

**CHARTER
SCHOOL
ALTERNATIVE
GOVERNANCE**

1/22/04

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Fax Cover Sheet

Send to: <i>Senate / HESS Committee</i>	From: <i>Jenni Austin</i>
Attention: <i>Fred Dupon</i>	Date: <i>2-9-04</i>
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Comments:

Please distribute the following information to the other committee members who participated at the Education / HESS Committee Meeting on 1-22-04.

Thanks,
Jenni Austin

ALASKA CHARTER SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

801 E. Arctic Ave.
Palmer, Alaska 99645
907-452-5020
President, Terri Austin

February 8, 2004

Dear Committee Members,

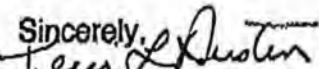
Thank you for allowing me time to share the Alaska Charter School Association's thoughts regarding the issue of an alternative chartering agency. We believe this is a critical topic that deserves extensive thought and consideration. We appreciate your interest.

We believe every effort should be made to insure the success of each charter school that wishes to open their doors. To place a brand new school in the middle of a small town or community that doesn't wish it to be there for whatever reason, places a great deal of stress on the school when there is already a high level of tension in opening a school. We don't believe this to be a positive situation for anyone involved.

Maybe the task here is not to create a different agency, but to help new charter founders find ways to work within their community, school district, and ultimately with the local school board. We have a number of "experts" within the state who have traveled this path and who could offer help and assistance. This could possibly be a role that our association offers.

I was asked during the committee meeting if my given statement represented the members' views of the Alaska Charter School Association. I did so in good faith. Some of those who also shared views are not paid voting members of the association.

Again, thank you for your consideration of this issue. If I, or the Charter School Association, can assist in any way, please let me know. We value the goal of working with you to foster and support exemplary charter schools throughout the state of Alaska.

Sincerely,

Terri Austin, President
Alaska Charter School Association
Chinook Montessori Charter
School, Fairbanks

I'm Terri Austin and co-founder of the oldest charter school in the state, Chinook Montessori Charter School. I'm head teacher and also teach 24 eager middle schoolers. I have been teaching for 23 years in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, and have worked as a charter school consultant for Northwest Regional Laboratory. I'm also president of the Alaska Charter School Association. And in that capacity, I would like to speak to you. Our association has four very deep concerns about creating an alternative chartering agency.

First, we believe that local consensus is essential. I know from experience how important it is to work to gain input and support from local leaders not only within the educational arena but also those involved in volunteer work, in politics, in business, and in the arts. A charter school joins an established working community and for that reason must be willing to both inform local leaders about the vision for the school, and also be willing to listen and respond to concerns and desires of these leaders. Taking a charter school proposal to an alternative granting agency side-steps these conversations. Going this route paints a picture that local comments are not required or desired in creating and establishing a charter school. Every business that wishes to be successful does a feasibility assessment and talks with those in the neighborhood. To be successful, a charter school needs to do the same.

Our second concern is about unity. In this time of sorting out the No Child Left Behind requirements and creatively dealing with financial concerns, everyone in the education profession needs to work together so that children are the focus of our time and energy, not who has the power to grant charters.

We believe an alternative granting agency would divide the education community of Alaska. We believe it would create individual isolated islands of charter schools attempting to work on their own. We believe it would not foster positive communication or a stable working relationship between the charter school and the local district. Teaching is much too hard to do it by yourself. We need each other in order to do the best job that we can.

Our third concern has to do with the size of our communities. For the most part our towns and settlements are small. It would not be easy for a charter school, who has not worked with the local district and local leaders, to suddenly appear and open their doors. Alaskans like to participate and they like to have a say in what happens in their community. It is very wise for charter schools to capitalize on this characteristic to insure stability and success.

Our final concern is with the ideas of support and communication.

The majority of charter schools in the state have positive working relationship with the local school districts. And, again from my experience, that connection is created from the many months of talking and negotiating between the charter school founders, the local school district and the local school board. There are always bumps in the road in becoming a charter school, but it's the navigation of those bumps that allow each party involved to better understand their own beliefs and the beliefs of the others. It also provides time - time for the charter school founders to examine and re-examine their mission and principles. For the school district and school board, the time allows them to also re-examine their values about education and how the notion of a charter school fits that view. This time allows both to negotiate, compromise, and learn about each other.

Now, this isn't to say that all charter schools are easily accepted or quickly embraced. In some instances the school board says no and that's heartbreaking for the charter school founders. But the recourse is part of the democratic system - vote in other people on the local school board and persuade others to your point of view. Some charter schools are the result of long hard campaigns, but the point here is that in the end, there were enough people that believed in the idea of that particular school to say "Give it a go". That's support.

Charter schools need support (every school needs support). No school can go it alone. Support comes from communication, tussling over language, sorting out beliefs, and most of all, coming to know each other. Alaska is continually being built on the spirit of cooperation and daring-do. It's the perfect place for innovative educators to create new opportunities for learners. It's the perfect place for local school boards to say, "let's hear your proposal". It's the perfect place for all those involved in education to talk, explore, and come to know. All that would be gone if an alternative granting agency is established in the state of Alaska.