



School Choice for Alaska's Students

Lon Garrison

Executive Director

Association of Alaska School Boards

Alaska Families Enjoy a Wide Variety of School Choice



- Traditional “Brick & Mortar” Neighborhood Schools
- Correspondence Programs
- Charter Schools
- Residential Schools
- Home Schools



association of
ALASKA
school boards



The Uniqueness of Alaskan Schools

The system is made up of 54 school districts divided into two types:

- 34 city & borough school districts
- 19 Rural Education Attendance Areas (REAA's)
- 1 state operated boarding school

Alaska's schools have vast differences



Anchorage School District
50,000 students & 300 teachers



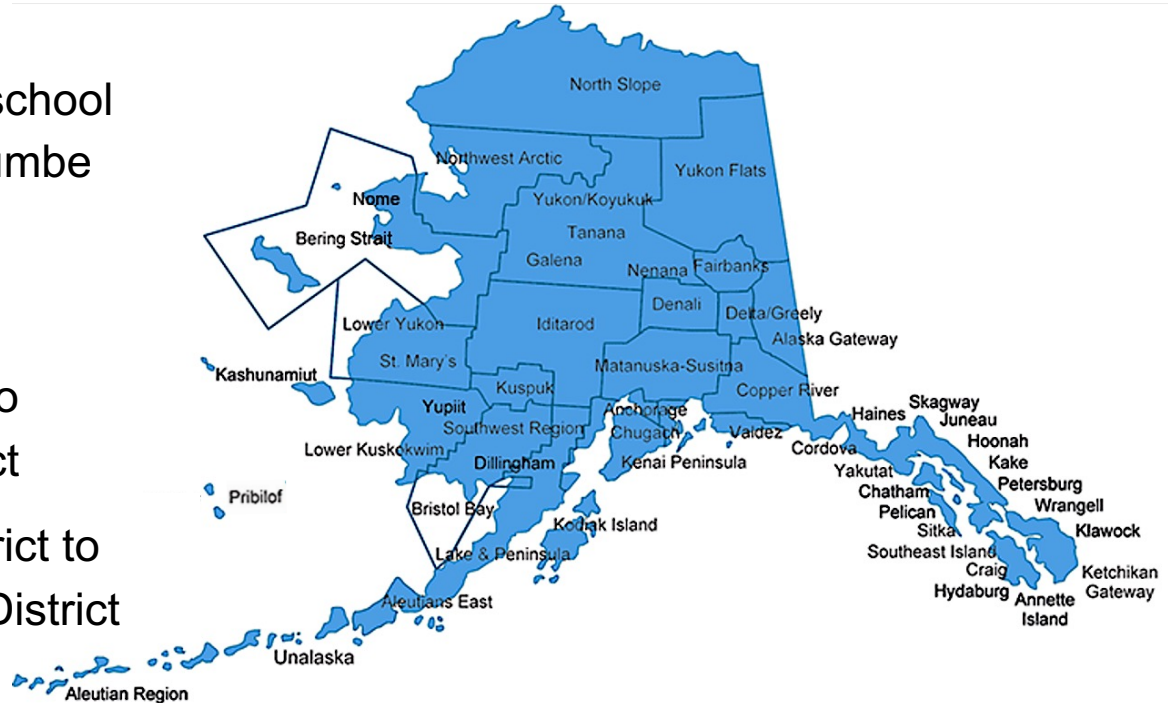
Aleutian Region School District
12 students and 2 teachers



Pelican School District
12 students and 2 teachers

Traditional “Brick & Mortar” Schools

- 502 separate schools in 54 school districts (including Mt. Edgcombe HS)
- ~126,700 students
- North Slope School District to Annette Island School District
- Aleutian Region School District to Ketchikan Gateway School District



Charter Schools

- Alaska's charter school bill enacted 1995.
- A 2001 amendment increased allowable numbers from 30 to 60 – extended length of charter from 5 yrs to 10 yrs – dropped geographical restrictions.
- 2010 amendment removed restriction on number of allowable charters.
- 2014 amendment clarified rental of district space to charters – limited indirect rate by the district to 4%.
- Charter school funding is determined in about the same way as traditional schools, through the BSA.



Charter Schools

- Charter schools are public schools, chartered by local school districts.
- Governed by an Academic Policy Committee under the general oversight of the local school board.
- Charter school staff are district employees although hiring latitude is common within each charter.
- 31 charters exist in Palmer, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, North Pole, Wasilla, Bethel, Eagle River, Nome, Homer, Juneau, Soldotna, Ketchikan, and Hooper Bay.



Residential Boarding Schools

- 1st boarding school was in Sitka in 1878 & operated by Presbyterian missionaries.
- Unfortunately, the story of Alaska's boarding schools is a sordid tale that did unspeakable harm to many of our indigenous citizens.
- Sadly, the early boarding schools' motive was to detribalize our indigenous citizens and assimilate them into Euro-American culture.
- By the late 20th century most of these schools had closed.



Residential Boarding Schools

- School districts with approved residential boarding schools may be reimbursed with a per-pupil stipend to assist with operational costs. The district must provide appropriate dormitories, food service, and daily access to a public school.
- Residential school construction costs enable cities and municipalities to seek funding via bond debt reimbursement, but a moratorium currently blocks new bond debt reimbursement.
- Besides the state-operated Mt. Edgecumbe residential program, there are seven district-run residential schools.



Residential Boarding Schools

- Galena Interior Learning Academy
- Kuskokwim Learning Academy (Bethel)
- Nenana Living Center
- Northwestern Alaska Career & Technical Center (Nome)
- Ready Academy (Bethel)
- Star of the Northwest Magnet School (Kotzebue)
- Voyage to Excellence (Chugach – Anchorage)
- Mt. Edgecumbe (Sitka)



Home School

- Alaska has had a long history of homeschooling, primarily because in the early days of the territory, that may have been the only way to get an education.
- Alaska's initial correspondence school, the **"Alyeska Central School"** was designed to meet the constitutional requirement to offer public education to every student.



Home School

Independent Homeschooling (The "Statute" Option)

1. **Traditional homeschooling.** Under AS 14.30.010(b)(12), a child is exempt from compulsory school attendance if they are being educated at home by a parent or legal guardian.
2. Education directed entirely **by the parent without government oversight or funding.**
3. There are **no requirements to notify the state**, no mandatory testing, and no specific curriculum requirements.
4. **Parents pay** for all materials themselves.
5. The **parent issues the high school diploma.**



Home School

Alaska's Homeschooling Today:

- Parents may use correspondence programs that their local district has designed & supports.
- Each district correspondence program and student funding allotment will vary.
- Parents may may select a **statewide correspondence program** that is sponsored by another school district in Alaska.



Home School

In short:

- ***Homeschooling*** is the act of educating a child at home:
- Either entirely privately with no state assistance
or
- Through the use of either public or private correspondence programs.



Correspondence Programs

A review of Alaska's correspondence school program will cover:

History & Evolution

Enrollment

Funding

Policy



Correspondence Programs

- 1st correspondence program was a territorial program begun in 1939.
- 34 programs that exist today.
- Alaska Statute (2002) allows a state centralized program as well as those operated by local school districts.
- Learning plans, allotments to families are allowable (non-sectarian).
- General oversight provided by DEED.
- Partisan/sectarian/ denominational materials & instruction prohibited.
- Funded through the BSA at 90% of BSA.
- Very popular with Home School families.



History of Correspondence Programs

Legislative Timeline: Evolution of Correspondence Schools

1939 — Territorial Correspondence Program Established

- Created to provide statewide access to public education
- State-operated, centralized system (Alyeska Central School)

1956 / 1959 — Alaska Constitution & Statehood

- Constitution establishes the State's obligation to maintain a public school system
- Correspondence programs continue as a means of fulfilling access requirements



History of Correspondence Programs

1980s–1990s — Statutory Recognition of Correspondence Programs

- Legislature authorizes school districts to operate correspondence programs
- Transition begins from state-run → district-operated programs
- Early foundation for decentralized system

Early 2000s — Cross-District Enrollment Allowed

- Students permitted to enroll in correspondence programs outside their home district
- Establishes statewide access and competition among programs
- Accelerates growth of programs like IDEA, RAVEN



History of Correspondence Programs

2014 — Major Policy Shift: Student Allotments (HB 278 / SB 100)

- Legislature codifies correspondence statutes and expands program flexibility
- Establishes student allotments (AS 14.03.310)
- Allows families to use public funds for:
 - Curriculum
 - Educational services
 - Approved materials
- Shifts system from:
 - State/district-directed → parent-directed model
- Removes many prior regulatory constraints



History of Correspondence Programs

2014–Present — Expansion of “School Choice” Model

- Correspondence programs evolve into a major statewide option
- There are now 34 correspondence programs in Alaska
- Enrollment grows to ~17–18% of all public school students
- Increasing use in urban and road-connected areas

2022–2024 — Legal Challenges & Clarification

- Lawsuits challenge constitutionality of allotments (use of public funds)
- Courts examine whether funds improperly benefit private education – a violation of the Constitution
- Alaska Supreme Court allows program to continue while clarifying limits



History of Correspondence Programs

What Changed?

- Went from “How do we deliver education to every child?” —
- To “How do families choose and direct education?”

- From centralized system (Alyeska)
- To decentralized, multi-district system

- From a uniform statewide curriculum
- To Individual Learning Plans + parent-directed spending



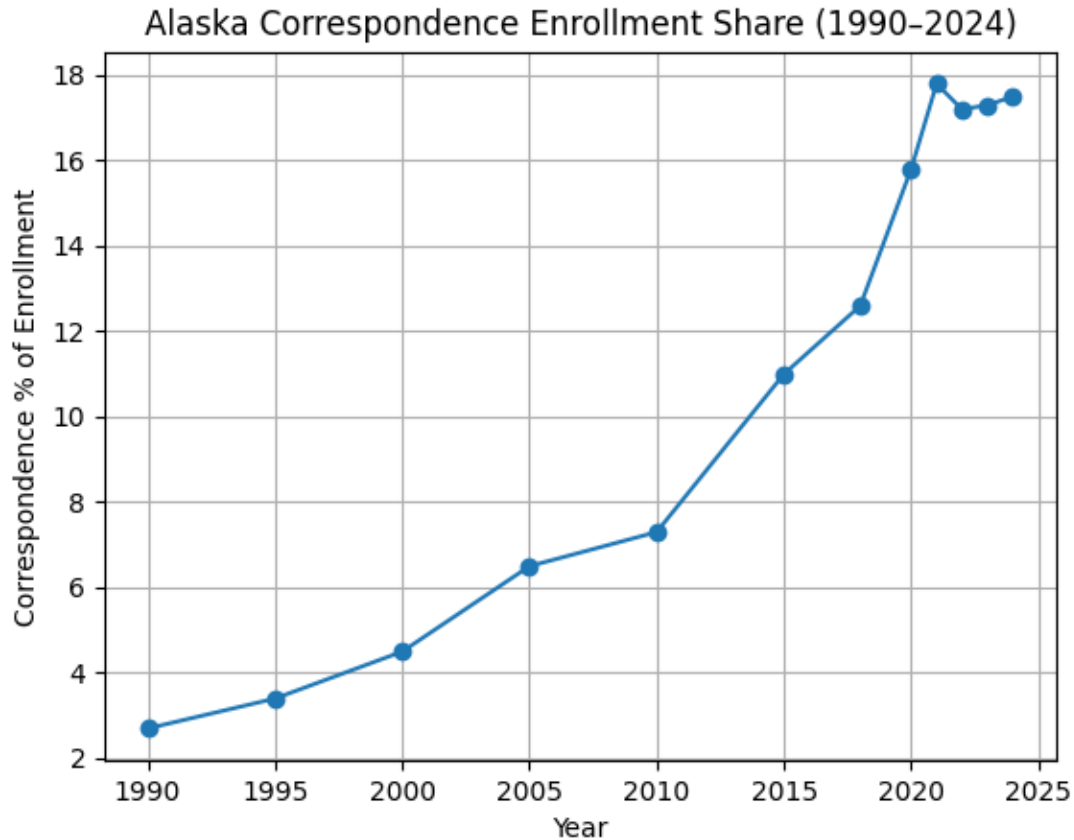
Correspondence Programs – Enrollment

Statewide Enrollment: Correspondence vs. Regular Students (1990–2024)

Year	Total Enrollment	Correspondence Students	% Correspondence	Regular (In-Person) Students	% Regular
1990	~128,000	~3,500	~2.7%	~124,500	~97.3%
1995	~132,000	~4,500	~3.4%	~127,500	~96.6%
2000	~134,000	~6,000	~4.5%	~128,000	~95.5%
2005	~131,000	~8,500	~6.5%	~122,500	~93.5%
2010	~130,000	~9,500	~7.3%	~120,500	~92.7%
2015	~132,000	~14,500	~11.0%	~117,500	~89.0%
2018	~131,000	~16,500	~12.6%	~114,500	~87.4%
2020	~130,000	~20,500	~15.8%	~109,500	~84.2%
2021	~127,000	~27,600	~21.7%	~99,400	~78.3%
2022	~127,600	~21,300	~16.7%	~106,300	~83.3%
2023	~128,200	~21,000	~16.4%	~107,200	~83.6%
2024	~128,300	~22,300	~17.4%	~106,000	~82.6%
2025	~126,700	~23,600	~18.6%	~103,100	~81.4%



Correspondence Programs – Enrollment



Correspondence Programs – Enrollment

Enrollment Shift Over Time

- 1990: ~3% correspondence students
- 2010: ~7% - start of district – statewide programs
- 2015: ~11%
- 2020: ~16%
- Today: ~18%

Key inflection point:

- ➔ 2014 legislation (student allotments, ILP, opt-out for testing)

Result:

- ➔ Correspondence evolved from an access model → **major school choice system**



Correspondence Programs – Enrollment

The five largest statewide correspondence programs in 2025 were:

1. IDEA – Galena City School district --- 7,592
2. Raven – Yukon Koyuk ----- 3,934
3. CyberLynx – Nenana ----- 2,179
4. Denali PEAK – Denali ----- 1,036
5. FOCUS – Chugach ----- 616

Total ----- 15,357



Correspondence Programs – Funding

- A full-time correspondent school student **is funded at 0.9 ADM** of a fulltime regular student
- No factors are applied to correspondence students
- Correspondence ADM is added at the end of the foundation formula for each district
- That funding covers:
 - Program administration
 - Staffing & support
 - Allotments (varies by program)
 - Special education or special needs requirements
 - Curriculum and materials



Correspondence Programs – Funding

Dual enrollment is permitted and is common option

- Brick and mortar school first
 - 1 class = 0.25 ADM
 - 2 classes = 0.50 ADM
 - 3 classes = 0.75 ADM
 - 4 classes = full ADM
- Correspondence funding determined after based on level of participation



Correspondence Programs – Policy & Perception

Why Correspondence Programs Have Grown So Rapidly

1. Parent Control and Customization (Primary Driver)

Modern correspondence programs offer families something traditional systems generally have not:

- Control over **curriculum, pacing, and instructional approach**
- Ability to tailor education to:
 - student interests
 - cultural context
 - learning needs
- The **Individual Learning Plan (ILP)** framework allows for personalization at a level not feasible in traditional classrooms.
- 🖱️ **This is the single most important driver.**



Correspondence Programs – Policy & Perception

2. Financial Flexibility Through Allotments (Post-2014 Inflection)

The 2014 policy change introduced **student allotments**, which:

- Provide families with **public funds to purchase educational services & materials**
- Enable access to:
 - tutoring
 - specialized instruction
 - enrichment opportunities
- This effectively transformed correspondence programs into a **hybrid public funding + parent-directed model**, significantly increasing their appeal.



Correspondence Programs – Policy & Perception

3. Perceived Better Fit for Individual Students

Families often choose correspondence programs for students who:

- Do not thrive in traditional classroom environments
- Need flexible schedules (health, travel, family needs)
- Are advanced or require remediation
- Seek alternative social or instructional settings

👉 Correspondence is often viewed as a **better “fit” rather than a replacement** for traditional schooling.



Correspondence Programs – Policy & Perception

4. Expansion Beyond Rural Necessity

Originally designed for remote access, correspondence programs now:

- Serve **urban and road-connected communities**
- This dramatically expanded the potential user base from: **“students without schools”** → **“families seeking options”**



Correspondence Programs – Policy & Perception

Correspondence Testing Participation (2002–Present)

2002–2014

- ~60–90% participation
- Comparable statewide data
- System-enforced accountability

2014–2018 (Inflection point, post HB278/SB100)

- Rapid decline in participation
- Shift to parent-directed model & opt-out

2019–Present

- ~10–20% participation
- Limited statewide comparability



Correspondence Programs – Policy & Perception

Graduation Rates: Correspondence vs. Traditional

What the Data Shows

- Correspondence students have **lower graduation rates** than traditional students
- Some programs fall **well below 50%**, and even below 20%

Trend Over Time

- Pre-2014: Lower but more stable
- Post-2014: Greater variability and wider gaps

Why This Is Difficult to Interpret

- Student mobility
- Non-traditional pathways
- Limited longitudinal tracking
- 4-year graduation metric may not fit well



Correspondence Programs – Policy & Perception

Final Thoughts

- Alaska has seen only about a 6% decline in overall student enrollment since the early 2000s
- The largest shift has been to correspondence programs - ~ 17-18% (~23,000 students)
- This shift creates the largest impact on district funding for schools
- 2014 legislation cemented the move to a parent-directed system -
- Testing rates declined and now are of little value
- Graduation rates have also declined



Correspondence Programs – Policy & Perception

Final Thoughts

- No returning to a centralized correspondence system – parental choice and directed education is here to stay.
- Does accountability matter?
- How do you fund such a disparate system?
- What is the measure for assessing the state's obligation to the Constitution regarding education? Just opportunity?

