

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 4, 2024

3:31 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Jesse Kiehl
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: ALASKA'S CHARTER SCHOOL MODEL BY SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS FROM SCHOOL DISTRICTS WITH CHARTER SCHOOLS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JAMIE BURGESS
Superintendent
Nome Public Schools
Nome, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

BOB METCALF
Treasurer
Board of Education
Nome City School District
Nome, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

MARGO BELLAMY, President
Anchorage School Board
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

JASON HLASNY, Director
Charter Schools
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

JHARRETT BRYANTT, Superintendent
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

ANDY RATLIFF, Chief Financial Officer
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

CLAYTON HOLLAND, Superintendent
Kenai Peninsula School District
Kenai, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

BRANDY HARTY, President
Board of Education
Fairbanks North Star Borough
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

FRANK HAUSER, Superintendent

Juneau School District
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

DEEDIE SORENSEN, President
Board of Education
Juneau School District
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

BRITTNEY CIONI-HAYWOOD, Member
Board of Education
Juneau School District
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

EDWARD PEKAR, Assistant Superintendent
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

HUGH DYMENT, Member
Board of Education
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

DIANE GUBATAYAO, Member
Board of Education
Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District
Ketchikan, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

LON GARRISON, Executive Director
Association of Alaska School Boards

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Invited testimony on Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:31:56 PM](#)

CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Kiehl, Gray-Jackson, Bjorkman, and Chair Tobin. Senator Stevens arrived shortly thereafter.

PRESENTATION: ALASKA'S CHARTER SCHOOL MODEL BY SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS FROM SCHOOL DISTRICTS WITH CHARTER SCHOOLS

PRESENTATION: ALASKA'S CHARTER SCHOOL MODEL BY SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS FROM SCHOOL DISTRICTS WITH CHARTER SCHOOLS

[3:32:54 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the presentation: Alaska's Charter School Model by School Board Members from School Districts with Charter Schools.

[3:33:54 PM](#)

JAMIE BURGESS, Superintendent, Nome Public Schools, Nome, Alaska, said she have work in the position for five years. She said that Anvil City Science Academy (ACSA) is the only charter school in Nome, established in 1998. It serves 60 students in grades 5-8, which accounts for 12 percent of the district's average daily membership (ADM). The school employs a project- and thematic-based instructional approach. There have been no applications for other charter schools or requests for assistance or complaints in filing an application. ACSA's charter was most recently renewed in 2018.

[3:35:28 PM](#)

MS. BURGESS provided a step-by-step review of the process to establish a charter school in Nome. The application process is time-consuming. Renewing the ACSA charter took approximately 20 hours of meeting time and an additional 10 hours for paperwork and presentation preparation. Turnover in charter school leadership and the academic policy committee can make the renewal process as challenging as the original application.

[3:35:45 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS joined the meeting.

[3:39:05 PM](#)

MS. BURGESS said the Nome School District supports its charter school in a variety of ways. For example, the principal attends leadership meetings, works with the district's business manager on annual budget development, and meets with the superintendent to discuss needs. The charter school is housed within the district office and has access to transportation and food services at the middle-high school. The school district collaborates with the charter school and ensures it receives what it is monetarily entitled to under state law. She added that having a charter school has benefited the middle-high school by fostering the exchange of ideas on instruction, curriculum, and parental involvement.

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MS. BURGESS said the state could better support charter schools by establishing a dedicated charter school position to assist with applications, renewals, and general guidance. Currently, the Alaska Association of School Boards (AASB) has stepped in to provide this type of assistance, as none is available at the state level. She added that increasing the Base Student Allocation (BSA) would help prevent cuts to the charter school's budget. While Nome is not facing classified staff cuts, it is facing cuts to supplies and technology, which will affect the charter school.

MS. BURGESS stated that the state could better support charter schools by creating a dedicated position to assist with applications, renewals, and general guidance. Currently, the Alaska Association of School Boards (AASB) provides this support since it is unavailable at the state level. She suggested that increasing the Base Student Allocation (BSA) would help avoid budget cuts. Although Nome is not cutting staff, reductions in supplies and technology will impact the charter school. Public support for the charter school is strong, and academic performance is high, with an annual waitlist of fewer than 10 students. She noted that Alaska's charter schools are unique in operating under local school boards. She opined that local control is valued in Alaska and contributes to the success of charter schools. In Nome, the community's desire for a charter school, along with parental involvement and district support, has led to positive outcomes.

[3:43:07 PM](#)

BOB METCALF, Treasurer, Board of Education, Nome City School District, Nome, Alaska, said he has lived in Nome 45 years. He

expressed pride in the charter school, Pacific City Science Academy (PCSA), highlighting its success due to the commitment of the principal, teachers, staff, and students, and families. He noted the school's project-based, collaborative teaching model, which involves significant effort from the four teachers. Families are engaged in supporting their children, recognizing funding limitations, and have voiced a need for more classroom aids and local cultural resources to support social-emotional learning. The school's Economic Policy Committee (APC) is active in fundraising and has expressed concerns about the size and condition of the school's facilities.

MR. METCALF explained that while PCSA has its own curriculum and governance, the school board takes ownership of it, just as it does with other schools in the district. He emphasized the need for sufficient and stable foundation funding to support PCSA and the district's other schools. PCSA serves both students seeking more academic challenges and those needing additional support. He acknowledged concerns from some community members about the exclusivity of the program, as well as the desire for more project-based learning in regular classrooms.

MR. METCALF highlighted the importance of local control in the development of charter schools, stressing that community involvement is key to their success. He shared feedback from parents, who appreciated the close collaboration with teachers and the influence they have on classroom projects and content. He concluded that if it is the state's goal to create more charter schools, he recommends a careful study of ways to support community efforts and incentivize school districts. He advised against untested modifications to a system that has proven successful.

[3:48:57 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked how many students are in the Nome charter school.

MS. BURGESS replied there are 60 in the charter school out of approximately 700 students in the district.

[3:49:27 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked if the application process must include the anticipated number of students.

MS. BURGESS replied yes.

[3:49:39 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked how parents are notified that a school district has an established charter that their child can apply to attend.

MS. BURGESS explained that the typical process for notifying parents about the charter school starts with presentations at the elementary school, given by the principal, teachers, and sometimes students. Parent meetings are advertised, offering information for those considering enrolling their children. Parents and students work together on the application, and workshops are held to assist with the process. She also noted that a lottery system is used if there are more applicants than available seats at a particular grade level.

[3:51:09 PM](#)

MR. METCALF stated that Nome is a small, close-knit community where parents are highly involved and actively recruit for the charter school. He emphasized that parents are strong advocates for the school, and word of mouth is an effective method of recruitment in this setting.

SENATOR KIEHL asked for clarification on the parent involvement requirements for the charter school. He requested details on what those specific requirements entail.

MS. BURGESS explained that the parent involvement requirement for the charter school is around 15 to 20 hours per year. The school provides various ways for parents to meet this requirement, recognizing that many parents are working. Some local employers, such as the hospital and regional nonprofit, allow employees to take time off to volunteer. Parents can also help with after-school or evening activities or assist with event planning remotely. While a few families have found the requirement burdensome, she noted that this is a small number and hasn't significantly impacted enrollment.

[3:53:47 PM](#)

MR. METCALF added that families are aware from the start that enrolling their child in the charter school requires involvement. Parents understand that they will have opportunities to visit classrooms and participate in activities showcasing student work. He emphasized that both students and parents are prepared to support these commitments from the beginning.

[3:54:42 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS addressed a recommendation that proposes shifting authority and responsibility for charter schools from local school boards to the unelected state school board and the unelected commissioner of education. He asked if there are any advantages to making this change.

[3:55:20 PM](#)

MS. BURGESS emphasized that in remote communities removing local government support for charter schools and placing them entirely under state control could create division within the community. Currently, the charter school is part of the district, and students transition from elementary school to the charter school and later to the middle and high schools, fostering collaboration. The charter school's principal is deeply integrated with district operations, which allows for shared problem-solving and support. She expressed concern that making the charter school independent would isolate the principal, making the role more challenging. She stressed that maintaining the charter school's connection with the district is beneficial and that separating it could be harmful, especially in remote areas.

[3:57:43 PM](#)

MR. METCALF commented that residents, especially in smaller communities, stop leaders when they are seen around town and discuss concerns with them. Since community members are neighbors, friends, and family, leaders feel a strong sense of accountability. This drives them to provide safe environments and quality education for students, hoping that future generations will choose to raise their children in the same community.

[3:59:09 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked if the charter school application process requires either a minimum or maximum number of students apply.

[3:59:24 PM](#)

MS. BURGESS explained that there is no strict minimum or maximum number of students required for a charter school, but sustainability must be considered. She noted that many charter schools must find their own physical locations, though their district provides support for tasks like payroll and purchasing. In Nome, Pacific City Science Academy did not need a lease agreement. The school began with three grade levels (sixth, seventh, and eighth), but community demand allowed them to add more, as outlined in the original charter. She mentioned that

schools in Alaska must have at least 10 students, but the maximum capacity depends on factors like available space and district considerations. Expansion is possible if built into the charter and driven by community interest.

[4:02:33 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL stated that it appears the Nome School District provides more funding to the charter school than the students generate under the funding formula. He asked if this is correct.

[4:02:51 PM](#)

MS. BURGESS replied yes. She explained that during discussions about the district's budget struggles, they considered the potential cost savings if the charter school were closed, and the teachers and students were reintegrated into the other schools. The district would save over \$800,000.

[4:03:51 PM](#)

MARGO BELLAMY, President, School Board, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, The Anchorage School District (ASD) mission is to educate all 43,000 students for success, including those in charter, alternative, and traditional schools. Currently, eight public charter schools serve about 2,500 students, accounting for approximately 6 percent of the district's Average Daily Membership (ADM). The charter schools include Alaska Native Cultural Charter School (2008), Aquarian Charter School (1997), Eagle Academy (2005), Rilke Schule (2007), Winterberry Charter (2005), Frontier Charter School (2003), STREAM Academy (2016), and Highland Academy Charter School (2003).

MS. BELLAMY noted that charter schools differ from other ASD schools in three significant ways: they are governed by an elected Academic Policy Committee (APC), the principal is hired by the APC, and they are exempt from the district's textbook program, curriculum, and scheduling requirements as outlined in their charter contract. While charter schools maintain independence and offer a wide range of curriculum, they must follow all ASD board policies unless specifically waived in their charter. Charter schools also have discretion regarding district initiatives, such as fifth grade to middle school transitions or schedule changes.

[4:07:37 PM](#)

MS. BELLAMY explained that in reviewing past records, they could not find any instance where the school board had ever rejected a charter school application. Once an application goes through the

administration's vetting process and is recommended, it comes before the school board for a work session and approval through the governance process.

[4:08:55 PM](#)

JASON HLASNY, Director, Charter Schools, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, explained that over the past 10 years, ASD has approved nine charter school renewal applications. ASD has never rejected an application. The process begins in July when proposers submit a letter of intent to the superintendent, either to start or renew a charter school. He said that by September, all application documents are submitted to his office, and there is ongoing dialogue to review and refine the application, including meetings to address budget and staffing projections. Once submitted, the application undergoes an administrative review involving all district departments, allowing stakeholders to provide detailed feedback. He said he then holds a meeting with the proposers and department heads to review the application line by line, aiming to improve and strengthen it. All stakeholders in the district are given an opportunity to provide input. After revisions, the proposal is presented to the school board as a public action item. Once approved, it is sent to the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) for technical review, usually completed within 90 days. He also emphasized his ongoing support for charter schools, including monthly meetings with principals and working with APC boards on policy, budget, and governance issues.

[4:13:25 PM](#)

MR. HLANSNY explained that he works closely with the chairs of charter schools and handles both initial and renewal applications for the district. He collaborates with ASD and charter schools on strategic planning. Every few years, they hold a statewide Charter School Academy, bringing together principals and board members for training on the Open Meetings Act, parliamentary procedure, and principal evaluations, among other key topics. He said he also supports schools by fielding parent calls, assisting principals, and ensuring proper evaluations of charter school principals, which are conducted by an administrator rather than the APC.

[4:14:48 PM](#)

JHARRETT BRYANTT, Superintendent, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, expressed ASD's support for the charter school language in SB 140, noting that the creation of a charter school coordinator position at the state level would provide a

centralized contact for charter school inquiries. This role would equalize support across the state for groups applying for charters and help navigate complex governance and regulatory requirements. He also emphasized the need for an increase to the base student allocation (BSA), which charter schools require just as much as neighborhood schools, given years of flat funding. Charter schools, like many public schools, are facing difficult financial decisions. He provided an example of one successful ASD charter school that has had to dip into its fund balance, cut two teacher positions, two paraprofessionals, and a nighttime custodian, and is struggling to afford lease payments. He stressed that charter schools reflect the financial challenges faced by all public schools in the state and reiterated the critical importance of increasing the BSA to maintain their scale and success.

[4:16:37 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked whether there is an advantage to removing control of charter schools from local districts and placing them under the control of the State Board of Education and the Commissioner.

[4:16:56 PM](#)

MS. BELLAMY expressed confusion about the idea of removing charter schools from local district control, especially given their deep connection to local communities. She emphasized that disrupting this relationship seems unnecessary and counterproductive. She stated that her preference is to maintain the current process under the school board, rather than making any changes that could cause disruption.

[4:17:54 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked a series of questions regarding practices at a charter school in his district and sought to know if they are relatable to charter schools in ASD. He said the charter school in his district has parents sign behavior contracts, unenrolls students for poor behavior or excessive tardiness, assesses students before enrollment to determine if the school is a suitable environment, and provides special education services through external providers without on-site staff. He asked if any of these practices were common among charter schools in ASD or if there were any similarities.

[4:19:29 PM](#)

MR. HLASNY stated that charter schools in ASD do not require parents to sign behavioral contracts for enrollment or admission. These schools are public choice options that are open

and inclusive to all students. While charter schools may not always have the same on-site specialists or services that neighborhood schools offer, they are committed to welcoming all learners. If there is a concern regarding the ability to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting is held to review the plan and make a team decision. He emphasized that charter schools in ASD follow the same policies and procedures as traditional schools.

[4:20:40 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked if any of the provisions he listed exist in charter schools in Anchorage.

[4:20:51 PM](#)

MR. HLASNY replied that he does not remember everything mentioned but he is not aware of any behavior or probation contracts. At ASD, it is a lottery process. Any student can apply.

[4:21:18 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL disclosed that he has close family members who attend and volunteer in Anchorage charter schools. He requested that the Anchorage School District provide information on the number of students in each charter school and clarify whether the district allocates the same amount of funding generated by the formula or more to those schools. He also asked if any of the charter schools in the district have parent volunteer or involvement requirements.

[4:22:00 PM](#)

MS. BELLAMY acknowledged that some charter schools in the district may have parent volunteer requirements, noting that when her own children attended a charter school, parents were expected to volunteer a certain amount of time per semester or quarter, and participate in fundraisers approved by the APC. She offered to gather school-by-school information if needed.

[4:22:55 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN asked Mr. Hlasny if he could provide an estimate of the per-pupil spending in the Anchorage School District's charter schools.

[4:23:00 PM](#)

MR. HLASNY explained that he is not the senior director or chief finance officer for the district but noted that per-pupil spending in charter schools is the same as in other schools, minus 4 percent. The 4 percent represents a direct cost that

goes back to the district, but otherwise, charter schools receive the same funding as any other school.

[4:23:41 PM](#)

ANDY RATLIFF, Chief Financial Officer, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, confirmed that the district provides full funding to charter schools as required by statute, including their share of federal impacted interest earnings and additional allowable contributions. The district then deducts the maximum 4 percent for indirect costs. He noted that this 4 percent rarely covers the actual administrative time spent on charter schools, as their budgets require much more review than traditional schools. In addition, the district offers professional development opportunities and pays for Mr. Hlasny's role in supporting charter schools, which is categorized under student instructional support rather than indirect costs due to state function coding.

CHAIR TOBIN asked that ASD send the information requested by Senator Kiehl to her office.

[4:25:02 PM](#)

CLAYTON HOLLAND, Superintendent, Kenai Peninsula School District, Kenai, Alaska, shared that the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD) has four charter schools: three in the Soldotna-Kenai area and one in Homer, with 653 students, representing about 7 percent of the district's Average Daily Membership (ADM). Over the last 10 years, four charter school proposals were submitted. Of the four, three were approved but later rescinded, and one was denied but is currently in the appeal process. He explained that KPBSD follows AS 14.03.250. KPBSD has an August 1 deadline for submitting letters of intent, and completed applications are due by October of the following year. He described the charter process and highlighted that the district provides significant support during the charter development process, offering financial, human resources, and special education information.

[4:28:56 PM](#)

MR. HOLLAND praised the proposal in SB 140 to have a state-level charter school coordinator, noting it would help with the workload since KPBSD does not have dedicated staff for charter schools. KPBSD has never denied a charter renewal and is thorough in its review process.

[4:29:35 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked whether there is any advantage in removing control of charter schools from local school boards, districts, and administrations, and placing it under the State School Board and the commissioner of education.

[4:29:54 PM](#)

MR. HOLLAND stated that he does not see any advantage in removing local control of charter schools. He questioned how it would work, particularly in cases where a budget is not aligned properly or missing required elements, noting that the local site would be best equipped to address such issues. He emphasized the importance of local input and pointed out that charter schools are eventually reviewed by the state, but he cannot imagine the process functioning effectively without local control and input.

[4:30:36 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN mentioned that some people in the Capitol believe that the charter school application, which was denied, was perfectly fine and should have been accepted, suggesting it was wrongfully discriminated against by the district. He then asked what gaps in the application led to its denial.

[4:31:16 PM](#)

MR. HOLLAND agreed that from the start, it felt like there was a lot of political influence on the process. He outlined several key gaps in the charter school application that led to its denial, with the primary issue being an incorrect budget. Despite the district offering assistance, the applicant did not allocate space or calculate costs correctly for the school they planned to occupy. There were also issues related to Title I funding, which could not be allocated until after a year of student attendance, and uncertainty about where the enrolled students would come from. Other gaps included issues regarding evidence-based curriculum and insufficient attention to special education. He noted that the proposal also changed models adding complexity. He remarked that the board's meeting on the matter lasted six or seven hours, with many challenges preventing approval.

[4:32:46 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked if the charter school in question, which appealed the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District's denial of their charter to the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) and Commissioner Bishop, was successful in that appeal.

[4:33:09 PM](#)

MR. HOLLAND explained that Commissioner Bishop recused herself from making a decision on the appeal. Another individual, whose name he did not recollect, made the decision, and the district's board decision to deny the charter was upheld by DEED.

[4:33:20 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN sought clarification that DEED also denied the charter school request.

[4:33:24 PM](#)

MR. CLAYTON replied that was correct.

[4:34:04 PM](#)

BRANDY HARTY, President, Board of Education, Fairbanks North Star Borough, Fairbanks, Alaska, said she has two children attending a district charter school. She shared that the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (FNSBSD) currently has five charter schools, including Alaska's first and longest-running charter, Chinook Montessori Charter, which opened in 1996, and Discovery Peak Charter School, which opened in 2020. Currently, 884 students are enrolled in these five charter schools, making up 7 percent of the district's total enrollment of 12,543 students. She noted that Fairbanks was the first district in Alaska to open a charter school in 1996. Since then, eight charter schools have opened, with two transitioning into district programs: the Career Education Center (CEC) and The Star of the North.

[4:35:20 PM](#)

MS. HARTY explained that New Beginning Charter School closed two years after opening by its own choice, and to her knowledge, the school board has never denied any charter school applications or renewals. She acknowledged that the application process can be cumbersome, involving negotiations for leases and legalities, which have been challenging for many charter schools at their start. The board holds yearly meetings to review contracts with charter schools in addition to the 10-year renewal process. She noted that the official application process is detailed in Board Policy (BP) 935.2, which she has provided in her testimony. Typically, the application process is completed a year before the school plans to open, although community members often begin informal preparations much earlier. She highlighted that local charter schools benefit from district infrastructure, including payroll, human resources, IT support, laptops, special education services, district custodians, and access to student support services such as Alaska Native education.

4:37:01 PM

MS. HARTY noted that charter schools in the district are overseen by the Executive Director of Alternative Learning, who assists with day-to-day needs. In the past, when transportation funding and drivers were sufficient, local charters had access to busing services, making them more accessible to a broader range of students. Like other district schools, charter schools would benefit from an increase in the Base Student Allocation (BSA), as they too have been affected by years of flat funding, service cuts, and reduced purchasing power due to inflation. Charter school educators are district employees and are covered by the same bargaining agreements, meaning that they will also face increased labor costs due to new agreements.

MS. HARTY highlighted that beyond funding increases, charter schools could benefit from affordable or no-cost legal representation. Many charter schools, including her son's, are housed in commercial real estate instead of district-owned buildings and face disputes with landlords or predatory leases that tie rent increases to any BSA increase. She also noted the charters do not often have a fund balance to offset years when multiple staff members take leave, as they must cover the costs for staff salaries and long-term substitute pay. She strongly supported the creation of a dedicated position to address the needs of Alaska's charter schools. She emphasized that local school board oversight is key to the success of Alaska's charter schools. As a district with the first and longest-running charter school, Fairbanks has found the arrangement with its charter schools to be mutually beneficial and is committed to further improving this partnership.

4:39:44 PM

SENATOR STEVENS asked what the advantages and disadvantages are to removing control of charter schools from the district and local administration and placing them under the State School Board and the Commissioner of Education.

4:40:06 PM

MS. HARTY stated that she sees no advantages to changing the current dynamic of local control over charter schools. She noted several disadvantages, emphasizing the close working relationship the district has maintained with charter schools since 1996. She highlighted that the state would not be able to provide the same level of public hearings, gather local input, or offer the robust process the district currently provides. She

concluded that there is no need to fix a system that is not broken.

[4:40:47 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked for clarification, confirming if he heard correctly that there are fewer than 600 students enrolled across the five charter schools in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District.

[4:41:00 PM](#)

MS. HARTY clarified that there are 884 students enrolled in the five charter schools within the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District.

SENATOR KIEHL noted that, based on the student numbers, the charter schools still fall below the efficient cut points in the funding formula. He then asked whether the district is providing more funding to those charter schools than what the formula generates for the students enrolled in them.

[4:41:34 PM](#)

MS. HARTY explained that the district provides charter schools with all the funding that is statutorily required, treating them somewhat like independent districts. However, the district also offers additional services beyond the required amount, particularly in special education. Charter schools keep all of the 20 percent allocated for special education (SPED) grants, even though the district provides extra support, such as speech and learning pathologists, occupational therapists, and paraprofessionals for students with higher needs. Since the district is the Local Education Agency (LEA) responsible for ensuring compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), it significantly supplements the resources provided to charter schools.

[4:42:35 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN mentioned that some believe if every school in Alaska operated like the charter school in his district, educational outcomes would improve significantly. He explained that this charter school assesses students before enrollment to determine if they will succeed, provides counsel to parents on their child's potential success, places students on a behavior plan, and unenrolls them if they do not comply. He asked if these practices are used in Fairbanks' charter schools and whether she considers this model scalable, where all children could be successful.

[4:43:58 PM](#)

MS. HARTY acknowledged that some elements mentioned do exist in Fairbanks' charter schools, which operate, to a certain extent, as independent contractors with the district. She noted that some charter schools have behavior contracts and can remove students who struggle with behavior, sending them back to neighborhood schools. As public schools, the district still serves all students, including those requiring special education. She pointed out that charter schools benefit from being able to disenroll students as neighborhood schools provide a fallback. Many charter schools, like her son's, have volunteer requirements, but these are often flexible and not strictly enforced. She added that charter schools can have difficulty maintaining full Academic Policy Committee (APC) boards. This is particularly the case for schools serving Title I populations, where many households have single or working parents who struggle to meet involvement expectations. She expressed that charters are not a universal solution for all students, especially given the challenges of providing special education services. Not every public school can be replaced with a charter school. She emphasized that while charters play an important role, they are not scalable for every student or school, as the demands placed on parents and students cannot be expected from all.

[4:46:33 PM](#)

FRANK HAUSER, Superintendent, Juneau School District, Juneau, Alaska, thanked the committee for the opportunity to speak about charter schools, specifically the Juneau Community Charter School (JCCS), one of the oldest in Alaska. He stated that his district was asked to respond to a series of questions, starting with the first: how many charter schools are in the district and how many students attend them.

[4:47:11 PM](#)

MR. HAUSER stated that there is one charter school in the Juneau School District, which is proportional to the size of the district. Starting in fall 2024, the district will have one comprehensive high school and one middle school. The General Community Charter School (JCCS) currently has 88 students, making up approximately 2 percent of the district's Average Daily Membership (ADM). JCCS began in 1997 with just over 30 students, or about 0.6 percent of the district. In the past 10 years, the district has received no requests to establish additional charter schools and there is no known feedback that the application process was too onerous.

[4:47:45 PM](#)

MR. HAUSER stated that in the last 10 years, the Board of Education has approved all charter school renewals, with none being denied. The Juneau Community Charter School (JCCS), one of the oldest charter schools in Alaska, has been renewed three times since it opened in 1997—in 2002, 2008, and 2015. He described the application process for the Juneau School District (JSD) stating the process is outlined in board policy. Once the board receives an application, it must review it at the next practical public meeting, within 60 days the board must review the application and provide its written decision. If approved, the application is sent to the State Board of Education for final approval. If denied, applicants can appeal to the Commissioner of the Department of Education and Early Development. An appeal process exists in board policy. According to JSD policy, applications for a charter school to operate the following year must be submitted no later than October 1 of the current year, and the school must begin operation by October 1 of the year it is approved.

MR. HAUSER spoke to resources and the strong partnership between JCCS and the district. JCCS receives support in areas such as recruitment, hiring, financial services, policy interpretation, and access to special education, counseling, and nursing services. The district also provides space for the school in JSD facilities. Additionally, JCCS is advertised on the district's website, and this year, it introduced a new mascot.

MR. HAUSER identified that the single most important action the state could take to help the charter schools, APCs, and the board of education is to increase the Base Student Allocation (BSA). He noted that charter schools rely on BSA funding, and the failure to increase it, despite inflation and rising fixed costs, negatively affects both charter schools and all public schools. An increase in the BSA would benefit all schools by addressing these financial challenges.

[4:50:54 PM](#)

MR. HAUSER stated that JCCS is one of Alaska's oldest charter schools, reflecting a strong partnership with the district and community. He mentioned that the JCCS principal emphasized the importance of a robust parent and volunteer support group, further stating, "It is incumbent that charter officials understand their role within the wider school district and seek to be a supportive member of that community."

MR. HAUSER expressed concern that state-level interventions in local charter schools would impose a statewide solution where no statewide problem exists. Local charter school policies are developed by elected officials who understand and are accountable to their communities. He argued that adding a new layer of bureaucracy at the state level would introduce unnecessary complexities without clear benefits.

[4:52:19 PM](#)

MR. HAUSER referenced Paul Peterson's study on charter schools and its use of five-year-old data. He reiterated that charter schools are suitable for some families, but not all. He emphasized that the Juneau School District (JSD) celebrates parent choice and offers a wide variety of academic programs that cater to the needs of the community. In addition to traditional neighborhood elementary schools and comprehensive middle and high schools, JSD has long offered alternative and optional academic programs for students and parents. These include the Tlingit Culture, Language, and Literacy Program (TCLL), a place- and culture-based program that integrates the Tlingit language and culture into daily instruction alongside national standards. Montessori Borealis is a Pre-K through 8th-grade Montessori public alternative school, one of only 500 public Montessori schools in the nation. Yaakoosgé Daakahídi Alternative High School serves as a 9-12 alternative high school, and HomeBRIDGE offers homeschool instruction for kindergarten through 12th grade. JSD also includes the Juneau Community Charter School (JCCS).

[4:53:57 PM](#)

DEEDIE SORENSEN, President, Board of Education, Juneau School District, Juneau, Alaska, recalled when the Juneau Community Charter School first opened and emphasized the importance of the community embracing all optional programs. She stated that it is crucial for local control of all public educational programs to remain with the local school board, which is elected by the community.

[4:54:47 PM](#)

BRITTNEY CIONI-HAYWOOD, Member, Board of Education, Juneau School District, Juneau, Alaska, shared that she was recently elected to the Juneau School Board in October and has previously served as the chair, treasurer, and a member of the Academic Policy Committee (APC) for the Juneau Community Charter School (JCCS). She mentioned that her child has been attending JCCS since kindergarten and is currently a sixth grader, making her family long-standing members of the school's community.

[4:55:22 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL posed a historical question noting his appreciation for the Juneau School District's efforts to provide public school choices, with the Juneau Community Charter School as an example. He recalled an attempt some years ago to open a Montessori charter school in the district, which was approved by the Juneau School District Board of Education but disapproved by the State Board. He asked if Ms. Sorensen could recall the reasons why the State Board rejected the local charter school application.

[4:56:05 PM](#)

MS. SORENSEN said she remembered the incident but could not recall the reason.

[4:56:24 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL replied it was an unfair question.

[4:56:41 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS expressed appreciation for the comment about transferring authority from the local school board to the State School Board being a "solution in search of a problem." He asked if there are any advantages to a transfer of authority or if there are disadvantages.

MS. SORENSEN stated that she sees no advantages to transferring authority and noted several disadvantages. She emphasized that charter schools need local commitment, which comes from the active involvement of the community and support from the Board of Education. She referenced a speaker from Nome who highlighted the accountability of local leaders, whom people interact with regularly in the community, such as in grocery stores. She stressed that in public schools, accountability ultimately lies with the local school board.

[4:58:03 PM](#)

At ease

[4:58:24 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN reconvened the meeting and introduced the next invited testifier.

[4:58:50 PM](#)

EDWARD PEKAR, Assistant Superintendent, Lower Kuskokwim School District, Bethel, Alaska, stated that the Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) has one charter school, Ayaprun Elitnaurvik, a

Yup'ik Charter School, located in Bethel. As of the most recent count, there were 183 students enrolled, representing about 4.8 percent of total LKSD enrollment. Over the past 10 years, the Board of Education has received a charter renewal and an extension to include grades seven and eight. He noted that there was no feedback indicating the application process was too onerous. The process, outlined in Administrative Regulations 6181A, involves an administrative meeting, a school board work session, and a school board decision on whether to accept or deny the charter.

MR. PEKAR said Ayaprun Elitnaurvik has access to the same district resources as the other 28 schools in LKSD and is governed by a local Academic Parent Committee (APC). The APC consists of five current parents, one former parent who is classified staff, two certified teachers, the principal as administrator, and one community elder. The Yup'ik language is the primary language of instruction from kindergarten through second grade, with 50 percent of instruction in Yup'ik for grades three through eight, following the district's language development model used in its two-language schools.

MR. PEKAR also noted that public and community input on the charter school renewal and expansion process has been positive, with strong support for expanding the school to include grades seven and eight. He emphasized that local control of charter school applications is crucial, as the Board of Education represents all LKSD communities and understands the public interest and support behind such applications.

[5:01:42 PM](#)

HUGH DYMENT, Member, Board of Education, Lower Kuskokwim School District, Bethel, Alaska, gave a brief overview of his 34 years of experience as a teacher, advisor, and board member. He noted that the community of Bethel is fond of its charter school, which represents 25 percent of Bethel's K-6th grade population. Of the approximately 670 K-6 students in Bethel, 153 attend Ayaprun. He mentioned that some of his children attended the charter school while others did not and expressed support for parental choice. Having served on the APC (Academic Policy Committee) and helped write the school's first renewal application, he found nothing particularly onerous about having a child at the school or being on the board. However, he acknowledged that success required people who were willing to work for what they wanted.

[5:04:44 PM](#)

MR. DYMENT opined that the success of charter schools often stems from self-selection, as parents actively choose to send their children to a school where there is a commitment to assist with homework and volunteer their time. He explained that among [rural school districts] LKSD is unique, being the largest in area and student population, with 4,000 students across 24 villages. Bethel, which is twice the size of other rural hubs, serves 56 villages, whereas hubs like Nome or Barrow serve 6 to 10 villages. He said charter schools also differ and noted that Ayaprun has a short waitlist.

[5:08:29 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if there are any advantages or disadvantages to transferring authority from local district to the state.

MR. DYMENT stated he is not familiar with the proposed legislation but opined that what is happening at the local level is working well. He mentioned that the Lower Yukon School District, which is half the size of LKSD, recently opened a charter school in Hooper Bay. He expressed that he sees no advantage to removing local control of charter schools and believes there are disadvantages if the goal is to shift control to the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED). He pointed out that current legislation already includes an appeal process, allowing charter applicants to appeal to the state if a local district denies their application, making further changes unnecessary.

[5:11:51 PM](#)

DIANE GUBATAYAO, Member, Board of Education, Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District, Ketchikan, Alaska, stated that she has served 10 years on the school board and noted that Ketchikan has two charter schools: Ketchikan Charter School, which serves preK-8 and Tongass School of Arts and Sciences, a K-6 school. There are 358 students enrolled in charter schools, representing approximately 17 percent of Ketchikan's student population. In the past 10 years, the Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District (KGBSD) has not received any new charter school applications.

[5:12:51 PM](#)

MS. GUBATAYAO recalled the lengthy process for establishing the Tongass School of Arts and Sciences during her time on the board. KGBSD's Board Policy (BP) 6181 outlines the requirements to qualify as a charter school and the year-to-year obligations. She shared her unique experience as a board member involved in the approval of Ketchikan Charter School in the late 1990s and

as president of the Academic Policy Committee (APC) for the Tongass School of Arts and Sciences for three years. Having worked on both sides of charter school establishment, she expressed deep appreciation for how charter schools function. KGBSD's approval process is like that of other districts, and the resources available to Ketchikan's charter schools are essentially the same as those provided to other schools in the district. She highlighted strong support from parents and the community, with choice in education being valued district wide.

[5:15:31 PM](#)

MS. GUBATAYAO emphasized that APC is a unique feature of charter schools, allowing greater parental involvement in school operations. She expressed strong support for charter schools, with the important caveat that they must be governed by the local school district and school boards in alignment with state law. This governance ensures that charter schools are fully accountable in terms of finances and academic achievement, just like all district schools. The charter process and Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) provide a degree of creativity and flexibility, benefiting both charter schools and the district.

[5:17:16 PM](#)

LON GARRISON, Executive Director, Association of Alaska School Boards, Juneau, Alaska, moved to slide 2 and said he was proud of the testimony given on how charter schools work and the importance and impact of local control. He said he put together a presentation on why local authorization is important spoke to the complexity of the school system:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Why Local Authorization

- Schools are a complex system that must be responsible for:
 - Student safety, welfare, academic progress
 - Special education
 - Special needs or intensive needs
 - Curriculum and instruction to meet state standards
 - Providing certified staff as required by law for teaching and administrative functions
 - Student progress monitoring and assessments
 - Providing a suitable facility in which students can learn

- Providing transportation and meals where applicable
- Communicating and engaging with parents
- Meeting all applicable state and federal laws and regulations

[5:19:16 PM](#)

MR. GARRISON moved to slide 3 and said local authorization is also important because of support services:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Why Local Authorization

Local districts provide the capacity to support school operations Policy

- HR
- Payroll & Accounting
- Facilities where applicable
- Family and parent engagement
- Professional development
- Transportation and meals, where applicable
- Opportunities to access grants

[5:19:39 PM](#)

MR. GARRISON moved to slide 4 and discussed AASB's support for local charter schools statewide and that almost all schools across the state use AASB's model policy. He described AASB's model board policy for charter schools:

[Original punctuation provided.]

AASB Supports and Encourages Local Charter Schools

From AASB Model Board Policy 6181 - Charter Schools

The School Board shall give appropriate consideration to any charter school petition, in light of its overall effect on the district's children and the proposed school's ability to function effectively and meet its goals. The School Board desires to support innovations which improve student learning **and views charter schools as an opportunity to implement school-level reform.** In accordance with law, the proposed charter **must include descriptions of the vision, mission and goals of the charter school, the**

governance structure which will be used, the educational outcomes to be attained by students, and **the method by which progress in meeting these outcomes will be measured.**

[5:20:54 PM](#)

MR. GARRISON moved to slide 5 and discussed what it takes to get authorization for a charter school:

[Original punctuation provided.]

What it takes to get Authorization

- Authorization is a lengthy and thorough process, but it needs to be!
- Authorization usually takes about 9 months or more and involves both the local board, DEED, and the State Board of Education (SBOE)
- Authorization requires local school board approval, DEED recommendation, and SBOE approval.
- The process includes an appeal process for the applicant if denied by either a local board or the Commissioner of Education.

[5:22:30 PM](#)

MR. GARRISON moved to slide 6 and provided information about the application process and its length. He stressed that the State Board of Education must have 90 days prior to its next meeting for an item to be placed on its agenda:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Current application and appeal process

Process and timeline for a charter that is approved

<u>STEP</u>	<u>DAYS</u>	<u>Cumulative Days</u>
Initial application to local school board	0	0
Local approval or denial	Within 60	60
Commissioner review of approval	To SBOE w/in 30 days	90
Forwarded to SBOE		

for final approval Scheduled for next
SBOE meeting not less
than 90 days in advance 180

[5:23:32 PM](#)

MR. GARRISON moved to slide 7 and discussed the denial process and appeal. He stated there are a lot of off ramps towards the process to approval and the process provides every opportunity possible to help a charter be successful in its approval:

Current application and appeal process

Process and timeline for a charter that is denied and appealed

<u>STEP</u>	<u>DAYS</u>	<u>Cumulative Days</u>
Initial application to local school board	0	0
Local approval or denial	Within 60	60
Appeal to Commissioner of local denial	Within 60 days	120
Appeal to SBOE if Commissioner upholds local denial	Appeal within 30 days	150
Forwarded to SBOE for final determination	Scheduled for next SBOE meeting not less than 90 days in advance of	240

[5:25:05 PM](#)

MR. GARRISON moved to slide 8 and closed by discussing resources available for charter schools:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Resources

- DEED website for charter school information: Charter Schools
- AASB Resources: Charter School Support

AASB is in the final stage of development:

1. Model Charter School Bylaws

2. Model policies for a charter school Academic Policy Committee
3. A new section of model board policies about charter schools

[5:27:10 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked if there are any charter schools in Alaska that have opted not to follow the model policy of AASB.

MR. GARRISON replied that he does not recall any charter schools in Alaska choosing not to follow the AASB's model policy. He noted that while the Mat-Su School District is no longer a member of AASB, much of its policy manual is still based on the model policy established by AASB, though it no longer receives updates.

[5:27:56 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL noted that the committee has heard from supportive school board members and superintendents who appear to subsidize charter schools by providing funding beyond what the formula generates to keep them strong. He mentioned that about 10 years ago, the state lifted the cap on charter schools and asked why there hasn't been a significant increase in the number of charter schools since then.

[5:28:35 PM](#)

MR. GARRISON opined that, based on the testimony, participation in charter schools typically ranges from 4 to 7 percent. He agreed that charter schools are somewhat self-selecting, as they offer an alternative opportunity for students that requires significant parental involvement, which could explain why there aren't more charter schools. He emphasized the importance of this consideration, suggesting that the success of charter schools might be tied to parental involvement. He also noted that the pupil-teacher ratio in charter schools tends to be lower and questioned whether charter schools meet the needs of students who lack involved parents, raising concerns about equity. He stated that as a public school system, it's essential to wrestle with how to provide equitable options through local schools and boards to meet students' needs. While a charter school may not always be necessary, he suggested exploring what can be learned from charter schools to create greater equity of opportunity for all students.

[5:30:52 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated that this meeting was important because it informed members about the involvement of elected board

members and district leaders. He expressed support for the idea that "if it is not broken, don't fix it." He referenced the Harvard study that indicated Alaska has some of the best charter schools in the nation. He noted that testifiers emphasized the importance of local control because it provides accountability and active participation from school districts. Districts expressed concerns that changes could not only disrupt but damage the success of charter schools.

[5:31:52 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN reiterated points from the meeting, expressing support for charter schools and acknowledging that it is beneficial for students in his district to have a charter school option. However, he emphasized that charter schools are not suitable for all students and highlighted the need for realistic expectations of what neighborhood schools can accomplish. He found it interesting that districts fund and subsidize charter school students, potentially at the expense of students in regular schools. He noted that it is not surprising that students with involved parents, rigorous curriculum expectations, and behavior requirements perform well in charter schools, as they have no choice but to meet those standards to attend.

[5:34:59 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL noted that as districts struggle with budgets, it's clear to him that running a small school cost more per student, and districts have no choice in the matter. He emphasized that, regardless of the difficult decisions made by locally elected school boards to balance the budget, the following year, a group of dedicated parents and their children from a charter school could bring in a significant financial burden that the district must accommodate, even if it doesn't fit within the budget. He stressed that the financial side of things must work, or none of the system will function effectively.

[5:36:21 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON agreed that the meeting was informative and important, especially given the proposal to change charter schools from local to state control.

[5:37:40 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 5:37 p.m.