

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 26, 2025

3:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Jesse Kiehl
Senator Mike Cronk

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 93

"An Act relating to district-wide early education programs; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 41

"An Act relating to mental health education."

- MOVED SB 41 OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL NO. 22

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

- MOVED SB 22 OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL NO. 23

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

- MOVED SB 23 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 93

SHORT TITLE: EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) TOBIN

02/12/25 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/12/25 (S) EDC, FIN
02/26/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 41

SHORT TITLE: PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(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)
02/24/25 (S) Heard & Held
02/24/25 (S) MINUTE(EDC)
02/26/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 22

SHORT TITLE: FINANCIAL LITERACY PROGRAM IN SCHOOLS

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(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)
02/24/25 (S) Heard & Held
02/24/25 (S) MINUTE(EDC)
02/26/25 (S) EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 23

SHORT TITLE: CIVICS EDUCATION

SPONSOR(s) : SENATOR(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)
02/24/25	(S)	Heard & Held
02/24/25	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/26/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

MAGGIE GRENIER, Intern
Senator Löki Tobin
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced SB 93 and provided an overview of the sectional analysis.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on SB 93.

TYLER WATTS, Associate Professor
Developmental Psychology
Department of Human Development
Teachers College
Columbia University
New York, New York

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 93.

CAROLINE STORM, Executive Director
Coalition of Education Equity
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 93.

JESSICA NESSET, Director
Early Learning

Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 93.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the fiscal notes for SB 93.

STEPHANIE BERGLUND, Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
Thread
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 93.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:30:51 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Bjorkman, Kiehl, Stevens, Cronk, and Chair Tobin.

SB 93-EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

[3:32:30 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 93 "An Act relating to district-wide early education programs; and providing for an effective date."

[3:32:48 PM](#)

MAGGIE GRENIER, Intern, Senator Löki Tobin, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, introduced SB 93 and provided an overview of the sectional analysis. She read the following introduction:

[Original punctuation provided.]

SB 93: Early Education Programs

- • State-funded Early Education Programs are currently defined by the Alaska Reads Act. To clarify Early Education Programs are district ran pre-kindergarten programs approved by DEED. For the purpose of conversation, I will refer to them as pre-kindergarten programs hereafter.
- • The Alaska Reads Act put into effect July 1st 2023, funds early education in two ways: Early

Education Program grants and foundation formula funding at 0.5 average daily membership for pre-kindergarten students.

- Specific to this legislation we will be discussing the second method of stable and predictable ADM Funding through the Base Student Allocation.

.5 ADM Funding

Currently, only three school district pre-K programs are approved for annual funding through the Foundation Formula.

- In 2024, the Anchorage School District was fully approved by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development.

- The Skagway and Valdez School Districts were conditionally approved as high-quality early education programs for the 2024-25 school year.

- DEED is currently accepting applications for early education program approval and 0.5 ADM/Formula Funding.

- Approved pre-Kindergarten programs are eligible for inclusion in the ADM counts to receive consistent, predictable funding as part of the base student allocation.

- Approved districts will be eligible to include 4- and 5-year-old preschool students in the average daily membership count.

- Under the framework approved by the act, state spending on pre-kindergarten programs will increase from \$3 million a year.

SB 93

Senate Bill 93 amends these pre-kindergarten statutes in the Alaska Reads Act by removing barriers that are preventing the expansion of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs across the state.

- SB 93 stipulates that every pre-kindergarten student in a DEED approved program is counted as a full-time equivalent student rather than one-half.

- This bill removes the limits on the number of pre-kindergarten students and programs that can be funded each year by removing

- The cap in the Alaska Reads Act that limited funding to \$3 million annually.

- If approved, SB 93 bill will turbocharge pre-K across the state with over \$9 million in funding.

Final Remarks:

- Pre-Kindergarten programs improve student readiness and reading proficiency.

- Senate Bill 93 will offer school districts stable and predictable funding for district- run pre-kindergarten programs. Bringing all students to the same starting line to give them the best chance at future life success.

[3:36:06 PM](#)

MS. GRENIER gave the following review of the sectional analysis for SB 93:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**SB 93 - Early Education Programs
Sectional Analysis
Section 1.**

Amends AS 14.17.500 by allowing enrolled pre-kindergarten students to count as full-time students in the Average Daily Membership rather than one-half.

Section 2.

Repeals statutes repealing the Alaska Reads Act district approved pre-kindergarten program sunset clauses under Section 47 Chapter 40 SLA 2022.

Section 2 is complicated in language, but not in intent. I will explain it further than what is written here and then allow time for questions or clarifications after. In the enrolled version of the Alaska Reads Act, there are statutes that are set to repeal the current pre-kindergarten funding system in 2034. Section 2 removes these repeals protecting pre-kindergarten funding in perpetuity.

Section 3.

Repeals a subsection of AS 14.17.500 limiting state funding for district approved pre-kindergarten programs.

Section 3 repeals the limits on pre-kindergarten foundation formula funding that caps the annual funds at \$3 million.

Section 4.

Establishes an effective date of July 1, 2025.

[3:37:43 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS opined that for seemed like a young age to include in SB 93. He asked why it was included.

[3:38:00 PM](#)

MICHAEL MASON, Staff, Senator Löki Tobin, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, answered questions on SB 93 stating there is ample research showing high quality pre-K programs are very beneficial to 4-year-old children, which is a priority of the Alaska Reads Act.

[3:38:37 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted that pre-K programs are play-based and developmentally appropriate. Pre-K programs do not resemble the traditional education programs of older children.

[3:39:07 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated that, in his district, a major barrier to implementing pre-kindergarten programs with state funding is the requirement to meet or exceed Head Start standards, which are tied to significant federal funding. He asked whether SB 93 addresses this issue.

[3:39:42 PM](#)

MR. MASON stated that SB 93 does not address the issue. He explained that a small change passed in legislation last year separated pre-K programs from Head Start, which previously blocked many programs from receiving Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) approval due to stricter Head Start requirements, such as home visit and healthcare requirements. He added that although the legislative change occurred, DEED has not yet implemented the necessary regulation change. He stated the hope is SB 93, along with last year's legislation, will lead to more programs receiving DEED approval and stable funding through the foundation formula.

[3:41:17 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced invited testimony on SB 93.

[3:41:55 PM](#)

TYLER WATTS, Associate Professor, Developmental Psychology, Department of Human Development, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York, testified by invitation on SB 93 and offered the presentation Summary of Current pre-K Evaluation Evidence. He moved to slide 2, and mentioned what he would discuss:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Overview

Introduce myself

Background on U.S. pre-k expansion

Summary of evidence regarding pre-k effects on children's academic outcomes

- Will not be reviewing evidence for effects on parents

Need for evaluation

[3:43:32 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 3, Who am I, and gave a brief work history:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Who am I Ph.D. in Education from the University of California, Irvine

Associate Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University

Study the long-term effects of educational programs

Can educational programs have long-lasting impacts on children's lives?

[3:44:06 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 4, Background on US pre-K expansion:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Background on US pre-k expansion

Demonstration programs from the mid-20th century suggest that high-quality, intensive, programs can have long-lasting benefits (see Elango et al., 2016)

- Abecedarian
- Perry Preschool

In the 21st century, state pre-k programs have scaled up across the country

- The programs under the pre-k label differ widely in implementation factors, funding, curricula, services, and populations targeted

MR. WATTS explained that much of the interest in early childhood education stems from foundational studies in the 1950s and 1970s, which showed long-term benefits for children from low-income communities who accessed high-quality, intensive early education. He referenced the Abecedarian Program and the Perry Preschool studies, which demonstrated positive outcomes lasting into adulthood. He noted that cost-benefit analyses of these programs revealed significant returns on investment, including lower involvement with the criminal justice system and increased independence from social services. These findings have driven long-standing policy interest in expanding early childhood education investment in the United States.

MR. WATTS stated that there has been significant investment in state-funded pre-Kindergarten initiatives across the country in the 21st century. He emphasized the difficulty of generalizing outcomes across states because the term "pre-K" lacks a consistent definition. He noted that program design varies widely by state, including differences in curriculum, services, and target populations. He cautioned that the label "pre-K" can refer to very different models depending on the setting.

[3:46:33 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 5, a graph showing the percentage of US population enrolled in from 2002 to 2023. He said the scale-up data shows the percentage of children enrolled in publicly funded preschool at ages three and four nationwide. He noted a consistent upward trend over the past 25 years, with enrollment increasing nearly every year. Currently, about 35 percent of children across the country are enrolled in publicly funded pre-Kindergarten programs.

[3:47:17 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 5, a graph showing the steady rise of 4-year-olds enrolled in state-funded pre-K. He shared updated data from his lab's ongoing research. He showed the average percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled in preschool by state, highlighting states that have significantly increased their investments over the past 20 years. He also noted the national average and Alaska's data, stating that Alaska began investing

in pre-K around 2008-2009 and currently enrolls a relatively small percentage of children in state-funded programs.

[3:48:19 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 7, a graph which shows the amount of money spent per four-year-old child across various states. He emphasized the wide variation in state investment levels and highlighted states (California, New Jersey, Vermont, West Virginia, and New Mexico) that have significantly increased spending over the past 20 to 25 years. He clarified that the data reflects spending for all four-year-olds in a state's population, not just those enrolled. He noted that Alaska, shown in red, currently spends below the national average and used the data to illustrate how Alaska compares to trends in other states.

[3:49:30 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 8 and discussed the difficulties of evaluating the effects of attending pre-K on child outcomes:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Evaluating the effect of pre-k on child outcomes is difficult

Researchers struggle to generate apples-to-apples comparisons between children who do and do not attend pre-k

Rely heavily on "quasi-experimental" methods, with few randomized studies providing "gold-standard" evidence

On-going, rigorous, evaluation efforts have been largely confined to several states/cities

- Boston, MA
- Tennessee
- North Carolina
- Tulsa, OK

[3:52:08 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 9, Compelling Evidence for Benefits to Academic Skills at Kindergarten Entry, a bar graph showing large literacy gains which exceed those from many other educational investments. He stated that rigorous evaluations consistently show preschool program access strongly improves children's academic skills at kindergarten entry. He explained that this includes gains in literacy and math, which are foundational

skills for early school success. He emphasized that the positive effects appear across numerous studies and are often substantial.

[3:53:25 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 10 and discussed mixed evidence for longer-term effects of pre-K access:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Mixed evidence for longer-term effects

When children are followed into elementary school, pre-k effects are often not sustained (see review on longer-term effects in Burchinal et al., 2024)

- During elementary school, children in comparison group may "catch-up" in academic skills to children who attended pre-k (e.g., Lipsey et al., 2018)

Some evidence for longer-term effects on adult outcomes (e.g., Gray-Lobe et al., 2021)

- Mechanism is unclear

Research area is still developing and uncertain

[3:55:42 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked whether research addresses the long-term disadvantage faced by children who enter kindergarten or first grade behind, rather than focusing on whether some children catch up. He emphasized interest in knowing the durability of the disadvantage for the bulk of children who enter kindergarten or first grade at a disadvantage.

[3:56:35 PM](#)

MR. WATTS restated the question as an inquiry into the persistent effects of starting behind in school. He explained that data show early academic skill differences are highly stable over time; children who begin school behind in math or reading often remain behind. He noted that while schools generally support learning for most children, they rarely change the relative academic ranking among students. He emphasized that this trend drives interest in preschool programs aimed at reducing early disparities, though the field struggles with "fade-out effects," where early gains from such programs often diminish unless aligned with continued support through later grades.

[3:59:44 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 11 and discussed compelling evidence that children from disadvantaged communities benefit most:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Compelling evidence that children from disadvantaged communities benefit most

Pre-K programs are often found to have compensatory effects, whereby effects are largest for children from the most disadvantaged communities (e.g., Watts et al., 2023; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013)

Effects of programs may be larger for kids who are otherwise unlikely to get high-quality, structured, learning environments (Kline & Walters, 2016)

Debate over the role that post-preschool environments play

MR. WATTS cited his own study in North Carolina, which showed greater academic gains from state-funded pre-K among under-resourced populations. He explained that the impact of a program depends on the "counterfactual condition," or what care children would receive without the program. He concluded that programs tend to have stronger effects in areas where families lack access to similar early learning opportunities.

[4:02:00 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 11 and discussed the following points regarding the urgent need for ongoing evaluation evidence:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Urgent need for ongoing evaluation evidence

Very hard to generalize findings from one setting to another

- Programs and communities differ widely across the settings that have reported rigorous evaluation evidence

Scaling up provides a prime opportunity for rigorous evaluation

If you want to know how pre-k investments will benefit children in Alaska, direct evaluation is the best way to answer that question

- Lottery studies have major advantages and can leverage existing data capacity
- Alaska could play an important role in building our evidence base

[4:05:20 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN noted that provisions for tracking early education program participation before K-12 enrollment already exist in the legislation that SB 93 would amend. She stated that an independent auditor will assess the effectiveness of both early education programs and the Alaska READS Act. She added that the findings will be compiled into a report for the 35th Legislature to review. She concluded that these measures position the state to collect quality data.

[4:05:59 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked whether, from a value standpoint, it is more effective for Alaska's education system to invest in pre-K or to allocate those funds elsewhere within the K-12 system. He acknowledged prior discussion on measurement but sought a professional opinion on where spending would most improve learning outcomes.

[4:06:36 PM](#)

MR. WATTS acknowledged the difficulty of the question and stated his preference to present research rather than make policy decisions. He offered his professional opinion that preschool investments are likely to have stronger impacts in areas with limited existing services, noting that Alaska currently shows low levels of public investment in early education. He expressed optimism about positive effects on kindergarten readiness from increased preschool access. He added a personal perspective as a parent, emphasizing that investing in young families is unlikely to be a poor use of educational funding, though he cautioned that tradeoffs depend on the effectiveness of alternative programs under consideration.

[4:08:39 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 12 and made the following concluding points:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- Pre-k findings are difficult to generalize from one setting to another
- Weight of the evidence suggests pre-k can provide important benefits to academic skills at kindergarten entry
- Evidence regarding longer-term effects is mixed and inconclusive Children from the most disadvantaged communities tend to benefit most
- Evaluation is crucial

[4:10:42 PM](#)

MR. WATTS moved to slide 13 - 14 providing his email presentation references.

[4:11:29 PM](#)

CAROLINE STORM, Executive Director, Coalition of Education Equity, Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation on SB 93 and gave the presentation The Case for Pre-K Programs for All Children in Alaska. She moved to slide 2, CEE's Mission:

[Original punctuation provided.]

CEE's Mission

Coalition for Education Equity champions a quality, equitable and adequate public education for every Alaska child through:

- Advocacy,
- Policy development and
- Legal action CEE's

What is "adequate public education"?:

An education that provides a child / young adult with the tools necessary for pursuing any path they desire after public school.

[4:12:04 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 3, Starting Smart, that contains a graph of brain development in children and other funding facts. She stated that decades of research confirm 85 to 90 percent of brain development occurs before age five, a period when many children remain at home without access to quality learning materials, developmental support, or trained educators. She highlighted that despite the critical nature of this developmental window, only about 14 percent of the U.S. education budget is allocated to children before kindergarten.

[4:12:47 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 4, containing a graph showing the rate of return to investment in Human Capital. She recalled first hearing the statistic from former Representative Seaton nearly 15 years ago that every dollar invested in pre-K saves seven dollars later, a figure that remains unchanged. She explained that the savings come from reduced spending on remedial education, social services, and the corrections system. She referenced two cornerstone studies in pre-K research, including the Heckman Principle, which demonstrates that the highest return on education investments occurs before age five. She noted this aligns with brain development science, as the early years offer the greatest opportunity for impact.

[4:13:43 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 5, Lifelong Benefits, and stated that early childhood investments yield high economic returns through increased earning potential, greater likelihood of home ownership, and reduced incarceration or criminal activity later in life.

[4:13:59 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 6, a graphic showing the return on money invested in early childhood education. She referenced the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, which followed a cohort of children randomly selected to attend preschool through a lottery, compared to peers without that opportunity, over a 40-year period. She stated that the study showed an average return on investment (ROI) of 7 percent for those who attended the city-sponsored preschool. She noted that this represents a strong market rate of return for educational investment.

[4:14:29 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 7, containing graphs on High/Scope Perry Preschool Program data on Public Costs and Benefits, and another on Major Findings through age 40. She mentioned the research found a 20 percent higher high school graduation rate among participants. She also pointed out a significant increase in IQ scores at age five for children who attended the preschool program.

[4:14:50 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 8, More Benefits, and stated that the benefits of pre-K extend beyond the child, also improving parents' earning potential by allowing them to work more or longer hours. She referenced a recent study, also mentioned by

Professor Watts, showing that pre-K attendance fosters greater discipline and motivation in children, contributing to higher graduation rates and increased college attendance. She concluded that, given these benefits, Alaska's kindergarten readiness data highlights an urgent need for access to quality early education:

[Original punctuation provided.]

MORE BENEFITS

Enrolling a child in the New Haven Public School Universal Pre-K program raised parents' average earnings by \$5,461 per year, or 21.7 percent, during the one- or two-year period when the child is of pre-kindergarten age. These gains coincide with increases in hours worked: UPK enrollment allows parents to work 12.8 more hours per week in the year following enrollment.

BOSTON PRE-K LOTTERY STUDY

"The combination of findings – that we don't see an impact on test scores, but we do see an impact on these behavioral outcomes and the likelihood of attending college – is consistent with this idea that there's some kind of behavioral or socioemotional, non-cognitive impact from preschool," says Christopher Walters, an economist at UC Berkeley who co-authored the study. The growing evidence continues to show that preschool can permanently improve kids' lives – but not necessarily that it makes them smarter, the data indicates these kids are more disciplined and motivated, which is just as important (or perhaps even more important) for their future livelihoods as how well they perform on reading or math tests.

[4:15:30 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 9 and discussed kindergarten readiness:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Kindergarten Readiness

Districts administer the Alaska Developmental Profile (ADP) to all kindergarten students.

The ADP is a tool based on multiple teacher observations recorded during the first four weeks of school.

The ADP includes 13 sets of skills and behaviors ("goals") in five domains.

[4:15:48 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 10, a chart of Domain 5 from the Alaska Developmental Profile. She stated that the chart shows Alaska's children are performing below adequate levels in phonological awareness, print concepts, and knowledge of letters and symbols. She explained that this gap places added pressure on kindergarten teachers, who must work significantly harder to help students catch up once they enter school:

Domain 5: Communication, Language and Literacy -Goals 11-13

State wide

2024-2025

Count of Students with Ratings 7831

Demonstrates phonological awareness	37.72 percent
Demonstrates awareness of print concepts	40.12 percent
Demonstrates knowledge of letters and symbols	42.96 percent

State wide

2023-2024

Count of Students with Ratings 8147

Demonstrates phonological awareness	38.27 percent
Demonstrates awareness of print concepts	41.3 percent
Demonstrates knowledge of letters and symbols	43.7 percent

State wide

2022-2023

Count of Students with Ratings 8565

Demonstrates phonological awareness	39.46 percent
Demonstrates awareness of print concepts	43.53 percent
Demonstrates knowledge of letters and symbols	45.13 percent

[4:16:23 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 11, Mississippi, and noted recent attention on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, particularly Alaska's low performance compared to Mississippi's gains. She shared that after reviewing articles on Mississippi's progress, it was clear the state has made sustained efforts since 2012 to improve outcomes. She emphasized that one key measure has been a significant investment in state-funded pre-K programs.

[Original punctuation provided.]

MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi's growth is due to a wide host of policies that have been changed over the past decades: No Child Left Behind, the nationally aligned Mississippi College and Career Readiness Standards, new tests and a new accountability system, and the Literacy Based Promotion Act, area few. Most importantly, Mississippi has had a comprehensive approach to improving education in the state since 2012.

According to Ms. Grace Breazeale, Director of Research for Mississippi First, the best explanation for the upward trajectory of Mississippi's scores over the last two decades is the state's long-term commitment to increasing the rigor of state standards and aligning state testing and accountability systems to match that rigor.

Other policies and initiatives (pre-K, high-quality curriculum, the state instructional coaching model, educator preparation reform) as well as their stellar implementation have built on the foundation of these aligned systems for defining and measuring student achievement.

[4:17:03 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 12 and stated that in 2013, the Mississippi Legislature passed the Early Learning Collaborative Act, which created the state's first publicly funded pre-K program. She noted that the program remains popular and continues to receive support.

[4:17:22 PM](#)

MS. STORM moved to slide 13, Why should public schools be involved with children before kindergarten, and shared the following reasons:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- The line between early care and education is blurry.
- Schools have a vested interest in school readiness.
- Every community has an elementary school.
- All children have access to public schools.

- Schools can help child care and Head Start programs.
- Child care and Head Start programs can help public schools.

[4:18:11 PM](#)

JESSICA NESSET, Director, Early Learning, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation on SB 93 and gave the presentation Investing in Alaska's Future: The Critical Role of Universal Preschool. She gave a brief work history and moved to slide 2, Why Early Learning Matters:

[Original punctuation provided.]

A study out of Havard shows that early childhood is the most important time in life and for brain development. 90 percent of a child's brain development happens before age of 5. (Harvard Center for the Developing Child)

Preschool supports Kindergarten readiness which is a child's ability to adapt to the classroom environment. It includes a variety of skills, including social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development.

MS. NESSET stated that kindergarten readiness does not mean achieving kindergarten academic standards, a common misconception. She emphasized that preschool primarily prepares children to be ready to learn by developing skills such as attention, listening, following directions, and peer collaboration. She stressed the importance of understanding this distinction. She added that children who attend preschool are more likely to start school at or above the level of peers whose families could afford private preschool.

[4:19:59 PM](#)

MS. NESSET moved to slide 3, Anchorage School District Preschool, and reported that the Anchorage School District operates 37 general education preschool classrooms and received 1,418 applications for the 2024-2025 preschool lottery, but can only accommodate 598 children. She stated that demand far exceeds available space and that families frequently call asking when their child will be admitted. She explained that most funding comes from grants tied to child risk factors, such as trauma, homelessness, incarceration of a parent, or an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) score, and that preschool placement is prioritized accordingly. She added that the district has

2,900 kindergartners this year, making universal preschool access unfeasible with current resources, and clarified that only 10 classrooms are funded through the 0.5 Average Daily Membership (ADM), with the remaining 27 funded by grants.

[4:22:01 PM](#)

MS. NESSET moved to slide 4 preschool provides Anchorage school district preschool

Preschool provides:

- A space to build social-emotional skills
 - Regulation of emotions and body
- Promotes cognitive development
- Opportunities to learn through play
- Develop skills of Kindergarten readiness
 - Phonemic Awareness and numeracy
- Allows for early identification and intervention
 - Early Intervention if needed
- Help break the cycle of adversity and trauma
 - Support with Mental Health

[4:23:38 PM](#)

MS. NESSET moved to slide 5, Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences ACEs in Alaska and stated that by age five, 16 percent of Alaskan children have already experienced two Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which may include physical, sexual, or verbal abuse, household dysfunction, mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, separation, or incarceration. She emphasized that ages four to five—preschool age—are critical for intervention. She explained that providing a safe, nurturing environment with access to mental health support and trusted adults can help disrupt these harmful cycles and also give parents time to work and develop their own skills.

MS. NESSET stated that many of the district's grants require serving high-risk families, and eligibility is often based on specific qualifying risk factors. She noted that these criteria align with the challenges previously described, such as adverse childhood experiences.

[4:25:12 PM](#)

MS. NESSET moved to slide 6, Evidence Based Success, containing a graph showing the major findings from the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study at age 40. She said the Perry Preschool Project

from the 1960s was a randomized study that followed participants for over 40 years. She stated that the group who attended the program had significantly better outcomes than the non-program group. Participants were five times less likely to have been arrested, more likely to own homes, and earned \$20,000 more annually.

[4:25:51 PM](#)

MS. NESSET moved to slide 7, a chart comparing 2024-2025 Fall m-Class scores of kindergarten students who did and did not attend the Anchorage School District preschool program. She outlined student subgroup data, including Low-Income (Title I), Economically Disadvantaged Families (EDF), English language learners (ELL), and Students with Disabilities (SWD). She reported that 15.2 percent of ASD preschool students scored above the benchmark on the fall assessment, compared to 12.9 percent of students who did not attend ASD preschool, showing a 2.3 percent performance advantage for ASD preschool participants. Additionally, 51.9 percent of ASD preschool students scored well below the benchmark, compared to 58.4 percent in the non-ASD group, again showing stronger outcomes for those who attended ASD preschool across all subgroups.

MS. NESSET explained that data collection has been a challenge, particularly regarding fiscal information, but a change is expected in the spring with the pilot of a new literacy component, My Teaching Strategies curriculum, which will be implemented in Anchorage and is endorsed by the state.

[4:28:27 PM](#)

MS. NESSET moved to slide 8, Summary of ASD Preschool to Kinder Data, and emphasized that across all categories, students who attended ASD preschool consistently performed slightly better than those who did not. She clarified that while the M-Class assessment is not a preschool-specific tool, it was administered to current ASD kindergarteners who previously attended ASD preschool. She expressed enthusiasm about the positive outcomes and the potential of the screener, which will be used throughout the next school year:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Summary of ASD Preschool to Kinder Data

Overall those who attended ASD Preschool out preformed those who did not.

- Title 1:

- A much larger percentage of No ASD PreK students are "Well Below Benchmark" (74.3 percent) compared to ASD PreK students (58.5 percent).
- There is a large difference in the above benchmark category. ASD PreK students have 10.9 percent while No ASD PreK students have 5.1 percent.
- EDS (Economically Disadvantaged Students):
 - Similar to the overall trend, a higher percentage of No ASD PreK students are "Well Below Benchmark" (71.3 percent) compared to ASD PreK students (56.7 percent).
 - The ASD PreK students have a higher percentage in all other categories.
- ELL (English Language Learners):
 - The majority of both groups are "Well Below Benchmark," with No ASD PreK students slightly higher (71.7 percent vs. 68.1 percent).
- SWD (Students with Disabilities):
 - Again, a higher percentage of No ASD PreK students are "Well Below Benchmark" (71.3 percent) compared to ASD PreK students (60.5 percent).
 - The ASD PreK students have a higher percentage in all other categories.

[4:29:21 PM](#)

MS. NESSET moved to slide 10, Early Learning: An Economic Investment and mentioned the economic benefits of preschool:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Early Learning: An Economic Investment

When children have access to High Quality Preschool we see a direct correlation to

- Higher maternal labor workforce
- Students are starting on or above the same playing field as peers in Kindergarten
- Increased education and income
- Lower crime rates
- Increases employment opportunities for Teachers and paraprofessionals in the field

MS. NESSET shared that many preschool paraprofessionals are parents who can work because their children attend preschool, which enables them to transition into kindergarten with support. She explained that even a four-hour preschool day significantly reduces child care costs for families. She highlighted the high cost of child care in Anchorage, noting she personally pays \$1,400 per month for her four-year-old. She recounted a recent call from a mother urgently requesting part-time preschool access to afford care for the remaining hours of the day.

[4:30:59 PM](#)

MS. NESSET moved to slide 11, The True Cost of High-Quality Child Care and Preschool in Alaska and shared the following costs:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**The True Cost of High-Quality Child Care and Preschool
in Alaska**

According to U.S. Chamber of Commerce report from 2024:

- Childcare issues result in an estimated \$165 million loss annually for Alaska's economy.
- Absences and employee turnover cost Alaska employers an estimated \$152 million per year.
- Alaska loses an estimated \$13 million annually in tax revenue due to childcare issues.

MS. NESSET stated she is collaborating with both the Anchorage School District (ASD) and the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Board to develop solutions that support early education and child care citywide and statewide, funded by marijuana tax revenue. She stressed the importance of strengthening and expanding early education systems to support families and build a local workforce. She highlighted King Career Center High School's program where students earn Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials, allowing them to enter child care or paraprofessional roles immediately after graduation. She added that efforts are underway to create partnerships so that after the four-hour preschool day, another agency can provide care for the remainder of the day, enabling parents to work full-time.

[4:32:56 PM](#)

MS. NESSET moved to slide 12 and discussed the reasoning for increasing the ADM in Alaska to 1.0:

[Original punctuation provided.]

The Need for 1.0 ADM in Alaska and SB 93

- The Need for 1.0 ADM in Alaska and SB93
- ASD was the only district to initially receive the .5 ADM
- State-Wide supported Curriculum, Assessment Tools, High Quality Standards
- 1.0 will allow ASD to open an additional 10 classrooms to serve the Anchorage Community.
- Very challenging for other districts in rural Alaska to meet the requirements
- DEED facilitates monthly calls to support curriculum, Purchases the assessment tools and guides through the standards
- Opportunities for other districts to offer high quality preschool to students and families

MS. NESSET concluded that the 1.0 ADM is essential to sustain and expand early education programs. She emphasized the challenges of operating solely on grant funding and described the daily strain it causes. She stated that both students and families deserve greater support and affirmed that current data demonstrates the effectiveness of preschool programs.

[4:36:14 PM](#)

HEATHER HEINEKEN, Director, Finance and Support Services, Department of Education and Early Development, Anchorage, Alaska, explained the fiscal notes for SB 93. She said the first is for the Public Education Fund (OMB Component Number 2804, dated February 22, 2025), which reflects an increase in funding for department-approved district-wide early education programs by adjusting the student full-time equivalent (FTE) count in the funding formula from 0.5 to 1.0. She stated that the Governor's FY 2026 budget includes \$7.7 million to support both current and anticipated needs if SB 93 passes, with projected increases based on FY 2025 funding of \$2,050,800 and annual growth of approximately \$300,000. Future funding projections include \$2.65 million in FY27, \$2.9 million in FY28, \$3.2 million in FY29, \$3.5 million in FY30, and \$3.8 million in FY31.

MS. HEINEKEN said the second fiscal note pertains to the Foundation Program (OMB Component Number 141, dated February 22, 2025) and mirrors the Public Education Fund analysis. However,

it reflects a \$0 amount because funding is transferred from the general fund into the Public Education Fund rather than directly into the Foundation Component. The fiscal note analysis is informational purposes only.

[4:38:34 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked, based on the fiscal note, how many additional districts are expected to implement pre-K programs each year.

MS. HEINEKEN responded that there is no specific estimate at this time. She noted that Anchorage, the largest district in the state, is already participating, so growth projections were based on experience with the program to date.

[4:39:18 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL referenced an earlier discussion about removing barriers that have prevented many districts from offering pre-K and acknowledged that some enabling regulations are still pending. He noted that expanding access will come with a cost and asked for an estimate of how many additional districts or students could be served under the funding levels outlined in the fiscal note.

[4:39:59 PM](#)

MS. HEINEKEN explained that current projections are based on assumptions and acknowledged that future appropriations may need to be adjusted. She stated that participation in the program has been lower than initially expected, and the \$300,000 annual increase is based solely on the experience of ASD programs. She noted that without additional data, it is difficult to estimate how many more districts or students may participate.

[4:40:54 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SB 93.

[4:41:21 PM](#)

STEPHANIE BERGLUND, Chief Executive Officer, Thread, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 93. She stated that SB 93 represents an important step toward expanding pre-K access and affordability, supporting young children and families across Alaska. She emphasized that pre-K is one component of a broader early childhood education system and highlighted the need for additional state investment to meet existing gaps. She cited data showing that approximately 23,000 children lack access to early education, while only about 2,500 are currently in pre-K and 11,000 in other licensed early education programs. She

explained that raising the funding rate from 0.5 to 1.0 ADM will strengthen pre-K programs, help launch new ones, and possibly extend existing services—especially critical in high-cost rural areas. She expressed support for the bill's early progress and a commitment to continued collaboration to build a strong, mixed-delivery early childhood education system. She added that coupling SB 93 with broader investments in child care will improve affordability, expand family options, and lead to stronger education outcomes statewide.

[4:43:49 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN closed public testimony on SB 93.

[4:43:57 PM](#)

MR. MASON responded to Senator Kiehl's earlier question regarding legislation passed the previous year. He clarified that it was House Bill 148, signed into law on June 26, which removed the requirement that pre-K programs meet Head Start performance standards in order to receive foundation formula funding—currently at 0.5 Average Daily Membership (ADM), and proposed to increase to 1.0 ADM under SB 93. He explained that this requirement had previously prevented some pre-K programs from receiving approval from the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), as they could not meet the healthcare-related standards tied to Head Start, which were originally included in the Alaska Reads Act. He noted that House Bill 148 had an immediate effective date, but the corresponding regulations have not yet been promulgated.

[4:44:57 PM](#)

MS. GARANIER stated that declining enrollment has resulted in fewer funds being distributed through the Foundation Funding Formula due to lower Average Daily Memberships (ADM). She explained that increasing pre-Kindergarten funding to a full ADM would help offset this funding shortfall. She emphasized that pre-K programs already exist in Alaska, and SB 93 would expand them as additional funding becomes available. She described SB 93 as a way to "turbocharge" pre-K programs for all Alaskans.

[4:45:57 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN held SB 93 in committee.

[4:46:09 PM](#)

At ease.

SB 41-PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

[4:46:24 PM](#)

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

[4:46:40 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited the will of the committee.

[4:46:42 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to report SB 41, work order 34-LS0078\N, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[4:46:54 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and SB 41 was reported from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

SB 22-FINANCIAL LITERACY PROGRAM IN SCHOOLS

[4:47:15 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of 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."

[4:47:31 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited the will of the committee.

[4:47:32 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to report SB 22, work order 34-LS0255\A, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[4:47:45 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and SB 22 was reported from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

SB 23-CIVICS EDUCATION

[4:48:06 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."

[4:48:17 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited the will of the committee.

[4:48:17 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to report SB 23, work order 34-LS0259\I, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[4:48:31 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and SB 23 was reported from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

[4:49:11 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:49 p.m.