

Rep. Dyson Extends Help to Charter Schools HB 101 Offers More Schools, Longer Contracts, Start-Up Funding

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(JUNEAU) -- Existing charter schools would get some breathing room, new charter schools would get a financial boost, and Alaskan children would get the chance to experience the benefits of an important educational alternative under House Bill 101, introduced by Rep. Fred Dyson (R-Eagle River).

"Some of our charter schools are exciting, dynamic examples of parental involvement in their children's education," said Dyson. "But most charter schools are struggling because we have not given them the tools they need to succeed."

First established in Alaska under a 1999 state law, charter schools are public schools established by contracts, or charters between school districts and local parents or organizations. They receive the same funding and employ the same certified teachers as public schools, while offering the benefits of diverse approaches to education. However, tight funding and resistance by some districts has depressed enrollment, forcing several schools to close their doors.

HB 101, which Dyson introduced Friday, would eliminate the current law's 2005 sunset date, which along with the required five-year term of charters had barred new schools from starting. It would also extend the allowable length of a contract from 5 years to 10; double the allowable number of statewide charters to 60; clarify that charter school students are not exempt from competency testing; and provide a small grant for teaching Alaska Native languages and history.

"While these steps are important, they are not nearly enough for charter schools to survive and thrive," Dyson said. HB 101 also provides for per-student start-up grants for new schools, and would give full funding under the foundation formula to schools with 100 students, instead of the 200 now required. While similar to a bill Dyson pushed last year, HB 101 lacks provisions requiring local districts to share local property tax revenue directly with charter schools, he said.

"We have two options," Dyson said. "We can strengthen the charter school law to encourage new thinking and foster more fresh educational reform. Or we can do nothing and watch the countless hundreds of hours that parents have invested in these schools die on the vine."

HB 101 was referred to the House Special Committee on Education, the House Health, Education and Social Services Committee, and the House Finance Committee.