



ALASKA

POLICY FORUM

April 10, 2021

LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY

Senate Bill 111

The Academic Improvement and
Modernization Act

Senate Education Committee
Senator Holland, Chairman
Senator Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Hughes, Member
Senator Micciche, Member
Senator Begich, Member

It has been repeated numerous times over the last eight years, but it bears yet another refrain: reading scores for Alaska's fourth grade students are dead last when measured against fourth graders in the other 49 states and the District of Columbia.

Alaska schools have good teachers, and our students have the same potential for learning as do children in the rest of the country. Yet, while Alaska's per-student spending ranks among the five highest per-student spending states in the country, our children are still not learning the most basic of educational skills.

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 who learn to read by age nine can, and must, use their reading skills to continue learning. 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, and end up in prison. Data supports these unfortunate realities.

There are several aspects to making sure students are keeping up with expectations, including early and continuous parental notification of struggling readers, pairing the weakest readers with the most highly effective reading teachers, and instruction in phonological awareness. Students who do not attain 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. This committee has already heard the articulate testimony provided by Dr. Kymyona Burk, so you know how successful the state of Mississippi was in turning around its literacy outcomes. Alaska can do the same, and we can do it with legislation that is now before this committee.

The 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
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Alaska Policy Forum