



Legislative Testimony

Senate Bill 6

February 12, 2020

Chairman Stevens & Members of the Senate Education Committee,

Considering the many hearings this committee has had on Senate Bill 6, you all know the statistics well by now. Alaska's children have not only scored near the bottom of all 50 states in third-grade reading in the last decade, but in 2019, we dropped to dead last.

This is not the fault of our children, or any other specific entity. And we're not here to place blame but to discuss solutions.

Robust early childhood literacy programs are a proven solution. These programs have resulted in momentous and relatively rapid gains for children in some of the states which have implemented the programs. But not all states. In some states, the results have been flat.

So what's the difference? The difference is accountability. In some states (such as Colorado and Connecticut), the programs do contain all of the right interventions, for example: early and continuous parental notification of struggling readers, pairing the weakest readers with the most highly effective reading teachers, instruction in phonological awareness, etc. In those states, if the interventions do not bring a child up to proficiency, often the child gets passed along through the remaining grade levels anyway. Data shows that while some of these children will eventually catch up, many will not. And those are the children who are most likely to drop out of school (four times greater rate), end up in poverty, and land in our correctional system. The data supports these unfortunate realities.



But in some of the states with early childhood literacy programs, they have included an important accountability measure: performance-based promotion. Again these states' programs have all the right interventions, in fact—every possible intervention. But if in the end, the child is not at grade-level proficiency, the child gets a different year of third grade, not just another year of third grade. The repeated third grade includes targeted, focused attention, which is precisely what these children deserve. In Mississippi for example, they increased the number of students with disabilities who passed the literacy test by 23%! The most current and rigorous academic studies of performance-based promotion show that it is a key to the success of early childhood reading policy reforms.

Another important consideration for this policy reform is to keep raising the bar. When Mississippi originally passed the law, it only required students to score above the lowest performance benchmark. They have continued to raise the bar and now they have a significantly higher percentage of students passing the highest bar. We don't just want Alaska's children to get a little better. We must have high expectations and put the right tools in place to make success possible.

As you consider these reforms, I remind you that there can be no better return on our investment than making a difference in the lives of Alaska's children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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