



Academic Programs in the Anchorage School District, November 2011

The Anchorage School District has by far the largest enrollment in Alaska, with 49,206 students in the 2010-2011 school year—or 37% of all students statewide. It ranked 94th in enrollment among all U.S. districts in the 2008-09 year. It has 61 elementary schools, with two serving grades K-8, 10 middle schools, and 8 comprehensive high schools. In the 2010-11 year, elementary school size ranged from 165 students at Girdwood's K-8 school to 706 at Sand Lake. Middle school enrollment varied from 536 at Wendler to 1,094 at Clark, and high-school enrollment from 895 at Eagle River High to 2,211 at East High. Geographically small compared with Alaska's sprawling rural districts, Anchorage is large compared with districts in other states. Most schools are in the Anchorage bowl, but one is in Girdwood, 40 miles to the south, and one is at Mirror Lake, 22 miles north of the district's headquarters.

Alternative Programs and Schools

Twelve elementary schools operate partial or full alternative programs, including language immersion (Russian, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese), open optional, and back-to-basics programs. Language immersion programs also continue 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.

Twelve of the district's schools are alternative schools. Polaris, a small K-12 comprehensive school, and Steller Secondary, a small academic 7-12 program, emphasize self-directed learning and community engagement. Eight schools offer secondary programs for non-traditional students, including those who are pregnant or have children; are incarcerated; have cognitive difficulties; or are at risk of dropping out due to behavioral or academic problems or have dropped out of other schools. The King Career Center offers juniors and seniors vocational and technical education; students split their time between home high schools and the center.

The district also has a rapidly growing online high-school program, currently called MyHigh, offering courses that supplement traditional classroom courses. About 1,750 students took online courses in the summer of 2011, and 1,274 took online courses in the fall 2011 semester.

Charter Schools

Eight of the district's schools are charter schools. Five are primary schools with varying emphases, including the Waldorf education model, German immersion, Alaska Native cultural immersion, interdisciplinary and arts-based learning, and standards-based learning. There is one secondary school emphasizing technology and using standards-based learning, and two K-12 programs that support home schooling. Optional and alternative and charter schools are described in more detail in a separate brief on school choice in the Anchorage School District.

Special Programs/Support Initiatives/Grant Funded-Programs

The district and individual schools also offer a number of special programs. The district has a growing focus on career and technical education, which includes developing district-wide health and construction academies. Some individual schools also have career academies, such as the Engineering Academy at Diamond High, the biomedical career academy at Service High, the Construction Academy at Central Middle School, and the Health Academy at West High.

Anchorage also has a number of district curriculum and instructional support initiatives. There are curriculum coordinators for Art, Career and Technology Education, Health and Physical Education, Language Arts, STEM/Math/Science, Social Studies, World Languages, and Social and Emotional Learning. The larger curricular areas (including Math, Science, and Language Arts) also have support teachers at different school levels.

Education technology is a major focus in the district. All high schools and middle schools have “technology collaborators” to provide professional development and help teachers integrate technology into their classrooms. There are also education technology coaches supporting all schools in the district, and several initiatives—like the federally funded Technology Teacher Leader program—help develop teacher leaders in technology.

The district has a number of grant-funded academic programs. For example, for over a decade the district has run 21st Century Community Learning Centers—after-school programs offering academic enrichment opportunities for students at Title I schools—twelve elementary, one middle, and one charter. In 2011-12 the district was also in the fourth year of a five-year Teaching American History grant, called the Alaska Network for Understanding American History. It has focused on creating a professional community of practice to help teachers expand their ability to teach American history.

Programs for Specific Groups of Students

Other district programs support learning among specific groups of students. The district’s program for gifted children is K-8, except for students in the highly gifted cluster group, which includes optional programs at Rogers Park Elementary, Romig Middle School, and West High. The IGNITE program offers pull-out enrichment for gifted students in grades 2 through 6. Middle school students receive accelerated and enriched materials in language arts and science courses. In high school, gifted students transition to Honors and Advanced Placement courses. The district program has 56 teachers trained in educating gifted children.

The Migrant Education Program is a federally funded program for students from families who travel outside district boundaries for seasonal jobs; in Anchorage these are mostly students whose families move for seasonal commercial fishing. The program served over 3,600 students as of November 2011. It identifies family and student educational and social service needs, works to develop family literacy, and improves reading readiness for students pre-K through grade 3.

The Child in Transition/Homeless Project facilitates collaboration among teachers, nurses, counselors, administrators, and community agencies to support homeless children and their families. In the 2010-11 year, over 2,400 students were considered homeless—defined as those with no “fixed, adequate, or regular” place to live. That includes those living in cars or campgrounds, but also those living in shelters, hotels or motels, or with relatives or friends.

The Title VII Indian Education program is a federally funded initiative to help indigenous students succeed academically and culturally, through tutoring, cultural enrichment programs, Native language studies, and counseling. A big effort in 2011-12 is Project Puqigtut, a three-year grant using online courses to help students catch up or get ahead in core academic programs.

Social and Emotional Learning has become another major focus in the district. It is based on research showing that when schools systematically attend to social and emotional skills of students, their academic achievement increases, problem behaviors decrease, and relationships with others improve. The district is supporting efforts to improve school climates and interactions between students and adults in schools and is implementing recently adopted Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards and Benchmarks.