



March 5, 2014

Representative Lynn Gattis  
State Capitol Room 420  
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Representative Gattis,

Thank you for your leadership in support of public charter schools in Alaska. The purpose of this letter is to encourage Alaska to amend its public charter school law to allow non-district entities to serve as authorizers of public charter schools.

Authorizers are the entities that review applications, enter into charter contracts with applicants, oversee public charter schools, and decide whether to renew or close public charter schools. Most states with charter laws allow local school boards to serve as charter authorizers. However, 35 states and the District of Columbia also permit non-district entities (such as universities, colleges, and independent state chartering boards) to serve as charter authorizers, usually in addition to local school boards.

There are several reasons that states allow non-district entities to serve as authorizers. First, they believe that charter applicants should have a choice of authorizers, particularly in districts that are skeptical – if not downright hostile – toward charters.

Second, they believe that allowing non-district entities to become authorizers forces districts to take their authorizing roles seriously. If they don't, charter applicants will go to the non-district entity.

Third, charter authorizing is a tough fit with existing district practices. Many districts are consumed in their own improvement efforts, which are typically more top-down in nature. Charter authorizing is one more responsibility for already overburdened district staff, plus it cuts against the grain of district's existing top-down approaches. Therefore, these states are creating non-district authorizers to model best authorizing practices and make those available to districts.

Lastly, these states wish to involve existing and new entities in innovative ways in public education. These entities often offer fresh perspectives, long-standing credibility, and strong connections to their missions.

There are six types of non-district authorizers:

- New, Independent State Chartering Boards (14 states and the District of Columbia)
- Universities and Colleges (14 states)
- Cities (3 states)
- Nonprofit organizations (4 states)
- Regional educational entities (6 states)
- Existing State Boards, Commissioners, and Departments (18 states)

One of the 20 essential components of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' model public charter school law is ensuring that two or more authorizing paths (e.g., school districts and a state charter schools commission) are available for each applicant for a public charter school, with direct application to each authorizer. Here's the relevant explanatory language from the model public charter school law:

"A well-designed public charter school law must allow multiple authorizers to which any group of potential charter founders can apply, so that all charter applicants have the opportunity to seek approval from a conscientious and well-motivated authorizer. The model law presents multiple approaches for creating a multiple-authorizer environment, with the understanding that the conditions and capacities within a state will determine which environment makes the most sense in that state. To create multiple authorizers, the model law provides for three things:

- Establishment of a state public charter school commission;
- Opportunity for local school boards to register as authorizers with the state's designated authorizer oversight body; and,
- Opportunity for various entities – including mayors, city councils, non-profit organizations, and public and private postsecondary institutions – to apply for authorizing ability to the state's designated authorizer oversight body.

It is important to note that some believe only existing public entities should be allowed to serve as authorizers, while others argue for the inclusion of private and non-profit entities to bring new expertise into the authorizing world. Experiences in various states with both public and non-public authorizing entities reveal that all types of authorizers can be successful if they meet at least three criteria: a clear desire to become an authorizer; enough political insulation to allow data-driven decisions; and, the ability to create adequate infrastructure to carry out their authorizer tasks.

To this end, the model law envisions the inclusion of multiple entities as authorizers, all under an authorizer accountability system. Given the dynamics within a given state, the specific portfolio of authorizers may vary. For example, one state may allow local school boards and a state public charter school commission to authorize public charter schools, while another state may allow local school boards, universities, and mayors to do so.”

Whatever path a state chooses, allowing non-district entities to authorize public charter schools will lead to a larger number of high-quality public charter schools in states. Not only will these schools benefit the students who attend them, but they’ll also serve the larger public education system by sharing successful practices with surrounding school districts.

Thank you again for your leadership in support of public charter schools. Please let us know if we can be helpful as you continue to work on legislation that can support the growth of high-quality public charter schools in Alaska.

Sincerely,

Russ Simnick  
Senior Director, State Advocacy  
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools