



School Choice in the Anchorage School District, November 2011

Parents and students in the Anchorage School District interested in educational programs other than those offered by their local neighborhood schools have numerous options. Those include alternative schools and programs run by the district itself, charter schools operating under contract with the district school board, private schools, and home schooling.

Alternative Schools and Programs

The Anchorage School District has over two dozen alternative schools and programs. Twelve elementary schools operate partial or full alternative programs, including language immersion (Russian, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese), open optional, and back-to-basics programs. Those language immersion programs continue on into middle and high school. A number of middle schools have partial alternative programs, from language immersion to science emphases. The high schools have many partial alternative programs, including but not limited to an international baccalaureate program, a biomedical career academy, and school-within-a-school programs.

There also are 12 alternative schools in the district. Polaris, a small K-12 comprehensive school, and Steller Secondary, a small academic 7-12 program, emphasize self-directed learning and community engagement. Eight alternative schools offer secondary programs for non-traditional students, including those who are pregnant or have children, are incarcerated, have cognitive difficulties, are at risk of dropping out due to behavioral or academic problems, or have dropped out of other schools. The King Career Center offers high juniors and seniors vocational and technical education; students split their time between home high schools and the center. In the past two years, the district has also expanded its Career and Technical Education offerings including district-wide health and construction academies, to all middle and high schools. The district also has a rapidly growing online high-school program, currently called MyHigh, providing an array of online courses that supplement regular high school courses. The enrollment in MyHigh has grown considerably in the past year, with about 1,750 taking online summer school classes, and nearly 1,300 taking online classes in the fall 2011 semester.

Charter Schools

In Alaska, charter schools are approved by the local school board and the state Board of Education and operate within school districts. Anchorage has eight charter schools. Two, Aquarian and Eagle Academy, are K-6 schools emphasizing, respectively, interdisciplinary and arts-based learning and standards-based learning. Three are K-7 or K-8: the Alaska Native Cultural Charter School, Rilke Schule Charter German School of Arts and Sciences, and Winterberry, which uses the Waldorf education model. Highland Tech serves grades 6-12 and emphasizes the use of technology and standards-based learning. Two charter schools, Family Partnership and Frontier, support homeschooling for families with children in grades K-12.

Out-of-Area Attendance

Anchorage also offers a limited open enrollment policy for students who want to attend a school outside their regular attendance area, regardless of whether there is an optional program at that school. Parents must apply for a zone exemption to exercise this option.

Applying for Optional and Charter Schools

Alternative schools in Anchorage are not necessarily accessible to all children whose parents might prefer such schools. The school district doesn't provide transportation for optional and charter schools and programs. Also, many schools have a parent-involvement requirement that may discourage parents whose work schedules are not flexible. As a result, many of the most popular alternative schools enroll students who are less diverse and at a higher socio-economic status than students in neighborhood schools, especially at the secondary level.

Parents who want their children to attend optional or charter schools must enter lotteries, which are held twice a year. Parents have to complete separate applications for each school or program they would like their children to attend, along with a Zone Exemption/Lottery Form. Information about the lottery process is at: <http://www.asdk12.org/Parents/choices/StepByStepLottery.pdf>

Many of the district's alternative programs and schools have waiting lists, currently ranging from more than 660 for the Aquarian Charter School and over 400 for both the Denali Montessori and the Northern Lights ABC schools, to very short or no lists for other programs. Because parents can apply to multiple schools, and there is no centralized lottery database that allows parents to indicate preference, it is not possible to determine whether students on the waiting list for one school are actually enrolled in another optional program.

Choices beyond the Anchorage School District

Parents and students can opt out of district schools entirely. Parents can home-school their children independently, or use one of Alaska's many online and by-mail home school options.

Eleven school districts run correspondence programs that accept students from anywhere in the state. (See http://www.eed.state.ak.us/Alaskan_schools/corres/Directory.cfm for a list.) It isn't possible to find out exactly how many students are home schooled in Anchorage or statewide. Alaska does not require that home-schooled students be tested or registered with any state agency, unless they are in programs that provide public funding, such as the district's home-school charter programs. Home schooling is supported broadly as an option in Alaska. But students who leave the district to be home schooled are counted as dropouts—which raises the district's dropout rate and lowers its graduation rate. Likewise, students who choose to leave early from high school and complete GED (General Educational Development) certificates also count as district dropouts.

There are also a number of private schools in Anchorage, but the proportion of school-age students in private schools—not including those who are home schooled—is around 5%, or about half the national average of 10%. Most private schools in Anchorage are faith-based and include the Anchorage Christian Schools, which offer preschool, elementary, and secondary education to about 550 students; Grace Christian School, with 278 K-6 students and 300 students in grades 7-12; Holy Rosary Academy, with 90 students K-12; the Anchor Lutheran School, with 93 students in grades K-8; the Eagle River Christian School, with 120 students grades K-12; Lumen Christi High School, with around 78 students in grades 7-12; and Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic School, with approximately 160 students in grades K-6. There also are several very small Christian schools (with 30 or fewer students). Independent private schools in Anchorage include the Pacific Northern Academy, with 122 students in grades pre-K through 8, the Atheneum School, with 8 students in grades 6-12, the Aurora Waldorf school, with about 100 K-8 students, and the Anchorage Montessori School, with 42 students in K-6.