



Briefing Points – LD 1438 “An Act to Permit Charter Schools in Maine”

The Public Charter School Model

- Public charter schools expand a state's public education system by encouraging innovative and accountable programs that are available to families of all income levels.
- As public schools, charter schools are free to parents, open to all children without admissions tests, voluntary, and accountable for academic achievement and fiscal management.
- No additional state or town funds are required, since the existing per pupil allocations will follow each child to the public school attended.
- Charter schools operate on contracts awarded and monitored by designated chartering “authorizers” - local school boards and Maine universities with 4 year education programs.
- Charter schools can be put under new management or closed or for non-performance.

Maine’s Education Challenges

Data from the National Governors Association indicates that about 25% of high school 9th graders in Maine do not graduate from high school in four years. Of graduates, many do not have the skills needed to succeed in jobs or in college, and require remedial training that they, their parents, or their employers have to pay for. At Maine community colleges, 37% of freshmen need to take remedial courses for no credit. Fewer than 50% of freshman at Maine's public universities graduated within six years.²

Looking to the future, Maine has an increasing percentage of children born into low-income families, which puts them at higher risk of school failure.³

Public charter school options can help the public education system meet this diversity of needs. For every child that we can prevent from dropping out of school, state expenditures on social welfare and juvenile justice programs will decrease.

¹ "Implementing Graduation Counts, 2008", National Governors Association,

² "Student Aspirations and College Readiness" PowerPoint Presentation, Lynne Miller, USM, 2007

³ "Maine Kids Count 2009"

Charter School Bills in Maine

In 2002, the State Board of Education studied public charter schools and recommended a pilot program. In the same year, the Advisory Committee of the DOE Office of Truancy, Dropout, and Alternative Education issued a statement supporting public charter schools in Maine. In 2006, LD 1640 proposed a pilot program for charter schools in Maine was narrowly defeated.

National Success

Today there are over 4,600 charter schools in 40 states and DC enrolling over 1.4 million children. Charter schools have been called the most effective school reform initiative since the “Nation at Risk” was published in 1983. Public charter schools are voluntary - students and teachers participate by choice. Over half of the schools have long waiting lists. Recent studies show promising results on measures such as safety, meeting the mission of the school, graduation rates, college matriculation rates, and academics. (RAND, “Charter Schools in Eight States - Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration and Competition,” March 2009)

President Obama's Strong Support

In his February 24, 2009 speech to Congress, President Obama named education as one of the three areas "that are absolutely critical to our economic future." He said, "We'll invest in innovative programs that are already helping schools meet high standards and close achievement gaps. And we will expand our commitment to charter schools." He plans to double the amount of federal funding in support of expanding charter schools. When announcing his selection of Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education, Obama remarked: "He's championed good charter schools – even when it was controversial."

Taking Advantage of National Experience

Maine can take advantage of lessons learned since 1992 in other states. LD 1438 is built on a model bill that reflects this experience, but is tailored to Maine's circumstances. Especially important is the emphasis on the role of the "authorizers" that approve and monitor the charter schools. National associations now assist states, operators, and authorizers in many ways.

Availability of Federal Funds

The Federal Charter School Grant Program makes grants of about \$450,000 over three years to each charter school for start-up and planning. Maine will be eligible once we pass enabling legislation such as LD 1438 that meets federal guidelines. Maine's Department of Education will be eligible for 5% of the grants for administration and support of the state's charter school program. No state matching funds are required.

Maine will be at a disadvantage when applying for the second round of the stabilization stimulus package funds, as the state will be asked to describe its charter school program. When applying for the first round of the "Race to the Top" stimulus package funds, Maine will be at a further disadvantage without charter school legislation. With a strong charter school law, Maine should be in excellent competitive situation.

Incentives for Efficient School Management

American education is organized by districts that have exclusive control over public funds for education, which can tax to support their budgets, and which control where families can enroll their children. So there are few ways that the "clients" (families and students) can provide feedback on the quality of education provided. Allowing public education options, and permitting families to choose among them, creates accountability for schools.

Since a public charter school's budget is based on fixed per pupil allocations, we create incentives for each school to be more efficient. If too much is spent on administrative overhead to the detriment of the school's ability to meet a child's needs, parents can transfer the child - and the operating funds will follow that child to another school the next year.

Maine Educators Are Ready to Start New Programs

Experienced Maine educators now working to reach more students would be able to expand their programs if given the tools and funding of the charter school model. Some have started private alternative schools while waiting for charter school legislation (The New School in Kennebunk, the Carleton Project in Aroostook, Blue Hill Harbor School, and The River School in Belfast). Others have founded afternoon and summer programs (Kieve, Rippleffect, Cobscook Community Learning Center, and Cultivating Community). The Hyde Foundation of Bath operates public charter schools in Washington, DC and New York City.