

State of Alaska
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

Frank H. Murkowski, Governor

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Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Task Force

Purpose of the task force

In May 2005, Governor Frank H. Murkowski called for the establishment of the task force and charged it with identifying ways Alaskans can improve the readiness of preschoolers to read and learn; families can become better at teaching children to listen, speak, read and write; preschools and childcare centers can provide the best possible start for children; the business community can do its part; and state and local governments can support the effort.

The Alaska Humanities Forum took the lead in establishing the task force.

How the task force came about

The recent effort in Alaska to improve early childhood literacy was stimulated by a nationwide initiative of the Council of Chief State School Officers through a grant from the Pew Charitable Trust. The idea is to promote partnerships among state and local education agencies, early childhood educators and community-based programs to expand preschool opportunities for 3- and 4-year-olds.

The Department of Education & Early Development wants families to have more access to better preschool programs that are aligned with the state's K-12 standards, so students can easily transition into the public schools.

About 50 Alaskans met January 28, 2005, in Anchorage to discuss the issue and hear from Dr. Libby Doggett and Ms. Stephanie Rubin of Pre-K Now, a national nonprofit that advocates for preschool for children age 3 and 4. The Trust for Early Education also presented research on economic returns to be realized from investing in good early education programs.

In the next step, the Pre-K/Early Childhood Literacy Summit was held May 17-18 at the University of Alaska Anchorage. Governor Frank H. Murkowski and First Lady Nancy Murkowski convened the summit with participation by sixteen agencies and organizations. The summit's purpose was to build awareness of the issue and start the pre-K plan. About 200 Alaskans attended.

Governor Murkowski addressed the summit, saying early childhood literacy and learning is an issue whose time has come. He said too many of our students are poor readers and don't do well in school. The Governor said we must help those families whose children are struggling to learn to read and write.

Why improve early childhood literacy?

- Greater vocabulary use at age 3 predicts better language skills and reading comprehension by third grade.
- The richness of a child's vocabulary predicts success in school. Three-year-old children of higher income parents have a vocabulary on average of 1,116 words. Children from other backgrounds have vocabularies that range from 525 to 749 words.
- The oral language and vocabulary patterns established by age 4 are very difficult to change.
- Society benefits from quality early learning programs by saving significant dollars because fewer children are retained in grade at school, referred for special services, are dependent on welfare, or are incarcerated as adults. A dollar invested in young children saves at least \$7 in later costs.

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