

Compass: State should build on success of public charter schools

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By JOEY ESKI

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This is, officially, the Education Session in Juneau. You have our attention.

Actually, you had our attention at the State of the State address. It was during this speech that Gov. Sean Parnell acknowledged public charter school success. He specifically mentioned Aquarian Charter School, in Anchorage, but he could have named any of the state's charter schools as examples of success in public education. He called for replication of successful public charter school programs and pledged to do more to give Alaskan families choice in public education by strengthening the state's charter school system.

Charter schools in Alaska are very misunderstood. Alaska's charter schools are public schools equally open to students regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic background, or the neighborhood in which one lives. Charter schools employ public school teachers who are part of the teachers' union. No tuition is charged to attend. A parent body governs each charter school making curriculum and budget decisions that uphold the school's charter.

There are currently twenty-seven active public charter schools in Alaska. Each public charter school operates under a local school district, adhering to all the standards and policies within each particular district. Working with the local school districts in this manner allows for innovation in education while providing the accountability of a traditional public school. Charter schools, statewide, reduce the load on neighborhood schools and create distinct learning environments some students crave or desperately need. For instance, Aquarian Charter School provides differentiated learning and math blocking which gives students the opportunity to work at their individual level (higher or lower). Aquarian's program is academically rigorous but also infused with the arts resulting in a balanced approach to learning.

Other charter schools within the state focus on various specialties, including the continuation of and appreciation for Alaska Native language and culture, technology, German, and creative learning through the arts and outdoor education. While Alaska charter schools are different in many ways, they are united in one common problem: the lack of adequate funding.

Although all charter schools are part of our public education system, not one of the state's public charter schools receives total funding on par with other types of schools such as traditional, optional or alternative schools. As they are currently written, Alaska's charter school laws do not entitle charter schools to receive many of the additional funding allocations other schools receive. A few examples of funding sources unavailable to charter schools include: special state

allocations (such as energy cost offsets), a substantial portion of local tax dollars from property taxes, transportation dollars, and capital funds.

In Anchorage, public charter schools receive the Base Student Allocation (adjusted for enrollment factors) to educate a child. That's it. From this smaller amount, charter schools must cover all operating expenses, including principal and teachers' salaries and benefits, textbooks, and supplies. However, unlike other types of schools in the district, charter schools must also use this money to pay for facility costs including rent, maintenance, utilities, and, in some cases, even local property taxes.

Lack of facilities funding is the biggest barrier to new charter school start-up and the single most significant challenge hindering charter schools' sustainability and growth. An increase in the state's BSA, while essential, will not solve the state's charter school issues. Supporters of the state's charter school programs understand legislative changes to charter schools' funding must occur this education session. These changes should ensure the sustainability of charter schools and allow for growth.

We applaud our governor and legislators for both recognizing and making a priority public school choice. We are encouraged by the governor's bill, HB 278, as well as Rep. Chris Tuck's current bill addressing charter schools, and will work together to further strengthen them. Adequately funding charter schools will ultimately allow for more public school choice, lowering the long wait-lists and opening access for economically-disadvantaged families.

So, Juneau, you have our attention. Thank you for recognizing us. We ask you to support Alaska's public education choices. Adequate funding of our state's public charter schools is the ideal compromise in Juneau this session.

Joey Eski is a parent and chairwoman of the Academic Policy Committee at Aquarian Charter School in Anchorage.