



ALASKA

POLICY FORUM

May 8, 2021

LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY

House Bill 164

Early Education Program; Reading

House Education Committee
Representative Drummond, Co-Chair
Representative Story, Co-Chair
Representative Zulkosky, Member
Representative Hopkins, Member
Representative Prax, Member
Representative Cronk, Member
Representative Gillham, Member

Reading improvement legislation, what we have come to refer to as K-3 Literacy or Read By 9, has been introduced and debated in the Legislature since 2013. In that time, Alaska's fourth grade students have consistently ranked dead last in reading competency when measured against fourth graders in the other 49 states and the District of Columbia.

Alaska has good teachers, and our students have the same potential for learning as do children in the rest of the country, yet our children are still not learning the most basic of educational skills - reading. This despite Alaska ranking among the five highest spending-per-student states in the country.

We spend heavily on education, but our children cannot read. For the sake of our children and the future of our state, this must change, and that change can be made through a robust K-3 literacy program.

Reading should be the fundamental educational objective in our public schools. All other curricula are secondary. Children's brains allow them to learn to read at a more efficient rate prior to age nine. Children who learn to read by age nine then use their reading skills to continue learning other subjects. Children who are not competent readers by age nine are more likely to fall behind in their studies, drop out of school, live in poverty, or end up in prison. There is plenty of data that supports these unfortunate realities.

There are several aspects to making sure students are keeping up with expectations. These include early and continuous parental notification of struggling readers, pairing the weakest readers with the most highly effective reading teachers, and instruction in phonological awareness. Student reading progress will be closely monitored, and those who are not attaining proficient reading scores prior to third grade will be afforded these interventions. Students who attain proficient reading scores by the end of third grade will be promoted to the fourth grade. But, if a student's reading scores are not to standard by the end of third grade, that student should not be promoted to fourth grade. Yes, this sounds harsh, and it goes against society's prevailing ideals of promoting self-esteem, but the child who has to repeat third grade will, in that repeated year, get the focused attention he or she needs to attain a proficient reading level. Holding students back is not punishment. It provides them an opportunity to catch up and help avoid all those resultant issues mentioned earlier – dropping out, living in poverty, serving time in prison.

Many other states have been hugely successful with K–3 literacy programs, Florida and Mississippi among them. Both states passed early reading legislation and their students' reading competency levels dramatically increased. Alaska can do the same, and we can do it with legislation that is now before this committee in House Bill 164.

Alaska Policy Forum encourages this committee to pass reading intervention legislation this session. The education of our public-school children and the future of our state will be greatly enhanced by it.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Tim Barto
Vice President External Relations
Alaska Policy Forum