

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 14, 2025

3:33 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. 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. 151

"An Act relating to headlice in public schools."

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 118

"An Act relating to the Board of Regents of the University of Alaska."

- MOVED SB 118 OUT OF COMMITTEE

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)
02/24/25	(S)	Heard & Held
02/24/25	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/03/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/03/25	(S)	Heard & Held
03/03/25	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/14/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 151

SHORT TITLE: SCHOOL DISTRICT HEAD LICE POLICY
SPONSOR(s): BJORKMAN

03/28/25	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/28/25	(S)	EDC, FIN
04/11/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
04/11/25	(S)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
04/14/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 118

SHORT TITLE: ADD FACULTY MEMBER UNIV BOARD OF REGENTS
SPONSOR(s): STATE AFFAIRS

03/05/25	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/05/25	(S)	EDC, FIN
03/26/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/26/25	(S)	Heard & Held
03/26/25	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/11/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
04/11/25	(S)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
04/14/25	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

DEENA BISHOP, COMMISSIONER

Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided a recap of SB 82 on behalf of the administration.

SUSAN MCCAULEY, Principal

Birchtree Charter School
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 82.

HEATHER GOTTSBALL, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on SB 82.

NELS ANDREASSEN, Executive Director
Alaska Municipal League
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on SB 82.

QUINCY AZIMI-TABRIZI, Deputy State Director
Americans for Prosperity
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 82.

JOHN WEETMAN, Principal
Matsu School District
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 82.

AUDRI JIRAK, representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 82.

AMANDA THOMPSON, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 82.

SENATOR JESSE BJORKMAN, District D
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of SB 151.

SAVAYA BIEBER, Staff
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided a presentation on SB 151.

KELLY MANNING, Deputy Director
Division of Innovation & Education Excellence
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered an overview of the fiscal note OMB 2796 for SB 151.

JOE HAYS, Staff
Senator Scott Kawasaki
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided closing remarks on SB 118.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:33:26 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:33 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Bjorkman, Kiehl, Cronk, and Chair Tobin. Senator Stevens arrived thereafter.

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

[3:35:32 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."

[3:35:59 PM](#)

DEENA BISHOP, COMMISSIONER, Department of Education & Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, provided a recap of SB 82 on behalf of the administration. She stated that previously she was asked, "What problem is SB 82 trying to solve?" After reflection she determined SB 82 is a response to the reality that Alaska is on the wrong side of the nation's most critical education metrics. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Alaska ranks near the bottom in reading and math and has the highest teacher turnover rate in the country. She stated that these challenges are not new but are worsening. She said while funding is essential, experience shows that funding alone is not the answer. She noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Alaska received an unprecedented influx of federal dollars; however, despite that investment, the

state did not see meaningful improvement in student achievement or teacher retention.

[3:37:13 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that SB 82 combines strategic investment with targeted policy to ensure public dollars are aligned with initiatives that made a measurable difference. She referenced the Alaska Reads Act, passed in 2022, and explained that lawmakers consulted national and local experts to identify the most critical components of effective reading instruction. She said the result was a comprehensive policy rooted in the science of reading.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP reported that in the first full year of implementation, the percentage of kindergarten students reading at grade level increased from 24 percent to 60 percent. She stated that such progress came from a comprehensive approach that includes early screening to identify student risk, aligned curriculum, high-quality instruction, structured interventions, rigorous professional development for teachers, and continuous parent engagement and communication.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that SB 82 builds on that success by targeting funding to increase reading achievement through student growth and achievement incentives, strengthening the educator workforce through lump-sum retention payments, increasing career and technical education funding to provide hands-on pathways to graduation and postsecondary opportunities, and supporting classroom environments free from cell phone distractions.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP added that SB 82 expands public school choice, including neighborhood schools, charter schools, correspondence programs, and boarding schools. She stated that Alaska's public charter schools led the nation in the most recent NAEP rankings and demonstrated exceptional achievement in reading and math, outperforming peers nationwide by one full year of learning. She said this success shows that when families are given options and schools are empowered to innovate, outcomes improve.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP concluded that Alaska needs additional investment in public education, but that investment must be paired with strong, evidence-based policy rooted in transparency and accountability.

[3:39:46 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN commented that that in working to improve education in Alaska, he had observed that charter schools in his district maintained high standards and high expectations for students regarding what they should know, understand, and be able to do.

SENATOR BJORKMAN stated that standards across other educational opportunities in the state varied widely, including standards for high school graduation, readiness for high school, and expectations regarding regular attendance. He noted that Alaska values personal liberty and freedom and allows parents and students significant latitude in how they engage in education, including attendance. He stated that while the constitution requires education for children, there is no meaningful expectation that they attend school consistently.

[3:41:02 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN said that when discussing COVID-19 funding and outcomes, it is important to recognize that state and local funding remained flat during that period and that schools lost funding as enrollment declined. He stated he is not certain that attributing outcomes solely to the influx of federal dollars is helpful.

SENATOR BJORKMAN further stated that blaming teachers or professional organizations is also not productive. He shared that he had been a teacher in Alaska for many years and had brought forward ideas to improve education, even when referred to as a "problem teacher." He stated he would continue bringing forward ideas focused on raising standards, expecting regular attendance, and requiring students to demonstrate measurable academic growth.

[3:42:21 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN said that until the state establishes clear expectations and accountability for all stakeholders, it would remain difficult to ensure education dollars are used effectively. He expressed interest in further discussion about attendance expectations, performance measurements, alignment to state standards or nationally normed benchmarks, and strategic investments tied to clear outcomes. He stated he looks forward to continuing the conversation.

[3:43:08 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS arrived at the meeting.

[3:43:32 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN mentioned that the NAEP website strongly urges caution against suggesting that NAEP scores are indicative of or causal to overall school performance. She said NAEP advises considering scores alongside socioeconomic status and other student supports. She referenced 2024 fourth-grade reading scores and noted that Alaska's non-economically disadvantaged students scored 214, which was above the national average of 212. She stated that economically disadvantaged students scored 186. She asked Commissioner Bishop to explain the difference between the two groups and the services provided.

[3:44:19 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP responded that additional federal funding was provided through Title [I] for economically disadvantaged students. She stated that school districts have discretion in determining how to allocate those funds at the school level and develop individual school plans accordingly. She said the governor's bill includes open enrollment provisions to allow students greater access to schools regardless of residence and to help address barriers, including transportation. She stated that where families live is sometimes a choice and sometimes not, and open enrollment seeks to reduce geographic barriers.

[3:45:49 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP explained that additional services are provided through Title I programs and that pre-K, as included in the Alaska Reads Act, also supports early literacy development. She stated that specific differences in services would require reviewing each school's Title [I] plan. She said the focus of Title [I] funding was to provide additional services to support students who were not arriving at school ready to read or perform academically at grade level.

[3:46:14 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN replied that she did not fully understand the explanation, noting that the performance gap between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students was approximately 26 points on the NAEP and has persisted since 2003. She asked why the gap has continued and how to reduce it. She acknowledged that SB 82 codifies open enrollment practices already in place in Alaska and asked what additional solutions might address the disparity.

[3:46:56 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that school choice matters and referenced a Harvard study on NAEP data related to charter schools. She said the scores were a surprise:

"Specifically speaking for the students that were economically challenged. Our ranking was number one. But when you remove the students who were economically challenged from that study, our ranking dropped. And so, our non-economically challenged students, if you will, actually dropped in the ranking according to the nation. But in Alaska, they actually stayed at the number one ranking. And the same was true for, interestingly enough, non-white. When you remove the non-white students from the student capture, they dropped. And it was of interest to Harvard to ask why and to share that something about Alaska's choice, especially for Alaska Native students, is working."

[3:47:54 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP stated that early literacy is critical to closing achievement gaps and referenced the Alaska Reads Act as a key policy focused on early skills development. She said research on effective literacy instruction had long existed but that consistent implementation had varied. She stated that strong policy and high standards are important for all schools, not just charter schools. She agreed that standards and attendance expectations should remain high statewide. She acknowledged that reasons for absenteeism varies by community. She concluded that while there was no simple solution to closing the achievement gap, the state could continue refining its laws related to public school choice and other evidence-based policies that had shown results. She stated that those principles informed the governor's legislation.

[3:49:13 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN clarified that the Harvard study referenced compared charter schools to charter schools, not charter schools to traditional public schools. She further noted that Alaska's charter schools were approximately 86 percent white and that Alaska did not have a statistically representative sample of Black students within NAEP data for evaluation. She added that the study's author, Mr. Peterson, acknowledged significant errors in codifying Indigenous students. She suggested assumptions were made.

[3:49:41 PM](#)

SENATOR CRONK stated that many of the issues discussed, including absenteeism and truancy enforcement, fell under local control. He said school districts determine their own policies and referenced Gateway School District's strict truancy

enforcement practices, including sending letters to families. He asked if DEED intends to take a more top-down approach or leave those decisions to districts. He stated that parental engagement, particularly reading to young children, is out of the direct control of districts. He emphasized that early literacy development is strongly influenced by parents reading with their children and noted that technology distractions present additional challenges. He questioned how the state can address parental involvement when it cannot compel families to prioritize education at home.

[3:51:04 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN said the number one predictor of student success is parent income.

SENATOR BJORKMAN referenced comments from educators that many students enter kindergarten significantly behind in reading skills and suggest students start school earlier. He shared that he began kindergarten shortly after turning five. He asked Commissioner Bishop for her opinion on the age children should start school.

COMMISSIONER BISHOP replied that early learning was important. She referenced programs such as Parents as Teachers that supported early intervention and early education in homes and childcare settings. She stated that state law allows approximately 14 different educational options for parents. She asked whether he was referring specifically to attendance in a classroom setting, noting that education could occur in various formats. She stated she supports early learning and early engagement, particularly in reading.

[3:53:05 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN clarified that he was asking whether students should engage in an educational modality that includes measurable assessment of growth prior to age seven. He referenced current statute requiring attendance beginning at age seven for first grade and asked whether the state should expect five- and six-year-olds to begin what was traditionally recognized as kindergarten, with accountability for learning progress.

[3:53:56 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP responded that entry into school is a parent's choice. She stated that she supports kindergarten and believes it provides valuable opportunities for students. She noted that during her tenure, many kindergarten programs

transitioned from part-day to full-day instruction, which increased student engagement. She acknowledged the relationship between parent income and student outcomes but stated she would not characterize it as causation. She said families with greater means often have greater opportunities to prepare their children academically, which influences learning outcomes. She stated that schools seek to help equalize opportunities so all students can thrive. She asked whether the question referred to statutory requirements for compulsory education. She stated that beginning kindergarten at age five or first grade at age six should remain a parent's opportunity and choice.

[3:55:08 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN stated that the legislature would address the issue directly through legislation. He said Alaska often emphasizes individual liberty and personal choice but does not consistently pair those freedoms with accountability for students and families. He stated that choices made by families affect the educational opportunities available to students. He expressed concern that when students do not engage in educational opportunities, schools are sometimes blamed for outcomes that were influenced by family or cultural decisions. He stated that the success of public education in Alaska was ultimately a cultural choice reflecting how much the state values education. He said that if the state prioritizes individual liberty over consistent participation in education, that is a policy choice, but schools and teachers should not be blamed for outcomes resulting from those choices. He stated that future legislation will address attendance, assessment, and academic standards more directly. He concluded that measurable growth requires accountability and engagement. He stated that progress cannot occur without consistent participation and support for learning.

[3:57:55 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated that his question relates to earlier comments regarding open enrollment and the Chair's observation that parental income is the strongest predictor of student success. He also referenced Commissioner Bishop's comment that not all families have the means to choose where they live. He noted that in many of the communities he represents, there is only one school, so open enrollment is not a significant issue. He said there are a couple of districts that make effort to facilitate school choice through open enrollment. He expressed interest in the equity and diversity benefits of open enrollment, particularly in larger communities with multiple schools. He noted research suggesting that greater socioeconomic

and political integration in schools improves overall outcomes. He stated concern about the transportation costs associated with open enrollment in larger districts. He said the bill directs the department to assist with transportation, and the fiscal note includes guesses about costs depending on assumptions. He asked whether the department has a clearer understanding of how the transportation program would operate, including rules and limits, particularly since the details would develop through department regulation.

4:00:19 PM

COMMISSIONER BISHOP responded that in other states with open enrollment policies, participation rates were typically around one percent and are limited to available seats. She stated that the program would operate only where open seats exist and would not be pervasive. She said funding for transportation would be finite and that districts would have flexibility in implementation. She explained that some districts organize transportation through hub systems rather than neighborhood-to-neighborhood routes. She noted that charter schools currently receive per-pupil transportation funding and that some participate in district transportation systems while others do not. She referenced existing provisions under the McKinney-Vento Act, which allows transportation assistance for students experiencing housing instability, including gas cards or other supports. She stated that similar mechanisms could inform implementation of open enrollment transportation. She explained that participation would depend on seat availability, district interest, and parental demand. She stated that open enrollment often allows parents to place children near their workplace. She acknowledged that implementation would be complex, involving seat capacity, funding limits, and district coordination. The department would address the issue incrementally through regulation to reduce barriers for families seeking alternate placements.

4:03:08 PM

SENATOR KIEHL stated that the concept was compelling but expressed concern that SB 82 did not include a cap on transportation costs. He suggested that if the provision moved forward, it might be appropriate to delay implementation to allow regulations to be written and costs more clearly identified before appropriation. He emphasized the importance of entering the program with fiscal clarity.

CHAIR TOBIN stated that she shared concerns regarding equitable distribution of finite transportation funds. She questioned how

the state would ensure fair access across districts, noting that Anchorage and Mat-Su could potentially consume the majority of available funding.

[4:04:18 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP responded that interest in open enrollment transportation was primarily anticipated in Southcentral Alaska, particularly between Mat-Su and Anchorage. She stated that approximately 40 percent of Mat-Su residents commute daily to Anchorage for work, and that this commuting pattern is a key consideration in developing the legislation.

[4:04:58 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced invited testimony on SB 82.

[4:05:16 PM](#)

SUSAN MCCAULEY, Principal, Birchtree Charter School, Palmer, Alaska, testified by invitation on SB 82 stating that Birchtree was a K-8 Waldorf-inspired charter school serving 415 students. She said she would address common misconceptions about charter schools in Alaska, as charter schools are referenced in SB 82.

MS. MCCAULEY stated that charter schools do not receive more funding than traditional neighborhood schools. She explained that Alaska statute requires funding of charter schools in the same manner as other public schools. She said that smaller class sizes in some charter schools reflect intentional staffing decisions rather than additional funding.

[4:06:41 PM](#)

MS. MCCAULEY stated that many charter schools lease their facilities and pay those costs from their operating budgets. She reported that Birchtree's annual lease cost is \$703,000, representing approximately 14 percent of its \$5.1 million budget. She said Birchtree has paid lease costs since its opening 14 years ago. She contrasted this with other Mat-Su schools, whose buildings are owned by the borough.

MS. MCCAULEY stated that districts are permitted to charge charter schools up to 4 percent of their budget, excluding facility costs, as an indirect rate for services such as human resources, payroll, and information technology. She noted that some legislation proposes increasing that cap to 8 percent. She said such an increase could double Birchtree's indirect fee from \$175,000 to over \$350,000, which would require eliminating staff positions.

[4:08:59 PM](#)

MS. MCCAULEY stated that Birchtree currently serves 61 students that qualify for special education, representing 14 percent of enrollment, and that historically the school had served special education students at rates equal to or exceeding the district average. She stated that SB 82 supports parent voice and choice and expressed support for that approach.

[4:09:47 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for clarification regarding facility costs, stating other schools in the district also incurred operations and maintenance expenses.

MS. MCCAULEY responded that Birchtree pays all utilities, internet, snow removal, and garbage collection, totaling approximately \$100,000 annually, in addition to its lease costs. She stated that while districts also incurred operations and maintenance expenses, Birchtree uniquely pays lease costs exceeding \$700,000 annually.

SENATOR KIEHL asked whether other entities pay facility space costs for traditional Mat-Su schools and sought clarification on how those costs were covered.

[4:11:13 PM](#)

MS. MCCAULEY responded that Birchtree receives the same per-pupil funding as other public schools and did not receive additional facility funding. She stated that all facility expenses were paid from the same statutory funding formula provided to public schools.

[4:11:45 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER BISHOP clarified that most Mat-Su school buildings are owned by the Mat-Su Borough and funded by taxpayers.

CHAIR TOBIN asked whether Birchtree's lease requires payment for capital improvements or deferred maintenance, or whether those costs were borne by the property owner.

[4:12:29 PM](#)

MS. MCCAULEY responded that responsibility depended on the lease agreement. She stated that some maintenance costs are covered by the landlord and others by the school. She provided an example of approximately \$18,000 spent on carpet replacement due to wear and tear, which the school covered under its lease terms.

[4:13:14 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked where in statute are charter schools required to pay for leased space, noting that a charter school in Juneau operates in district-owned space.

MS. MCCAULEY offered her understanding that because there is no exception for facility costs in statute, the expenses are the charter schools. Charter schools are not exempt from costs relevant to operation. She stated that because charter schools receive the same per-pupil funding as other public schools, they are responsible for all operating costs, including facilities, unless otherwise provided. She opined the myth is Charter schools receive per-pupil funding but have facility costs that are significant compared to traditional public schools. She noted that some charter schools located in district-owned facilities still pay rent and, in some cases, utilities to occupy those spaces.

[4:14:55 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL said the facility issue seems to involve two factors. One factor is the cap on indirect which limits a district's ability to recover costs. He suggested that if districts could fully recover costs, charter schools might be housed in district-owned space with maintenance and operations covered similarly to other public schools. He further stated that the decision in some districts to require charter schools to lease expensive space appears to be a local control decision rather than a statewide problem requiring state intervention.

MS. MCCAULEY responded that in the Mat-Su School District there is no available space in district-owned facilities for its six charter schools to occupy. She stated that Mat-Su is experiencing enrollment growth, unlike many other districts. She added that the Mat-Su Borough and School District recently took action to address the facility issue by placing a bond proposition before voters to fund construction of three charter school facilities, including Birchtree. She said the proposition passed and that construction of a new school would significantly reduce Birchtree's facility costs in the future. She expressed appreciation for the borough and district's cooperation and support.

CHAIR TOBIN commented that she is happy the school district made a decision that is right for their community. She said everyone on the committee is a strong supporter of local control.

[4:17:25 PM](#)

HEATHER GOTTSBALL, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation on SB 82. She said she is a community advocate for school choice. She stated that she was born in Bethel, raised in Kenai and Anchorage, and later served in the military. She said she worked as a high school English teacher in multiple states and has observed various education systems. She stated that school choice provides families with greater opportunity to support their children's academic success. She said she has attended both traditional public schools and public charter schools and values differentiated educational opportunities.

MS. GOTTSBALL expressed support for SB 82, particularly its open enrollment provisions, which she said would allow families to select schools and academic pathways that meet their children's specific needs. She stated that the bill requires transparent reporting on school capacity, applications, and enrollment decisions. She noted that the bill provides transportation assistance for students attending schools outside their assigned attendance area and includes funding adjustments for mid-year enrollment increases.

[4:20:02 PM](#)

MS. GOTTSBALL stated that SB 82 also supports charter schools by allowing initial charter applications to go directly to the State Board of Education. She said she has spoken with community members who experienced barriers in initiating charter schools under the current process. She noted that SB 82 would allow the University of Alaska and local governments to authorize new charter schools. She further stated that SB 82 increases the correspondence program funding factor from 0.90 to 1.0 full-time equivalent and expands access to special education services and block grants.

MS. GOTTSBALL stated that SB 82 includes provisions requiring districts to adopt policies limiting student cell phone use during the school day, while allowing exceptions for emergencies, health needs, and individualized education programs.

[4:22:03 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SB 82.

[4:22:29 PM](#)

NELS ANDREASSEN, Executive Director, Alaska Municipal League, Juneau, Alaska, provided testimony on SB 82:

[Original punctuation provided.]

It feels like an auspicious moment in time.

We want to acknowledge all the hard work that this body and its counterpart in the House have applied to the question of not just increasing State funding for public education, but seeking other improvements that would increase efficacy thereof.

Passage last week of an increase to the BSA of \$1,000 is a critical step forward, and back. If the Governor does veto HB 69 as indicated, we are left with school districts that remain underfunded. Maybe there is a veto override, and maybe there isn't, but the potential of the latter increases significantly the risks involved for Alaska's schools, and ultimately communities.

At the same time, there are clearly areas of compromise that were engendered by negotiations on HB 69. We hope that where agreement was fostered, it can be the foundation for next steps.

SB 82, and its companion in the House, are starting points perhaps, which offer building blocks for legislation that may navigate a path for compromise as we move forward. This remains a priority for AML, since local governments fund about 50 percent of the State's public education obligation in municipal school districts, where the majority of students attend, and own and maintain 75 percent of schools in Alaska.

We have said before that we appreciate that the Governor, alongside House and Senate leadership, have prioritized addressing the challenges experienced by Alaska's public education system. We fully understand that both bodies need the votes to advance legislation that increases and inflation proofs the BSA, without threat of a gubernatorial veto. Clearly, the multiple sides involved must reach a compromise. We recognize that this involves careful negotiations between the Governor, and both majorities and minorities in the Legislature.

Please, for the sake of our students, families, communities, and businesses, let's continue to work toward negotiated solutions.

First, note that AML members have voted to support a higher and inflation-proof BSA, and we agree that this is a different than and as important a discussion as accountability measures. Clearly, a starved system doesn't produce results that attract and retain Alaskans.

We are interested in a Task Force on Education Funding, that was earlier proposed and are prepared to engage diligently in offering solutions or contributing perspectives that may not otherwise arise.

4:25:24 PM

QUINCY AZIMI-TABRIZI, Deputy State Director, Americans for Prosperity, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 82. She said she supports expanding opportunities for Alaska students by strengthening open enrollment, allowing multiple charter school authorizers, and increasing funding for correspondence school programs. She stated she grew up in Anchorage and attended both a public charter school and a neighborhood public school. She said she had great teachers and access to an education that worked for her but emphasized that every child learns differently. She stated that families across Alaska, both urban and rural, deserve educational options that fit their learning styles.

MS. AZIMI-TABRIZI stated that open enrollment empowers parents to choose the school that best fits their children's needs regardless of zip code. She noted that 84 percent of states offer some form of open enrollment and that 70 percent of Americans support it across party lines. She stated that Alaska is the only state that relies solely on local school districts to authorize charter schools. She noted that every other state, except for Hawaii, has multiple authorizers, including universities and independent chartering boards. She stated that expanding authorizer options would help communities create schools that meet local needs. Public correspondence schools already serve nearly 1 in 5 students in Alaska. However, they only receive about 90 percent of the BSA compared to district schools that average 2.2 times the BSA, after multipliers. These programs save the state around \$150 million per year. Even increasing correspondence schools to the full BSA would save the

state about \$7,200 per student, while giving families better access to resources and curriculums. She opined that together the policies give students and educators more options and make sure every child in Alaska has a real chance to succeed. She urged support for SB 82.

[4:27:45 PM](#)

JOHN WEETMAN, Principal, Matsu School District, Wasilla, Alaska, Testified in support of SB 82. He stated he celebrated his fortieth year as an educator in Alaska and explained that Twin Rivers operates as a correspondence charter school serving about 600 K-12 students and families in the Mat-Su Borough. He stated SB 82 would improve educational access and innovation across Alaska by empowering families, educators, and local communities and by allowing charter school applications to go directly to the State Board of Education, which would streamline the process and reduce delays and barriers for innovative educators and underserved communities. He stated expanding charter school authorizers to include the University of Alaska and local governments would create collaboration opportunities and support a wider range of educational models. He added that increasing the funding formula for correspondence students from 0.9 to 1.0 FTE would correct a longstanding inequity and acknowledge the growing role and success of home-based and flexible learning models. He said SB 82 would expand access to special education services for correspondence students, make them eligible for block grants, and support educational opportunity for students and families across Alaska.

[4:30:29 PM](#)

AUDRI JIRAK, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in support of SB 82. She stated that she has two children enrolled in American Charter School. She said Alaska ranks near the bottom nationally in math and reading test scores while charter schools perform at the top. She stated that SB 82 would increase school choice and collaboration and allow additional charter schools to be established. She noted that there is a waitlist at almost every charter school in the Mat-Su School District and said parents want more school options for their children. She stated that having incentives and goals is a great way to motivate educators to achieve student growth. She expressed support for a cell phone-free environment policy and increased funding for CTE programs. She said new funding should be paired with reform and accountability. She concluded that SB 82 would benefit students statewide.

[4:32:26 PM](#)

AMANDA THOMPSON, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 82. She said she is a teacher in the Anchorage School District and that teaching is difficult due to a lack of support. She stated that SB 82 contains "bright spots" that support teachers, such as reading incentive grants. She said schools should incentivize good work from students. She added that she is teaching at a neighborhood school to help achieve better results for the students attending there. She said school choice allows students who an alternative to move out of neighborhood classrooms, allowing more attention for the students who remain. She concluded that SB 82 is a win-win and urged its support.

[4:34:51 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN closed public testimony on SB 82.

[4:34:58 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN held SB 82 in committee.

[4:35:03 PM](#)

At ease.

SB 151-SCHOOL DISTRICT HEAD LICE POLICY

[4:36:00 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 151 "An Act relating to head lice in public schools."

[4:36:15 PM](#)

SENATOR JESSE BJORKMAN, District D, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor of SB 151 stated the goal of the bill is to stop the spread of head lice between students at school. He explained the bill would also fund one-fifth, or 20 percent, of the cost for a district to employ a school nurse at a school serving grades K through 8, such as an elementary or middle school.

SENTOR BJORKMAN stated lice are extremely disruptive and create a significant burden for parents to eliminate. He said lice cause discomfort and embarrassment for students, and children want them gone as quickly as possible. He emphasized that lice can be stopped from spreading if they are identified early and if families receive information to help prevent and treat infestations.

SENATOR BJORKMAN explained that SB 151 would require schools to enact policies for lice education, prevention, and eradication.

Schools would provide parents and students with information on how to avoid lice and how to treat them if lice are found. The bill would institute a policy of no live lice at school. He clarified SB 151 would not require mass lice checks, which he said were common in the past when children were gathered for inspections. Instead, students would be checked privately in a discreet manner to protect their privacy and allow families to receive guidance if lice are found.

[4:39:14 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN reiterated the goal of SB 151 is to prevent and stop the spread of lice, ensure families have the information needed to address infestations, and support the presence of school nurses to assist with prevention and treatment.

[4:40:01 PM](#)

SAVAYA BIEBER, Staff, Senator Jesse Bjorkman, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided a presentation on SB 151. She moved to slide 2, What does SB 151, and discussed in more detail the following highlights of the legislation:

[Original punctuation provided.]

What Does SB 151 Do?

- Requires school districts to adopt a head lice policy
- Requires districts to educate students and parents on lice prevention
- Requires DEED to reimburse school districts 20 percent of the cost to employ a nurse if these provisions are met:
 - The nurse works at a school in the district that serves grades K-8
 - The district employs the nurse on at least a half-time basis
 - The district performs lice checks on at least 95 percent of students in a manner that protects student privacy - NO mass lice checks
 - The district submits a report to DEED by July

[4:41:33 PM](#)

MS. BIEBER moved to slide 3, What are Lice, and explained that head lice are parasites that live on the scalp and feed on human blood. Female lice can lay four to eight eggs, called nits, per day. Eggs hatch into nymphs in about a week, and nymphs become adults about a week later. Adult lice are two to three millimeters long, about the size of a sesame seed, and can live

on a person's head for about 30 days but die within 48 hours if they fall off.

[Original punctuation provided.]

What are Lice?

- Parasites
- Feed on human blood
- Usually live in your scalp

[4:42:06 PM](#)

MS. BIEBER moved to slide 4 How Do They Spread: Who is at Risk, and stated lice infestations affect an estimated six to twelve million children in the United States each year, most commonly among children ages three to eleven. Lice move by crawling and cannot hop or fly. The most common way lice spread is through head-to-head contact, though they can also spread through items such as hats, hair accessories, combs, brushes, towels, bedding, and furniture:

[Original punctuation provided.]

How Do They Spread? Who is at Risk?

- Pre and Elementary school aged students
- Move by crawling
- Most common transmission is head-to-head contact
- Can be spread through other forms of contact

[4:42:40 PM](#)

MS. BIEBER moved to slide 5, How Can Students Avoid Lice, and said students can avoid lice by avoiding head-to-head contact and by not sharing hats, scarves, coats, brushes, combs, or hair accessories.

[Original punctuation provided.]

How Can Students Avoid Lice?

- Avoid head-to-head contact with other people
- Do not share hats, scarves, coats or other clothing that is worn near the head
- Do not share brushes, combs, towels, or hair accessories

[4:42:55 PM](#)

MS. BIEBER moved to slide 6, CDC Recommendations, and noted the CDC recommends students with lice not be sent home early, but instead finish the school day and return after treatment begins.

[Original punctuation provided.]

CDC Recommendations

- Do not need to send students with a lice infestation home early from school
- Students with lice can go home at the end of the day, be treated, and return to class after beginning treatment

[4:43:11 PM](#)

MS. BIEBER moved to slide 7, How to tell if you have a lice infestation. She explained symptoms include itching caused by an allergic reaction to lice bites, which may take four to six weeks to appear the first time someone has lice. Other signs include sores on the scalp from scratching and eggs located near the scalp, where warmth allows them to survive.

[Original punctuation provided.]

How to Tell if You Have a Lice Infestation:

- Itching
- Feeling movement in hair
- Sores on the head
- Can be found in hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes
- Eggs(nits) present near scalp

[4:43:51 PM](#)

MS. BIEBER moved to slide 8, Treating Lice, and described treatment options including over-the-counter **permethrin shampoo (Nix)** and **ivermectin lotion (Sklice)**, as well as prescription treatments such as **malathion, spinosad, and Ulesfia**. Additional care may include using nit combs to remove lice and eggs, washing bedding and clothing in hot water, sealing items in airtight bags for two weeks if they cannot be washed, soaking combs and brushes in hot water, and vacuuming floors and furniture.

[Original punctuation provided.]

Treating Lice

- Non-prescription:
 - Shampoos containing permethrin (Nix)
 - A lotion containing ivermectin (Sklice)
- Prescription:
 - Ivermectin

- Malathion
- Spinosad
- Ulesfia
- Self & Home Care:
 - Nit comb
 - Washing sheets and clothes
 - Clean brushes & combs
 - Vacuum floor & furniture

[4:45:29 PM](#)

SENATOR CRONK said most school districts already have policies regarding lice. He explained that in his district students with lice were checked and sent home until the lice were gone. He noted most schools do not have nurses and the responsibility often falls to the school secretary, but districts generally already have policies in place. He said the bill appears intended to ensure that every district has a policy.

[4:46:03 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN replied that the issue of how schools handle head lice has become more controversial because there is disagreement between the National Association of School Nurses and the CDC about how lice should be handled. He said some people believe schools should not actively address lice, while others believe schools should notify families and act. He stated lice spread when they are not discussed and can easily move from child to child. He emphasized that parents often are not notified when lice outbreaks occur and said informing parents is the least a school can do so families can take preventative steps, such as checking their children's hair and encouraging practices that reduce transmission.

[4:47:23 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN explained some schools now allow students with live lice to attend school, which many parents find surprising. He said SB 151 addresses that issue by establishing a policy prohibiting live lice at school. He added that lice are disruptive for families and require significant time and effort for parents to treat their children.

[4:48:34 PM](#)

SENATOR CRONK said he appreciated the explanation and noted he is familiar with lice issues as a teacher and parent. He said the Alaska Gateway School District has a strong policy where students are checked and sent home if lice are found and cannot return until treated.

[4:49:03 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked about SB 151, page 1, lines 8-10, which state a student may not return until a nurse or designee confirms the student is lice-free. She asked whether the schools would excuse the absence and whether the policy could affect student learning. She also asked how the bill would apply to students in state care, housing-insecure students, or students without a parent or guardian available to help treat lice.

[4:49:46 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN replied that SB 151 contemplates that students are treated and return once the lice are no longer alive. He said a nurse or designee could check the student's hair to confirm only dead nits remain and allow the student to return to class. He stated that with proper treatment and education, students should not need to miss much school. He acknowledged some students may not have a parent or guardian available to assist immediately, but said community organizations and school booster groups could help fill those gaps and provide assistance for students who need support.

[4:51:13 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN invited the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) to present the fiscal note.

[4:51:22 PM](#)

KELLY MANNING, Deputy Director, Division of Innovation & Education Excellence, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, Offered an overview of the fiscal note OMB 2796 for SB 151. She stated there are two primary costs associated with the bill. The first is \$6,000 for services to develop regulations needed to implement the statute. She explained the second cost is \$1,544,000 annually in grants to school districts to support compensation for school nurses. The estimate is based on fall staff accounting from 2024, which shows 100 certificated school nurses statewide with an average annual salary of approximately \$77,000. She noted that currently all certificated school nurses are located in the Anchorage and Mat-Su School Districts, which would influence how the funding is distributed. She added that regulations would outline the allocation of funds if the appropriation does not cover the full 20 percent reimbursement.

[4:53:56 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked about language in SB 151 on [page 1], lines 9 and 10 allowing another health care provider to conduct lice checks if a district does not employ a certificated nurse. She

asked whether the department has an estimate of how many districts might qualify for funding under that provision.

[4:53:29 PM](#)

MS. MANNING responded that nine districts, including Anchorage and Mat-Su, currently employ classified nurse personnel. Those staff positions could potentially qualify for reimbursement. She said districts without those staff often rely on public health nurses to assist with similar health policies.

[4:54:04 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked why the state would reimburse school districts for nurses when districts already receive funding for nurses. He asked whether the reimbursement is necessary if nurses are already funded through existing education funding.

[4:54:39 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN responded that many schools do not have elementary school nurses, or they share a nurse among several schools. He explained that a nurse may only be present at a school for a limited portion of the week. He said SB 151 is intended to encourage districts to employ more nurses at least half-time in school buildings, and districts would only receive reimbursement if the nurse met the requirements outlined in the bill.

[4:56:27 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN opened public testimony on SB 151; finding none, she closed public testimony.

[4:56:44 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN held SB 151 in committee.

SB 118-ADD FACULTY MEMBER UNIV BOARD OF REGENTS

[4:57:02 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 118 "An Act relating to the Board of Regents of the University of Alaska."

[4:57:36 PM](#)

JOE HAYS, Staff, Senator Scott Kawasaki, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided closing remarks on SB 118 on behalf of the bill sponsor. He stated SB 118 is a good bill and hopes the committee will move it forward.

[4:57:52 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked if there were any comments.

[4:57:56 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN solicited the will of the committee.

[4:57:58 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to report SB 118, work order 34-LS0697\A, from committee with individual recommendations and attached zero fiscal note(s).

[4:58:15 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN found no objection and SB 118 was reported from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

[4:58:55 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:58 p.m.