



DEMOCRATS *for*
EDUCATION REFORM

Alaska *Policy Memo*

A Note From **Our CEO**



Democrats face a critical juncture in education policy. Over the past decade, our party's historical advantage on education has eroded from lack of vision and loss of public trust. Voters' message is clear: They want something different, but Democrats have offered more of the same.

Alaska is a case study in both the challenge and the opportunity. The state suffers from low reading and math proficiency on state and national assessments, high chronic absenteeism, soaring teacher and principal attrition, and low graduation and college enrollment rates. Without renewed urgency and a forward-looking vision, Alaska risks the futures of tens of thousands of its students. These troubling academic outcomes demand immediate action to prevent a generational loss of student potential, socioeconomic mobility, and economic productivity.

Across the country, several states are showing that reform can deliver real results for students—proving that progress is possible when leaders act boldly. While much of this progress is occurring in a few Republican-led states, we believe Democratic governors and gubernatorial candidates, including in Alaska, can claim the mantle of a results-driven education agenda that discovers what works, invests only in what works, and allows families to choose what works best for them. This is both a political and a moral imperative: With the right leadership, Alaska can help lead the nation in education—preparing every student to succeed in college, career, and life—and show that Democrats are ready to deliver bold, lasting change for every child.

About **This Report**

This report outlines a policy framework for improving education in Alaska through innovation, accountability, and choice. It is intended to inform candidates, campaign staff, and policymakers about both the current state of Alaska's education system and the opportunity ahead.

It includes:

Executive Summary (pg. 3)

Overview of Alaska's education landscape and opportunities for progress.

**Alaska at a Glance (pg. 3) and
Recommendations at a Glance (pg. 4)**

Descriptive statistics providing a brief picture of Alaska's education demographics and outcomes and a summary of state policy recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

Organized around three pillars that, together, create a roadmap for measurable improvement.

- Innovation (pg. 5)
- Accountability (pg. 10)
- Choice (pg. 14)

Executive Summary

Alaska's 130,000 K-12 students are among the lowest-performing in the nation, and the data make clear this is a structural failure, not a demographic inevitability. Fewer than one in four students demonstrate proficiency in reading or math on the [Nation's Report Card](#) — and outcomes are measurably worse for economically disadvantaged students, English Learners, and students with disabilities, which means the system is failing hardest where it can least afford to. Chronic absenteeism remains near its pandemic peak, signaling that families have not been given sufficient reason to show up — and overly restrictive charter laws ensure they have nowhere else to go.

The next governor inherits both a crisis and a window. Strategic investment in the educator workforce, evidence-based literacy and math instruction, and high-quality public school options would move Alaska from a cautionary tale to a proof point. The state has the federal resources, the reform levers, and the urgency — what it needs is leadership willing to use them.

For DFER, Alaska is exactly the kind of moment our mission was built for: a state where historically underserved students are losing years they cannot get back, and where the structural conditions for change are finally, if briefly, aligned.

Alaska At a Glance



Public School
Student Enrollment (2024-25)
129,907

Chronic Absenteeism Rate (2023-24)
43%

Schools Classified as Rural (2023)
60%

Economically Disadvantaged (2024-25)
48%

English Learner Students (2024-25)
10%

Students with Disabilities (2024-25)
20%

Students Proficient or Above on State
Summative Assessment (2024-25)
ELA 33% | Math 32% | Science 38%

High School
Graduation Rate (2024-25)
80%

Two- and Four-Year
College Enrollment (2021)
21%

NAEP Rankings

4th-Grade Reading

50th

4th-Grade Math

50th

8th-Grade Reading

50th

8th-Grade Math

45th



Innovation

- 1. Incentivize Strategic Staffing Practices to Support and Reward Great Educators.** Encourage adoption of team teaching models and targeted pay incentives to attract and retain excellent teachers where they are most needed while laying the groundwork to permanently strengthen the educator workforce pipeline.
- 2. Support the Creation of Public Microschools.** Consider legislation to establish a framework and funding for public microschoools in order to address regional challenges and serve students with unique learning needs.



Accountability

- 1. Strengthen and Sustain Strategies to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism.** Strengthen the state's approach to addressing chronic absenteeism by developing a statewide policy agenda prioritizing the issue and ensuring financial sustainability of proven practices.
- 2. Expand Evidence-Based Literacy and Math Practices Across K-12.** Expand evidence-based literacy and math practices across K-12 through larger investments in and stronger requirements about teacher training and licensure, high-quality instructional materials, screening and intervention, and parental notification.



Choice

- 1. Deepen Investments In Evidence-Based Nontraditional Public School Models.** Expand regulatory and financial support for charter schools, full-service community schools, dual enrollment and early college programs, and other evidence-based models that accelerate learning outcomes and meet diverse student needs.
- 2. Leverage the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit Program.** Use the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program to expand tutoring and out-of-school time learning opportunities, directing resources to under-resourced students and trusted community-based organizations that provide academic and enrichment support.



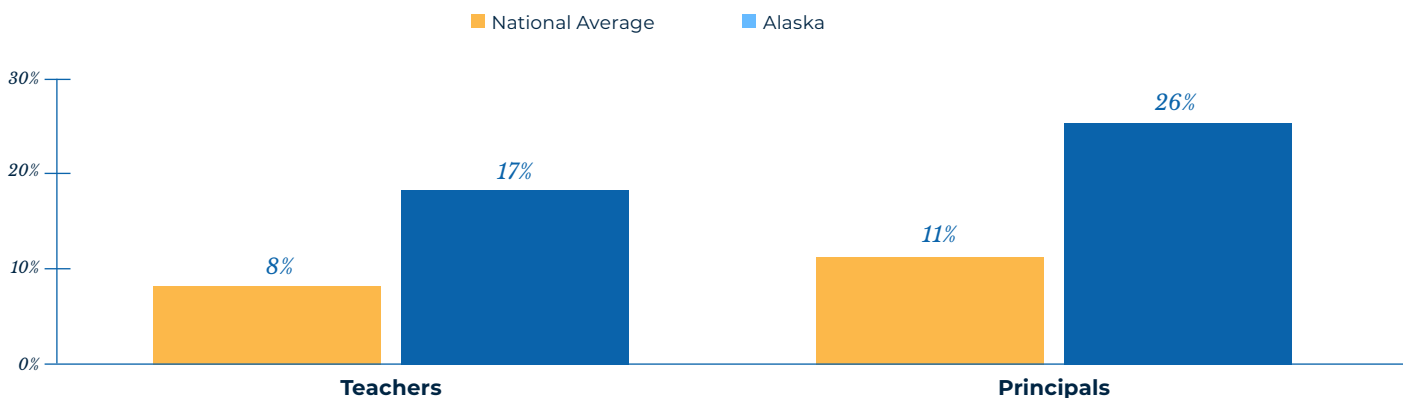
Innovation

Alaska's next governor has the opportunity to ensure that the state becomes the best place in the country for students to prepare for college, career, and life. In order to do so, they must embrace a spirit of innovation that allows all students to flourish. The next governor of Alaska should usher in a new era of education innovation informed by the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Incentivize strategic staffing practices to support and reward great educators.

Alaska has an educator workforce crisis. According to [reporting](#) by Alaska Public Media, **about one in six teachers and one in four principals left their school districts in 2024**, with rates typically [highest in rural areas](#). Research by the Center for Alaska Education Policy Research [indicates that](#) the **average cost of teacher turnover** in Alaska is **\$20,431 per teacher**, or approximately **\$20 million per year** for school districts (which the researchers considered a “conservative estimate”). Replacing a principal comes at an even higher cost, with the Wallace Foundation [calculating it](#) at \$75,000 per principal. To effectively sustain Alaska's educator workforce and avert strains on district resources, evidence-based policy solutions are urgently needed.

Alaska's educator attrition rates are over double the national average



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics \(2021-22\)](#); [Alaska Public Media \(2025\)](#)

To help address educator workforce challenges, we recommend expanding the use of strategic staffing practices, including [team teaching models](#) to accelerate learning and scaffold educator career ladders and providing [supplemental pay](#) for teachers in hard-to-staff schools (e.g., high-poverty and rural schools) and in-demand specializations (e.g., special education, English Learner, and STEM classrooms). We also advise creating a statewide task force charged with examining Alaska's educator workforce pipeline and producing recommendations to permanently strengthen it.

An example of innovative policy directly affecting teaching and learning, North Carolina has adopted a [team teaching model](#) which has [significantly improved](#) student outcomes and teacher experiences in participating schools. Students in schools with the model had an **additional 1 month of growth in math and science** compared to comparable schools without the model. Similarly, a team teaching model in Arizona—[Next Education Workforce](#)—has led to an **additional 1.4 months of reading growth** for students as well as higher educator effectiveness, lower turnover, and increased job satisfaction.

Teacher pay is also a critical area of improvement, with Alaska teachers [earning 25% less than educators in other states](#) after adjusting for cost of living, which follows a 20-year trend of uncompetitive teacher salaries in the state. In times of economic constraint, however, across-the-board pay increases can be infeasible, and they rarely solve teacher shortages because shortages [tend to be concentrated](#) in specific areas and specializations. Instead, several states and school districts across the country have implemented supplemental pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and specializations, [with promising results](#) showing that this can be an effective strategy to address teacher shortages where they are worst.

This pay strategy can be scaled through [grant programs](#) tailored to address chronic shortages, [pay scheme flexibilities](#) for qualifying districts, [scholarship programs](#) that cover full tuition costs for teacher preparation programs in exchange for a multi-year commitment to a hard-to-staff assignment or specialization, or even a [sliding scale tax credit](#) for teachers based on the poverty level of the school in which they teach.

Finally, efforts must be undertaken to strengthen the entirety of Alaska's educator workforce pipeline. This will require a coordinated effort by state stakeholders to examine and act on challenges compromising the pipeline's integrity. A roadmap already exists for this work: New America, in collaboration with 23 national education policy organizations, has published a comprehensive [Six-Strand Strategy for Educator Excellence](#) for strengthening the educator workforce. Alaska could utilize this roadmap in tandem with insights from [existing state initiatives](#) to generate and enact a new vision for the educator workforce in Alaska, ensuring the sustained integrity of the educator pipeline, from start to finish.

Recommendation 2: **Support the creation of public microschoools.**

One emerging school type that is expanding across the country is the [microschool model](#). Building on homeschool-style learning pods formed during the COVID-19 pandemic and earlier small-school models, microschoools emphasize individualized learning and targeted supports. Because of the nascent nature of the microschool model, data on their performance is currently limited. Currently, several districts across the country are opening and operating microschoools to provide more public school options and create opportunities for students to have a different learning experience. Many microschoools are designed specifically to support the learning and development of marginalized youth, and are scalable in rural areas where education might be particularly cost-intensive.

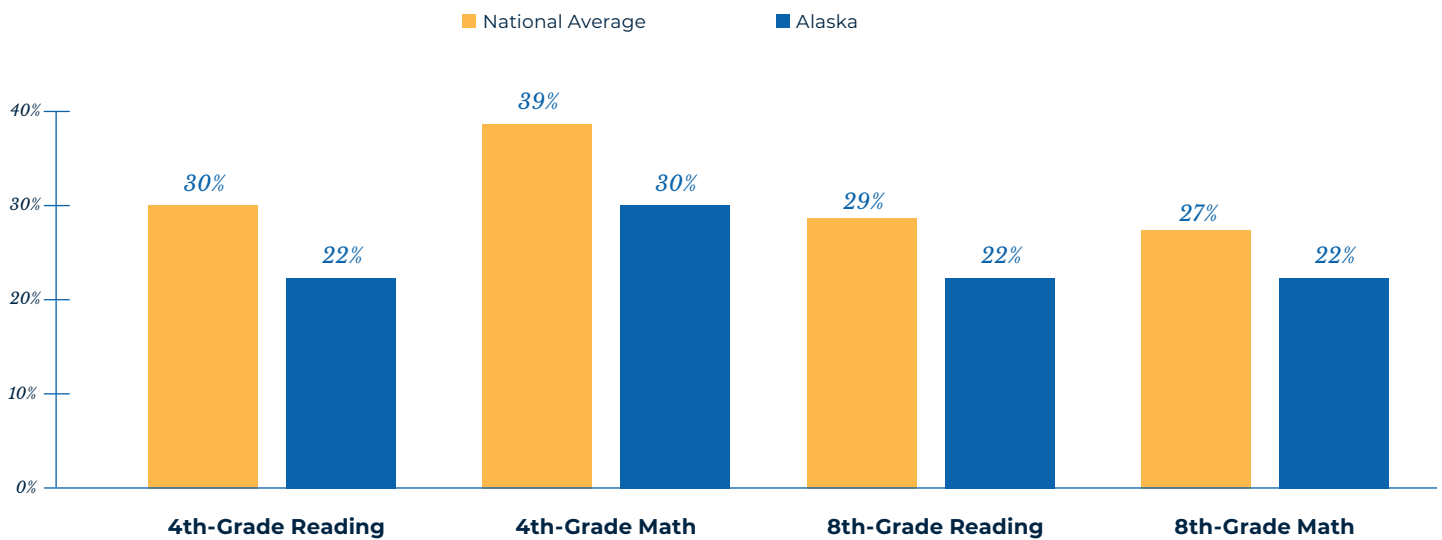
To help address the unique challenges of rural education, Indiana has [begun operating](#) microschoools as public charter schools. Board members of the Indiana Microschool Collaborative describe the schools as a way to avoid unnecessary infrastructure investments and better personalize learning to [students' individual needs and interests](#). Similarly, in the state of Washington, the Issaquah School District has taken a district-led approach, opening microschoools [housed within existing school facilities](#) that operate with distinct schedules, instructional models, and small enrollments while allowing students to participate in courses and activities in the larger school. Together, these examples show how public microschoools can emerge through both charter and district pathways, expanding public school options while remaining integrated within broader public education systems.

To boost access for underserved students who need a different education environment and integrate public accountability measures, Alaska can support the creation of public microschoools in high-need areas by considering [legislation](#) similar to that proposed in Washington to establish a framework and funding for public microschoools. This legislation could make specific provisions to ensure students with the greatest need are being served by these new schools.

It is a well-known challenge that parents often believe their children are doing better than they actually are in school. This “parent perception gap” leads to inadequate accountability for chronically underperforming schools and the deprioritization of education as a voting issue. Alaska’s next governor must generate renewed urgency around creating a school system that achieves positive outcomes for all students, especially those from historically underserved groups.

Alaska’s educational outcomes demand attention. On the [2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#)—the only nationally representative test that can compare student achievement across all states and territories—**Alaska ranked 50th in 4th-grade reading, 4th-grade math, and 8th-grade reading, and 45th in 8th-grade math.** The national test’s results showed that fewer than one in four Alaska students demonstrated proficiency in 4th-grade reading, 8th-grade reading, or 8th-grade math, while only about three in ten demonstrated proficiency in 4th-grade math.

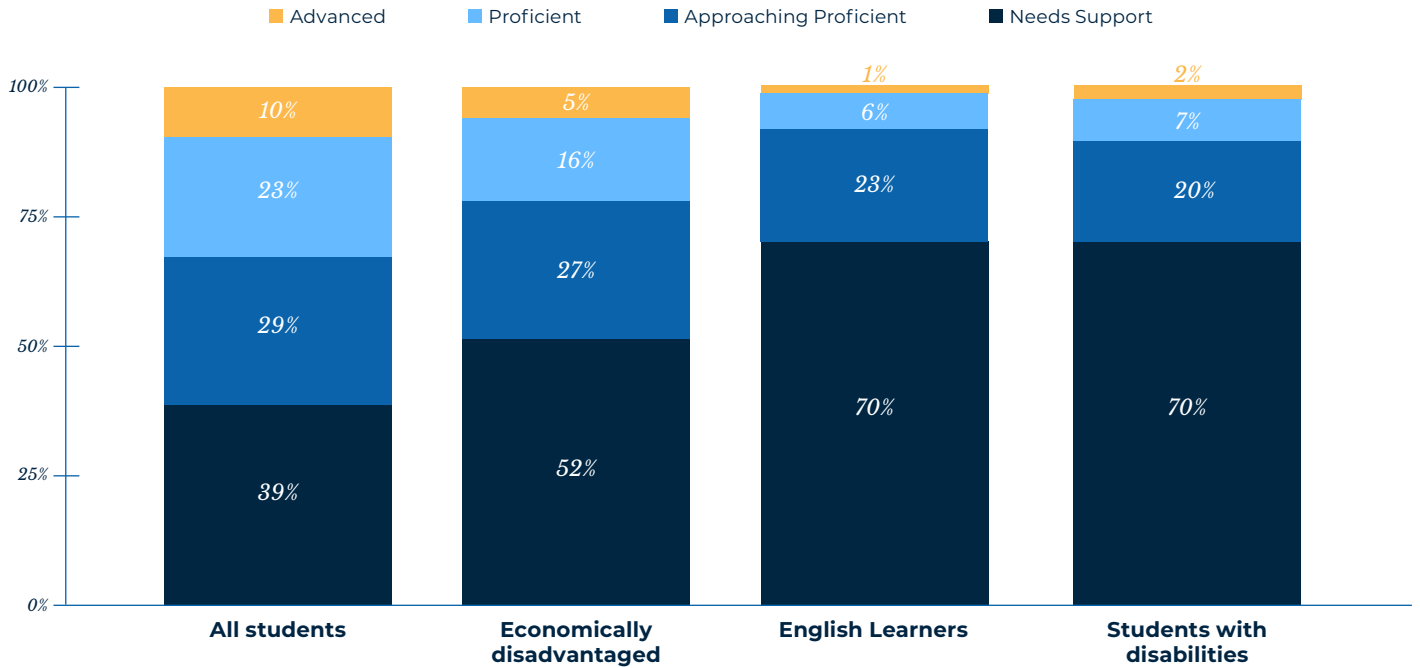
Alaska trails nearly all other states in reading and math proficiency



Source: [The Nation’s Report Card \(2024\)](#)

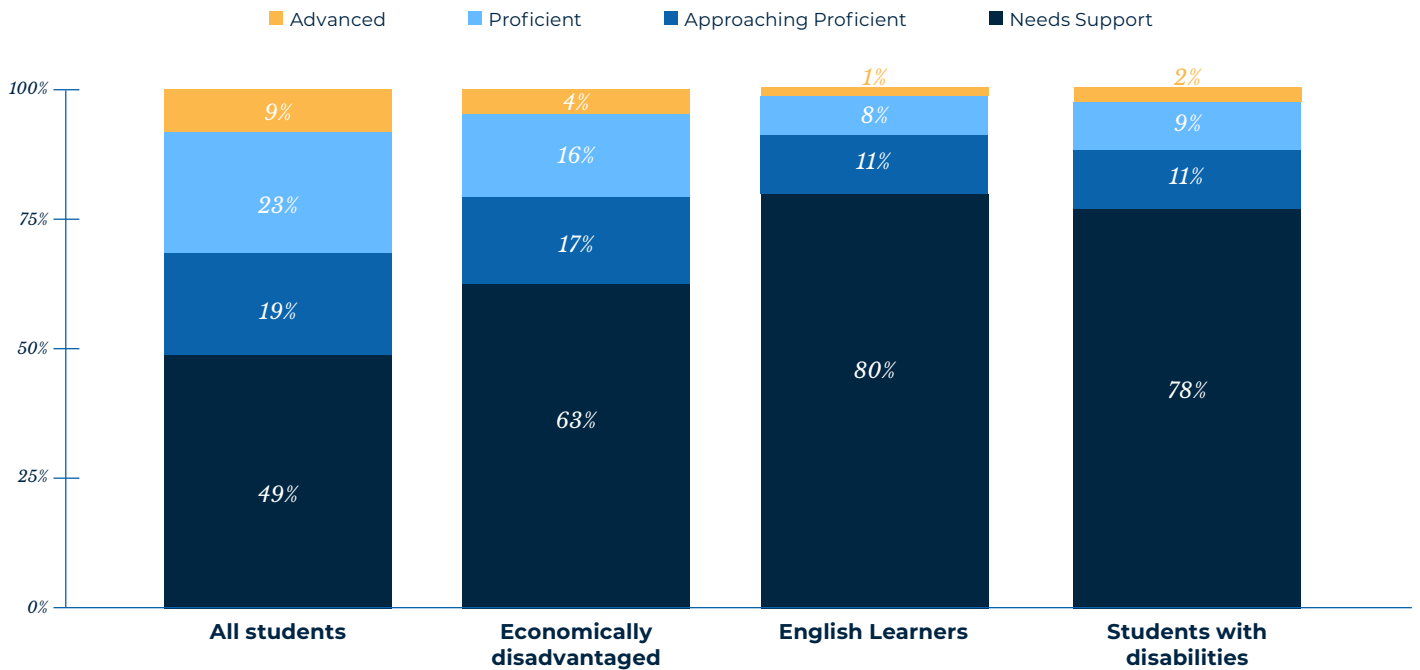
State assessments show similar results, with only about a third of students proficient in ELA or math. And the state’s most vulnerable learners perform [disproportionately worse](#): in ELA, one in two economically disadvantaged students score in the **lowest achievement level**, as do seven in ten English Learner students and students with disabilities. In math, three in five economically disadvantaged students and four in five English Learner students and students with disabilities score in the **lowest achievement level**. On both tests, **75-90% of students in these vulnerable categories score below proficient.**

Alaska's vulnerable student populations perform disproportionately worse on the ELA state assessment



Source: [Alaska Department of Education and Early Development \(2026\)](#)

Alaska's vulnerable student populations perform disproportionately worse on the math state assessment

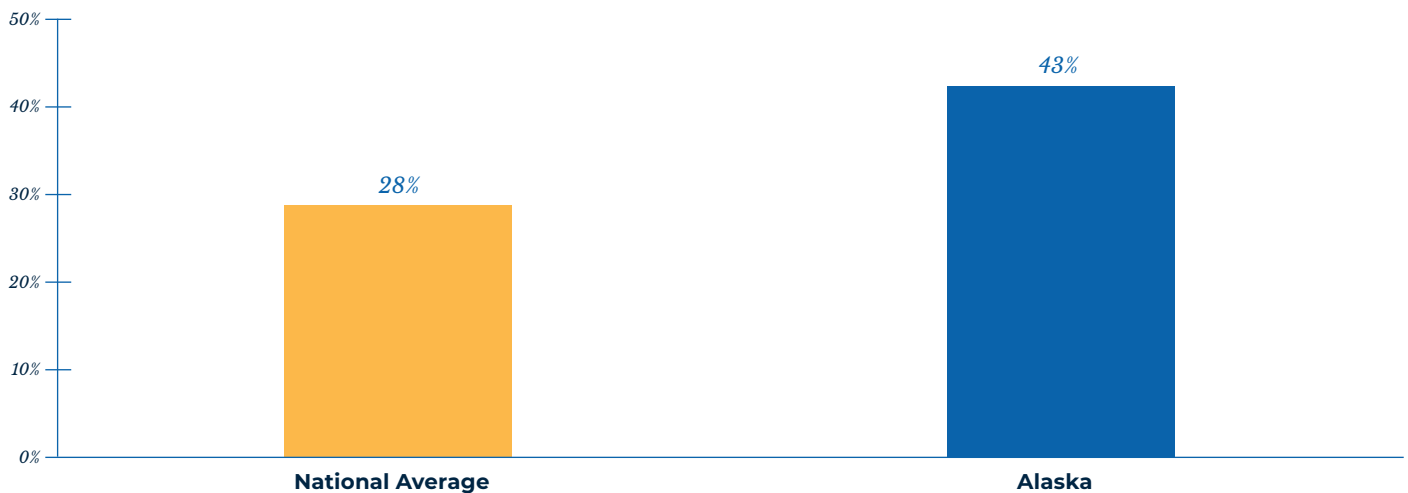


Source: [Alaska Department of Education and Early Development \(2026\)](#)

Contributing to the issue, Alaska had the second-worst chronic absenteeism rate in the nation as of the most recent [national comparison](#) in the 2022-23 school year. While other states' chronic absenteeism rates have gone down since then, Alaska's rates [have remained the same](#) in recent years, **with more than two in five students missing at least 10% of school days** in the 2023-24 school year. The problem is significantly worse for economically disadvantaged, Alaska Native/American Indian, and English Learner students, with [over half of each population](#) considered chronically absent last year.

Chronic absenteeism directly affects academic performance; children who are chronically absent from school [tend to have](#) disproportionately worse academic outcomes. Moreover, schoolwide chronic absenteeism [affects all children](#), even those who have perfect attendance. Reducing chronic absenteeism is essential to improving student outcomes.

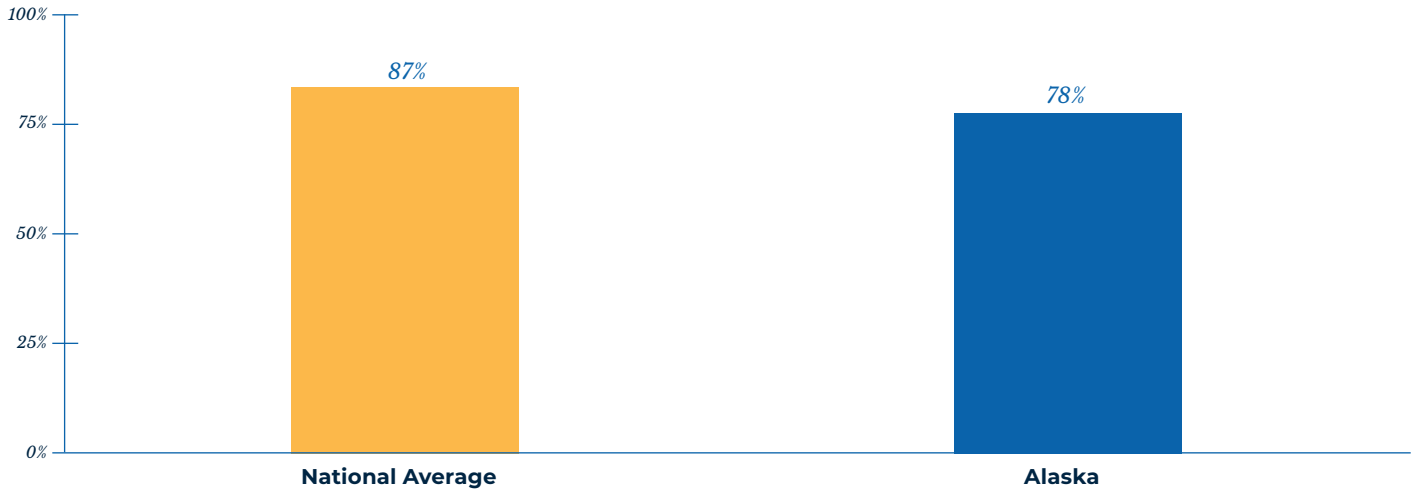
Alaska's chronic absenteeism far exceeds the national average



Source: [U.S. Department of Education \(2022-23\)](#)

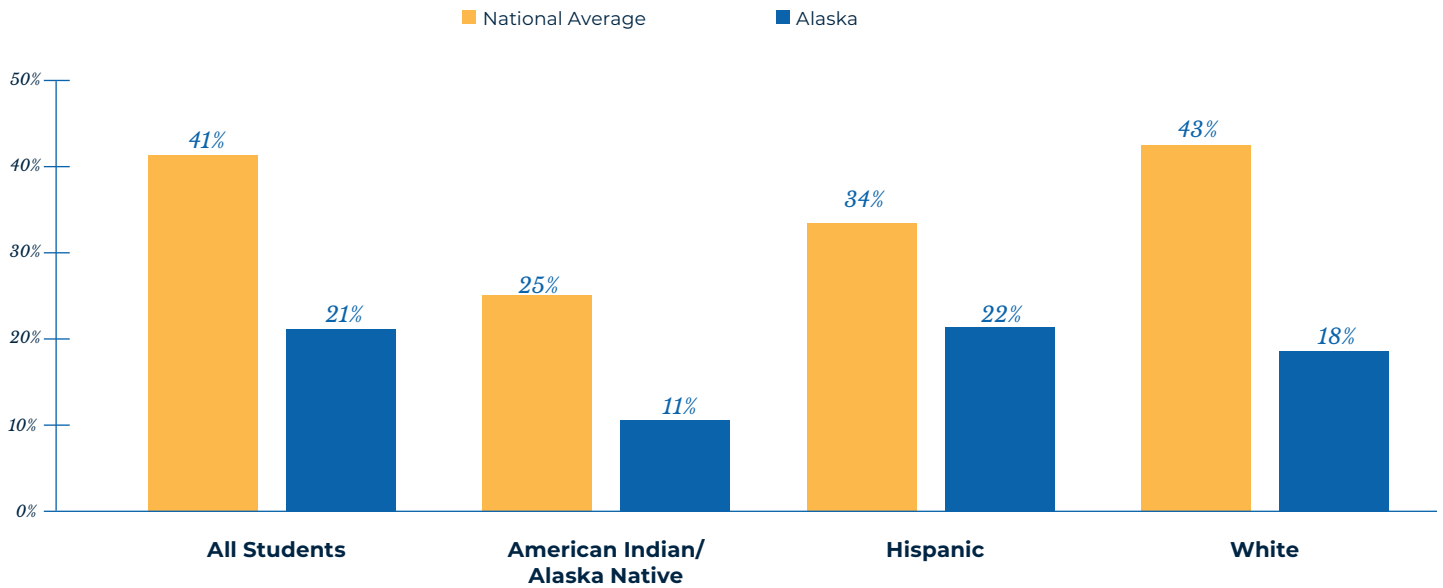
These academic and attendance issues follow Alaska learners to high school graduation and college matriculation. Just [four in five](#) Alaska students reach high school graduation, one of the lowest graduation rates in the nation and a number relatively unchanged from the [last national comparison](#) in 2022. The state also has the **worst college enrollment rate in the country**, with only about one in five students enrolling in college according to [national data](#) from 2021. Even [state data](#) indicating higher enrollment rates shows that **Alaska sits nearly 30 percentage points below the national average** as of the last comparison.

Alaska's graduation rate was far below average as of 2022



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (2021-22)

Alaska's college enrollment is nearly half the national average



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (2021)

All of these data suggest that Alaska is failing to prepare students for their futures. Reforms are immediately needed to ensure that schools deliver the results needed for students to succeed in their postsecondary goals and fulfill the state's workforce needs.

Recommendation 1:

Strengthen and sustain strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Alaska has [made little progress](#) on reducing chronic absenteeism since the pandemic. The state must make this problem a top priority in order to ensure that all students receive the learning they need. The next Alaska governor should strengthen the state's approach to addressing chronic absenteeism by [developing a statewide policy agenda](#) prioritizing the issue—informed by the state legislature's [pending recommendations](#) on the topic—and [ensuring financial sustainability](#) of [proven practices](#). Dedicated state funding targeted at addressing chronic absenteeism could help encourage school districts to focus on the issue.

One approach to consider—discussed further below—is the expansion of [full-service community schools](#) in Alaska. This evidence-based model offers a [promising approach](#) to addressing chronic absenteeism and should be considered in tandem with other comprehensive statewide efforts.

Recommendation 2:

Expand evidence-based literacy and math practices across K–12.

In recent years, Alaska has made improving literacy a priority through the [2022 Alaska Reads Act](#), a landmark piece of legislation that implemented universal early literacy screenings, mandatory district and individual reading improvement plans, third grade reading progression requirements, and mandatory literacy endorsements for educators based on the Science of Reading. With these important policy changes, Alaska is [meeting 15 of 18 ExcelinEd metrics](#) for comprehensive early literacy policies and the state has [begun to see progress](#) in improving literacy outcomes for K-3 students.

However, more policy changes may need to be made to maintain and accelerate improvement, especially in grades 4 and beyond. Currently, most of the state's new literacy policies are confined to grades K-3, which invites the possibility of improvement evaporating as students progress through upper elementary and middle school. The next governor should bolster recent literacy policies by advancing supports and interventions which target grades 4-12, such as targeted funding for high-impact tutoring and literacy coaches.

Alaska has significantly more work to do in the realm of evidence-based math. Currently, the state is only [partially meeting 1 of 11 ExcelinEd metrics](#) for evidence-based math policies. The enactment of a comprehensive set of evidence-based math policies will require an ambitious policy agenda. **This is a monumental area of opportunity for the next Alaska governor to lead.** The next administration should focus on a set of math policies that include rigorous requirements for teacher licensure and renewal, universal math screeners and progress monitoring, mandatory daily instructional minimums, high-quality instructional materials, state-funded math coaches, parental notification system for students identified for support, and other measures.

Alabama made [significant investments](#) in evidence-based math instruction and has seen notable improvements since then, making the [largest jump in the nation](#) on the 2024 NAEP results. Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Indiana [have also implemented](#) strong reforms with notable return.



Choice

The next governor of Alaska has several opportunities to expand the availability of high-quality public education options for families across the state, giving every child access to an excellent education that meets their unique needs.

Recommendation 1:

Deepen investments in evidence-based nontraditional public school models.

We recommend examining Alaska's regulatory and financial support for charter schools, full-service community schools, dual enrollment and early college programs, magnet programs, career academies, innovation zones, and other evidence-based public school models that accelerate learning outcomes and meet diverse student needs.

Charter Schools

After decades of iteration, charter schools now [consistently outperform](#) traditional district schools when it comes to academic performance. **Experts have attributed this positive development to increased accountability, the tendency to adopt evidence-based practices, and staffing flexibilities.** States like [Rhode Island](#) are leading the way in building charter school sectors that deliver the strongest results for students, and Alaska has shown its own potential: According to a [2023 study](#), the average performance of an Alaska charter school student was **one year's worth of learning higher** than the average U.S. charter school student.

However, the expansion of high-performing charter schools in Alaska is hampered by burdensome regulatory restrictions. Charter school authorization requires [local school board approval](#), which are the entities typically most reluctant to grant charters. In addition, charters that do receive authorization are not given the typical operational autonomy afforded in other states; instead, Alaska charter schools are [overseen by the local school board](#) and operate under most of the same regulatory requirements as traditional district schools. These constrictive policies prevent charter schools from enacting the kinds of innovations which [help lead](#) to improved student outcomes.

The next governor of Alaska has the opportunity to expand the availability of high-performing charter schools for Alaskan families by creating an independent state-level authorizer which may grant charters for charter operators seeking to open schools in chronically low-performing school districts or by incentivizing local school boards to approve high-quality charter operators, as is the case in [Georgia](#). Currently, charter schools in Alaska may only seek authorization through the state via appeal following local school board denial—and if approved by the state, the charter school is still overseen by the local school board, creating a potentially hostile relationship under which to operate.

To support startup and ongoing operational costs, it would also be important to create a state grant for charter school facilities funding, transportation, and school meals. Alaska could also pair

these policies with [transitional aid](#) for traditional district schools so that enrollment losses do not adversely affect their budgets as the student population shifts, which would lower the tension between traditional district schools and charter schools.

Full-Service Community Schools

[Full-service community schools](#)—which serve as a center of their neighborhood by providing access to critical programs and services like health care, social services, expanded learning programs, mentoring, adult education, and other resources—have been [shown to](#) improve attendance, reduce disciplinary incidents, boost academic achievement, strengthen school climate, and increase high school graduation rates. They also have a significant ROI, with [studies](#) calculating that **for every \$1 spent on full-service community schools, they have an up to \$15 return on investment.**

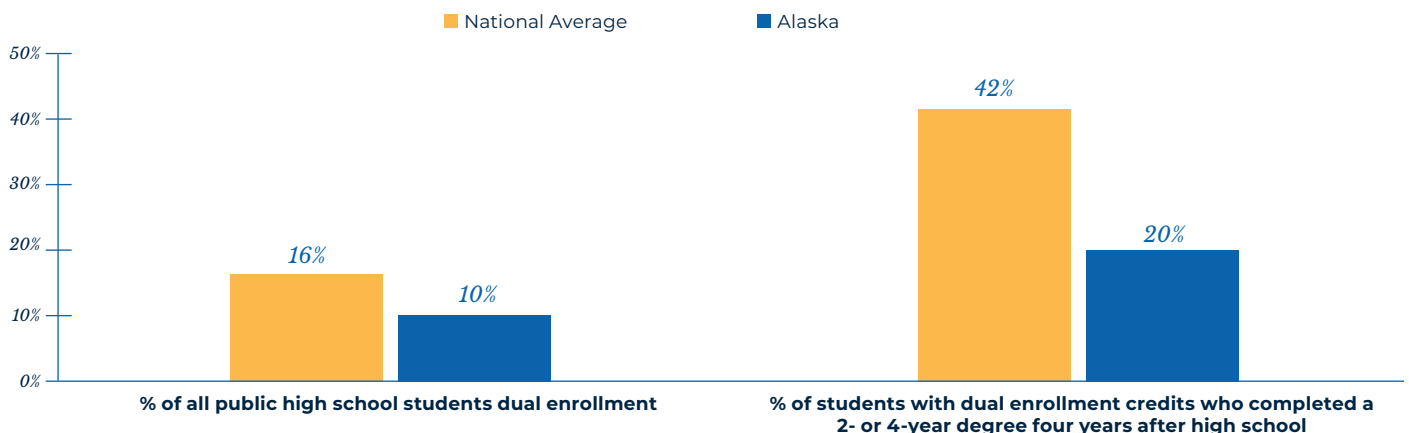
Alaska has [begun piloting](#) the full-service community schools model, with a study of its implementation [currently underway](#). The next governor should consider statewide investments in this proven model through a dedicated state grant program, which could be structured similarly to and supplemented by the [federal program](#).

Dual Enrollment and Early College Programs

Graduates of Early College High Schools (ECHS) are [considerably more likely](#) to earn some form of college degree over the next ten years than non-participants and do so faster, allowing them to begin earning wages earlier than they otherwise would. In Massachusetts, ECHS graduates are [14 percentage points more likely](#) (68% versus 54%) **to go on to college** compared to control-matched peers, and [14 percentage points more likely](#) (58% versus 44%) **to persist into a second year of college**—a strong predictor of eventual graduation. Dual enrollment has [also been shown](#) to provide similar benefits.

However, Alaska has lower-than-average dual enrollment participation and startlingly low returns on its dual enrollment investments: The percent of students that complete an associate's or bachelor's degree after participating in dual enrollment is **less than half the national average.**

Alaska lags behind on dual enrollment participation and has poor returns on degree completion



Sources: [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Survey \(2022-23\)](#); [Community College Research Center \(2024\)](#)

Identifying and mitigating the causes of low participation and attainment rates should be a priority for the next administration. The state should implement an annual evaluation of dual enrollment programs, participation, and outcomes, disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and school district, and make the findings easily accessible. This analysis should consider accessibility of dual enrollment, whether dual enrollment credits are transferring for both general education and major courses, and whether dual enrollment courses are providing the rigor and quality needed to prepare students to succeed in college.

Recommendation 2:

Leverage the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit (FSTC) program.

The new [Federal Scholarship Tax Credit \(FSTC\) program](#) represents an opportunity to accelerate learning through evidence-based tutoring for students who need it the most and expand access to high-quality out-of-school time programs. Governor Dunleavy has already [opted into](#) the program, which will begin in January 2027. The next governor should also support the state's participation. We recommend embracing the FSTC program and equipping it with guardrails so that it serves under-resourced public school students and families by providing free services through scholarship-granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations that provide academic and non-academic support to K-12 students. [Out-of-school time](#) programming provides [academic enrichment and innovative learning opportunities](#) for young people to build academic and durable skills. It also provides working class families with additional child care support, ensuring their children are in safe, supportive environments after school and on weekends.

Moving **Forward**

The next governor has a chance to continue driving education reform in Alaska, from the first day a child enters school to the day they graduate with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to succeed in college, career, and life. By embracing innovation that maximizes the potential of every student, ensuring schools deliver strong results, and expanding high-quality school options for families, the next governor can build a brighter future for all. This is how children, families, educators, and communities across Alaska will thrive for generations to come.