specifically regarding mid-year student transfers. She inquired whether the funding is based on a full adjusted Average Daily Membership (ADM) or calculated using a different formula. She requested additional detail on the assumptions informing this section of the bill.

[3:57:23 PM](#)

MS. MORRISON explained that the estimate is based on 50 additional students, using prior year trends to account for mid-year transfers between districts. She stated the calculation

used the average of district cost factors combined with the base student allocation of \$5,960. She said this methodology resulted in the projected total cost of \$438,100.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that an estimate was necessary, so existing data was used, though it is known that more than 50 students move between districts each year. She explained the focus was on identifying districts—excluding correspondence programs—that had an increase in Average Daily Membership (ADM) by the end of the year. MS. B clarified that the intent was to make those districts whole if their year-end ADM exceeded the fall count.

[3:58:40 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN sought confirmation on whether the funding provides a full allocation for a student who transfers mid-year or later. She asked if the district would receive the full amount for that student as if the student had been enrolled for the entire year.

[3:58:58 PM](#)

HEATHER HEINEKEN, Director of Finance and Support Services, Department of Education and Early Development, Fairbanks, Alaska, answered a question on SB 82. She replied that yes, the district would receive the full amount, but only if its Average Daily Membership (ADM) at the end of the year is greater than the ADM recorded in the fall count. She explained that this approach accounts for both students who leave and those who join the district during the school year.

CHAIR TOBIN commented that it if a district receives full funding for students that have only attended part of a year equity could be an issue.

[3:59:55 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated that one of the biggest concerns for some of the districts he represents is the mid-year movement of students with intensive special needs. He noted that these students often transfer from local districts to hub districts, creating a significant cost burden. He observed that SB 82 appears to address only overall student count changes, not specific adjustments for high-cost special education needs, and asked whether the bill accounts for that cost driver.

[4:00:36 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that SB 82 would account for intensive needs students as well as all other students. She acknowledged the need for more detailed discussion but noted

that currently, no additional funding is provided when students move mid-year. She explained that SB 82 aims to support districts that are educating students. Sometimes contracts cannot be canceled. She added that this is why the funding is based on a full count above the fall ADM.

[4:01:11 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked whether the envisioned approach would involve a supplemental appropriation in the following year, considering current statues and school funding practices. She inquired how the legislature would ensure that funds are directed to districts to compensate for this portion of SB 82.

[4:01:33 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that funding is already allocated in SB 82 but if participation grows beyond expectations, a supplemental would be needed. She noted that evidence shows open enrollment programs do not expand rapidly. She explained that families typically seek alternative schools for reasons such as bullying, specific programmatic needs, or the desire to be closer to their children during the school day.

[4:02:27 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP moved to slide 9 and said SB 82 also includes a provision for cell phone-free schools, which aligns with a separate bill currently under consideration:

[Original punctuation provided.]

### **Cellphone-Free Schools**

School districts are required to adopt a policy that prohibits the use of personal mobile communication devices by students during the school day except in the event of:

- An emergency or perceived threat of danger
- When a teacher or administrator grants permission for educational purposes
- When the device is necessary for health or well-being of the student
- If the device is required as part of a student's individualized educational plan.

[4:02:59 PM](#)

MS. MORRISON moved to slide 10, Reading Proficiency and Learning Growth Incentive Grants and provided the following information:

[Original punctuation provided.]

School districts are eligible to receive a reading proficiency incentive grant in the amount of \$450 per student

- Each student in grades kindergarten through three who performs at or above grade level on the statewide screening tool or demonstrates learning improvement growth on the statewide screening tool
- Each student in grades four through six who performs at grade-level or demonstrates improvement on Alaska's standards-based assessment in language arts

[4:03:27 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN referred to SB 82, page 3, line 19, regarding the statewide screening tool. She stated her understanding that one tool had been adopted by the State Board but noted that legislation allows alternative screeners and a reading portfolio. She observed that SB 82 does not include those additional mechanisms and asked whether the intent is to include all options to demonstrate proficiency under the Alaska Reads Act or to limit the bill to the statewide screening tool, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS).

COMMISSIONER BISHOP said the screening tool refers to the state-approved tool or one used under a waiver and confirmed that all approved screening tools are included.

[4:04:20 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted that some students opt out of testing and referred to the section[s] addressing proficiency for grades four through six. She asked how the section[s] applies to students who opt out but still require interventions, and whether the intent is to ensure all students participate in the screening tools.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that the provision does not require all students to be assessed, as that requirement already exists in law. She explained that the intent is to incentivize participation among students who perform well. She added that school districts could use this as a tool to encourage families to have students complete assessments and screeners. She emphasized that the measure serves as an incentive rather than a mandate.

[4:05:44 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP moved to slide 11, Application for Charter School to the State Board of Education:

[Original punctuation provided.]

The State Board of Education may approve the establishment of a charter school in any school district by an application to the state board or may delegate authority to another government or local agency to support innovative experimental school.

- Local Government Agency
- University of Alaska

COMMISSER BISHOP stated that SB 82, an omnibus bill, allows applications for charter schools to be submitted to the State Board of Education. She explained that the State Board may approve the establishment of a charter school in any district or delegate that authority to another governmental or local agency. She said this provision was added in response to prior feedback about creating an additional charter authorizer and the desire to maintain local control. She noted that the bill allows flexibility for local government agencies or the University of Alaska to participate if interested.

[4:06:31 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN referred to SB 82, page 4, line 20, noting the phrase "in any school district in the state." She said her interpretation suggests that Anchorage could establish a charter school in the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Borough if it chose to do so.

[4:06:46 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP replied that was not her interpretation and asked for the reference location.

[4:07:00 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said SB 82, page 4, line 20, reads, "authorize the establishment of a charter school to operate as provided [in AS 14.03.255 - 14.03.290] in any school district in the state."

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that she interpreted the language as applying to local agencies as well. She explained that any local agency within an area could exercise that provision, meaning that if a district is not the authorizer, another local agency could authorize a charter school in any location.

[4:07:29 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked for clarification regarding SB 82, page 4, lines 20-24, "the board may delegate the authority to authorize establishment of a charter school to a board committee, political subdivision of the state, or state agency, including the University of Alaska; delegation under this paragraph is limited to approving or denying an application for a charter school." She said it seems like the intent is that any subdivision or political entity or state agency could establish a charter school in any community. She suggested future legislative changes could clarify intent.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated her understanding is that is correct so long as it is a government agency within that community.

[4:08:17 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated that the language of SB 82 aligns more closely with the chair's interpretation. He expressed willingness to wildly revision the language to reflect the described intent. He questioned why state agencies or the University of Alaska are listed as authorizers if the goal is to maintain local control.

[4:08:49 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP compared the concept to open school enrollment, stating that increased opportunities encourage schools to improve. She said some innovative charter school ideas have been dismissed in the past and that having additional authorizers fosters collaboration and more choices for families. She explained that charter schools differ from traditional programs because they originate from grassroots efforts by educators and parents, rather than top-down administrative decisions. She emphasized that expanding local options helps ensure innovative ideas are fully considered within existing laws and not lost in bureaucracy, allowing strong proposals to advance and weak ones to be declined.

[4:11:15 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL raised concerns about fiscal responsibility, noting that an unrestricted authorizing process could create financial risks. He asked which political subdivisions are envisioned as potential authorizers and how they would be held accountable for meeting the spending and budget requirements of the district operating the charter school.

[4:11:51 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that accountability laws for both student learning and fiscal transparency are established in state law. She explained that any authorizing entity, in cooperation with the school district, must follow the same accountability and reporting requirements as other schools. She emphasized that all charter schools operate under identical provisions for financial oversight and educational outcomes.

[4:12:19 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL expressed concern that this arrangement allows the authorizer to grant approval while leaving another entity financially responsible.

[4:12:29 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN stated she shares Senator Kiehl's concerns about state agencies and political subdivisions understand education statutes, particularly those related to accountability and student protections. She expressed doubt that the Department of Environmental Conservation would be familiar with AS 14. She noted that local school boards do have that knowledge. She said the committee would continue reviewing the section and its potential impact on locally controlled schools.

[4:13:13 PM](#)

MS. MORRISON moved to slide 12 and discussed student transportation and debt reimbursement:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### **Transportation of Students**

State transportation funding increases by 20 percent over the current statutory rate.

#### **School Debt Reimbursement**

The school bond debt reimbursement program's moratorium will be extended until 2030.

MS. stated that the bill includes a \$14.5 million annual increase in pupil transportation funding, representing approximately a 20 percent increase over current statutory rates. She said the investment demonstrates the state's commitment to safe and reliable student transportation, assisting districts with rising costs and maintaining access to education across Alaska. She added that SB 82 extends the school bond debt reimbursement moratorium to July 1, 2030. This

extension supports previously approved projects while promoting responsible fiscal management.

[4:14:11 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for the total unmet major maintenance needs of school facility buildings in Alaska, linking the question to the issue of responsible fiscal management.

[4:14:41 PM](#)

MS. HEINEKEN replied the department would get back to the committee with the amount.

SENATOR KIEHL requested data on the state's investment in major maintenance of school facilities, asking for either a four-year or five-year average.

CHAIR TOBIN requested the department to provide the information for distribution.

SENATOR KIEL stated that, based on available information, the state spends less than 1 percent annually on major maintenance of school facilities, despite the general recommendation to spend 2 to 3 percent of total facility value to prevent deferred maintenance. He said this underinvestment contributes to a growing backlog. He noted that this year's approved major maintenance request list from districts totals approximately \$250 million, which he described as only a fraction of the full need. He questioned how allowing school buildings to continue deteriorating aligns with responsible fiscal management and asked the department for clarification.

[4:15:57 PM](#)

MS. MORRISON stated that the school bond debt reimbursement will not provide new state funding for the program but will continue to fulfill existing school debt commitments. She explained that as current bonds are paid off, the overall financial obligation will decline. This reduction, she said, will contribute to long-term stability in education funding.

[4:16:39 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL acknowledged that the description provided reflects the contents of SB 82. He asked how allowing a significant and growing major maintenance backlog to worsen aligns with the principles of good fiscal management, rather than beginning to address the problem.

[4:16:56 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that the issue of addressing major maintenance is a statewide concern, as the legislature controls appropriations for building and maintaining of Regional Educational Attendance Area schools, K-12 facilities, other public buildings, and the University of Alaska. She agreed there is a backlog of major maintenance and capital improvement needs across the state. She explained that the department prioritizes funding through the Capital Improvement Project (CIP) list. She acknowledged that the State of Alaska owns a significant amount of real estate that requires ongoing investment.

[4:17:53 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN requested a list showing how much money the legislature has appropriated to the Capital Improvement Project (CIP) list for major maintenance, along with the number of times those funds have been vetoed. She said this information would help clarify the fiscal management discussion. She also asked for a list of communities that do not receive transportation funding, noting that several school districts are excluded from that allocation.

[4:18:19 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN [held SB 82 in committee.]

[4:18:51 PM](#)

At ease.

### **SB 41-PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION**

[4:19:46 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 41 "An Act relating to mental health education."

[4:20:02 PM](#)

ELVI GRAY-JACKSON, Senator, District G, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor of SB 41 introduced the bill:

Mental health is an essential component of overall well-being, and it's time we equip Alaska's youth with the tools they need to navigate life's challenges. Senate Bill 41 is a critical step toward integrating mental health education into our schools, ensuring that students develop the knowledge and skills to recognize, address, and seek support for mental health concerns. Educators, parents, healthcare

professionals, and community leaders across the state have voiced strong support for this legislation, recognizing the urgent need to address Alaska's youth mental health crisis, with suicide rates among our young people remaining alarmingly high. Providing students with age-appropriate mental health education will reduce stigma, promote early intervention, and foster resilience, key factors in preventing crises before they escalate. Again, Senate Bill 41 follows the lead of other states that have successfully implemented mental health education in schools, reinforcing that mental health well-being is just as important as physical health. Therefore, by equipping students with coping strategies and access to resources, we can create a healthier, more informed generation that is prepared for success in and beyond the classroom.

[4:21:24 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SB 41.

[4:21:48 PM](#)

JONNI MYERS, Vice-President, Kodiak College Student Government, Kodiak, Alaska, testified in support of SB 41. She shared that she experienced the onset of severe mental illness at age 12, including volatile mood swings and hallucinations, and neither she nor her young parents understood what was happening. At age 14, she asked to see a doctor and was diagnosed with severe bipolar disorder with psychotic episodes. She described the stigma she faced in high school, including students assuming she was on drugs or asking for her prescribed medication. She emphasized that mental health education would have been beneficial during her school years, as there was none available, and she had to explain her condition to peers on her own.

MS. MYERS noted that Kodiak College, where she currently studies, has no counselors, and students are working to coordinate with the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) psychology department for support. She said if college students struggle to access mental health resources, the situation is likely worse for younger students. She stressed the importance of providing mental health education from kindergarten through 12th grade to reduce stigma and help children understand and accept their conditions.

[4:25:04 PM](#)

KATHLEEN WEDEMEYER, Deputy Director, Citizens Commission on Human Rights, Seattle, Washington, testified in opposition to SB 41 as written. She urged a no vote on SB 41 in its current form, citing concerns with the biomedical model of mental health, which relies on symptom clusters rather than objective laboratory tests for diagnosis. She quoted the World Health Organization, stating that this model emphasizes diagnosis, medication, and symptom reduction over social and environmental factors. She highlighted that some medical conditions, such as autoimmune disorders, are often misdiagnosed as psychiatric conditions, leading to improper treatment. She called for the inclusion of healthcare providers such as naturopaths or medical doctors with experience treating mental health without psychiatric drugs and requested that training guidelines incorporate medical, nutritional, and other data that can mimic psychiatric disorders.

[4:27:04 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN closed public testimony on SB 41.

[4:27:14 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON thanked committee thanked the committee for hearing SB 41 and stated her desire for it become law this session.

[4:27:29 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN [held SB 41 in committee.]

[4:27:35 PM](#)

At ease.

## **SB 22-FINANCIAL LITERACY PROGRAM IN SCHOOLS**

[4:28:17 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 22 "An Act establishing a financial literacy education program for public schools; and providing for an effective date."

[4:28:28 PM](#)

HUNTER LOTTSFELDT, Staff, Senator Bill Wielechowski, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided a brief review of SB 22 stating it would establish a graduation requirement of a half credit in financial literacy for Alaska high school students. He explained that the course would cover fundamental skills such as balancing a checkbook and extend to learning how to complete the

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and apply for financial aid.

[4:29:02 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SB 22.

[4:29:22 PM](#)

FLORA TEO, President, Junior Achievement of Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 22. She stated, she has 24 years of experience educating 15,000 youth annually in financial literacy, work readiness, and entrepreneurship, that she has seen the effects of financial illiteracy across the state. She said many Alaskans struggle with debt, credit, and basic money management, which can result in financial insecurity and poverty. She emphasized that including financial literacy in school curricula will empower students to manage money confidently, avoid debt, and reach financial stability, particularly benefiting low-income and minority students. She praised Senators Wielechowski and Gray-Jackson for sponsoring the bill, and urged its passage to help build a financially literate and economically secure generation for Alaska.

[4:31:22 PM](#)

KARI NORTE, Director, External Affairs, Alaska Chamber, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 22. She stated that the Alaska Chamber, the state's largest business advocacy organization, represents over 700 members, 58,000 workers, and \$4.6 billion in wages. She said the Chamber holds a formal policy position to support the adoption of financial education as a graduation requirement by the state or school districts. She explained that teaching financial literacy in high school equips students with essential money management skills, reduces debt and financial insecurity, and promotes economic stability and individual well-being. She noted that SB 22 includes free or low-cost resources and a delayed effective date, giving schools time to prepare and implement the curriculum.

[4:33:11 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN closed public testimony on SB 22.

[4:33:19 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN [held SB 22 in committee.]

[4:33:28 PM](#)

MR. LOTTSFELDT thanked the committee for hearing SB 22.

### **SB 23-CIVICS EDUCATION**

[4:33:34 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 23 "An Act relating to civics education, civics assessments, and secondary school graduation requirements; and providing for an effective date."

[4:33:54 PM](#)

TIM LAMKIN, Staff, Senator Gary Stevens, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided a brief summary of SB 23 stating the bill aims to increase awareness of civics education and would offer students three options to meet the requirement: passing the U.S. immigration citizenship test, completing a semester-long civics course developed with the Department of Education and Early Development, or completing a project-based assessment. He explained that students must achieve a passing grade through one of these pathways in order to graduate.

[4:34:42 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SB 23; finding none, she closed public testimony.

[4:35:03 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN held SB 23 in committee.

[4:35:30 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:35 p.m.