

Advantages of Compact Schools v. Charter Schools

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The Alaska Legislature has passed legislation authorizing a demonstration project in which the Commissioner of Education may compact with Alaska Native Tribes or tribal organizations to operate one or more K-12 public schools. A primary purpose of this project is to use one of the most effective tools of the U.S. government—compacting—to demonstrate a transformational approach to education in Alaska. The historic disparity between the educational services for Native students compared to non-Native students, combined with the devastating impacts of the pandemic on the delivery of educational services, highlights the need for a transformational approach to the education of Alaska Native students. Compacting of education offers significant benefits over other methods of the delivery of educational services to Alaska’s Native children, including the charter school model, and will support the ultimate goal of more direct tribal ownership in the education and success of Native children.

While charter schools have been an important part of Alaska’s education system for decades, there are several key differences between charter schools and compact schools that highlight the need to pursue the innovative route of tribal compact schools. The charter school model as a potential pathway in Alaska’s Education Challenge was evaluated and rejected through the public process that sought a new pathway forward for Alaska Native students. While charter schools offer flexibility in curriculum, teaching about

Native cultural or language is not enough. The need for transformational education for Alaska Native students goes beyond cultural curriculum and requires that Alaska Native people take greater ownership of the system of education.

The key difference between a charter school and a compact school is that the compacting model reflects a government-to-government agreement that forms a partnership that is founded on the idea of shared vision, shared resources, and shared work. Critically, the compacting model allows for key aspects of the compacting relationship to be negotiated between the parties at a government-to-government level, which honors tribal sovereignty. This negotiation process is a necessary component of Native ownership of and accountability for key aspects of Native education. Conversely, charter schools operate primarily within the existing framework of public school services and are under the direct supervision of the local school district and board. The charter-school approach adds layers of bureaucracy and related expenses and does not reflect the sovereign status of tribal governments. Charter schools also fundamentally lack the Native ownership that is a critical component of the success of compact schools.

The State will also benefit from compacting of education, as compacting will improve the delivery of educational services to Native students while leveraging current, as well as potentially new, sources of funding while preserving education standards for all students in the State. Like charter schools, compact schools will still be subject to the legal requirements that make schools eligible for state and federal education funds. For example, compacting schools will still have to meet all State academic reporting requirements. However, compacting will allow Native communities to maximize the benefits of State and federal resources for the education of Native children by allowing funding to flow directly from the State or federal

government to the compact school without first being dispersed at the school board level. Like the success that Alaska has experienced with the delivery of Native health care through tribal compacts for the past several decades, the State will benefit from the resources that flow from the compacting relationship.

Though charter schools have offered significant benefits to Alaska's students, they simply do not provide the same acknowledgement of the role of the Tribe and local communities in the education of Native students or provide a mechanism for the federal trust responsibility of Native education to be carried out. Compacting recognizes and respects Native ownership in the education of Native children while working to improve educational opportunities in an innovative and cost-effective manner. Tribal compact schools offer many benefits over the charter school model and presents a pathway forward in a transformational approach to education for Alaska Native children.