

## **Make the Right Call for Public Charter Schools**

In his first major policy speech on education, President Obama said: “There are caps on how many charter schools are allowed in some states, no matter how well they are preparing our students. That isn’t good for our children, our economy, or our country...I call on states to reform their charter rules, and lift caps on the number of allowable charter schools, wherever such caps are in place.”

As it happens, Maine has the tightest cap of all. No charter schools are allowed. Although 4,600 charters are now educating 1.4 million students in 40 states, Maine remains one of the ten states that do not yet allow this innovative form of public schooling. But this can change if a bill now pending in Augusta makes it through the Legislature to Governor Baldacci for his signature.

One would think that Maine would embrace charter schooling as the latest evolution in a proud tradition of public schooling stretching back to 1647. In the 19th century Maine was a pioneer in creating a State Board of Education to remedy inefficiencies and improve teaching. In the 20th century, the school year was extended from 20 to 36 weeks. In our time, public schools must equip students to take their place as informed citizens and as leaders in a global economy. That requires new approaches in the classroom, and new ways of holding schools accountable for reaching these demanding goals. Yet every year 2,000 high school students drift away from Maine’s existing school system, and drop out – a trend that is tragic for them and unacceptable for a caring society.

What makes public charter schools part of the solution to Maine’s educational challenges? Charters are independent public schools, free to be more innovative and held accountable for improved student achievement. They foster an environment of real partnership where parents are welcome, teachers are free to try new approaches, and students are provided the structure they need to learn.

Not every charter school succeeds, but as a group they drive toward quality through a new and powerful form of accountability for results. A “charter” is a contract for performance, usually for a term of 5 years. If the school meets its goals (state standards plus additional goals according to each school’s mission), then the school will be renewed for another term. But if the school fails to improve its students’ academic performance, then the school can lose its charter or new management can be called in.

Charters have shown a particular power for closing achievement gaps, welcoming students who have fallen behind their peers and moving them toward success. They are typically smaller than other public schools and, as the President pointed out in his recent online town hall, they often feature themes such as science and technology that give students a head start toward college and careers.

President Obama made the right call in urging states to lift charter caps. When the bill to create Maine’s first public chartered schools comes to a vote in the Maine Senate and House, legislators can vote to support this important innovation in public education. And when the bill reaches Governor Baldacci’s desk later this year, he too can make the right call – and add Maine to honor roll of states whose students are benefitting from these accountable and innovative public schools.

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