

**Testimony of Dr. Rick Dale in Support of
LD 1438, An Act To Permit Charter Schools in Maine**

Senator Alford, Representative Sutherland, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Rick Dale. I am an assistant professor of special education at the University of Maine at Farmington and am here to testify in support of LD 1438. I would like begin by explaining my background and interest in charter schools.

I have been at the University of Maine at Farmington since 2006. Prior to that, I lived in Pennsylvania, where I was an assistant professor of special education at Mansfield University of Pennsylvania, a director of special education in the public schools, a Pennsylvania Department of Education special education policy analyst, a state-wide consultant/trainer, and a special education teacher in various settings.

I earned a Doctorate in Educational Administration at Penn State in 1999. The title of my dissertation was "The Politics of Special Education Policy in Charter School Legislation: Lessons from Pennsylvania." If you are interested, I can provide you with an executive summary of my dissertation's findings. I worked at the Pennsylvania Department of Education during the period of time when Pennsylvania's charter school law was enacted and initially implemented. I served as the Bureau of Special Education's charter school contact, and had numerous interactions with the Department's charter school office, as well as with charter schools, including site visits to several charter schools in Philadelphia. When I left the Department of Education, I took a position as a special education director in one of Pennsylvania's regional service agencies called "Intermediate Units." During my time as an administrator, I provided special education services to two different charter schools in the Harrisburg, PA area, and had the opportunity to visit both schools. Since I moved to Maine, I have been active with the Maine Association of Charter Schools.

As you can see, I have a strong academic background in the area of charter schools as well as practical experience. I could provide you with a list of scholarly reasons for enacting charter school legislation in Maine, but I think such reasons are self-evident in the fact that Maine is one of only 10 states without charter school legislation. Clearly, charter schools are a viable public school option across the country, and research on the pros and cons is readily available. I do want to highlight that one of the features of LD 1438 – allowing colleges and

universities that offer baccalaureate degrees in education to become charter school authorizers – is particularly exciting to me as a professor at such an institution: the opportunities for innovative collaboration with a start-up charter school are profound. From my perspective as an educator, I enthusiastically support charter schools and urge you to enact LD 1438.

The focus of my testimony today is *not* from my perspective as an educator. Rather, I want to appeal to you as someone who values providing all children with an equal opportunity for a strong public education.

Many students in Maine are at-risk. That is why the legislature created an Alternative Education Programs Committee and authorized them to submit a written report to the 123rd Legislature in December 2007. In that report, the committee recommended the following (p. iii):

8. Students in every regional school unit have access to alternative learning options including alternative education programs. The Governor's Task Force to Engage Maine's Youth stated that "the inequitable access to a broad array of educational and social service options for youth across the state puts them at significant disadvantage." The Committee supports increasing alternative learning opportunities and joins the Department of Education in proposing that every regional school unit be required to establish or provide access to alternative education programs.

I wholeheartedly agree with the Committee's recommendation that Maine's students need access to alternative learning options. Many students in Maine are at-risk in traditional educational settings. They need schools with unique educational philosophies, high academic standards, smaller class sizes, and innovative approaches. They need schools that understand their needs. They need schools that truly want them there and accept them unconditionally. Charter schools can provide an answer to these needs.

Maine parents with financial means already have such options. They are called private schools. But parents of average means, and especially parents living in poverty, do not have such options available. When their children do not thrive in the local public school, what are they to do?

Charter schools came along too late for my son. He did not thrive in the traditional public school setting. He learned to hate "school," and barely got by. Now he's living in California, underemployed, without a college education and without many prospects. I trace it all back to his public school experience. If there had been an alternative public school option for him, his life might have turned out much differently. By separate testimony, you will hear about my partner's struggles with getting her 3 sons through Maine's public school system. And the stories go on and on. When will we listen?

If charter schools existed in Maine, parents would have options regardless of socioeconomic status. There would be schools whose missions aligned with the interests of students, and whose practices aligned with the needs of students. Perhaps some of those schools would specialize in serving students with disabilities, or giftedness, or other at-risk issues. Such schools would be public schools. Such schools would be literally "funding neutral," taking only their share of per pupil public school dollars and not requiring additional funding from Maine's citizens. Such schools would be held accountable for results, always facing the possibility of being closed if they do not live up to the standards of their charter and of the law.

Charter schools hold emancipatory promise! They offer quality educational options for all children, regardless of their parents' income or educational levels. If we really believe in the promise of public education, then we must support approaches that increase the likelihood that every child will receive one. Charter schools are one of those approaches that deserves a chance in Maine. They are not without problems, but neither are the existing public schools. Charter schools are not a panacea for the political, social, and economic challenges we face in this country.

I hope you won't be swayed by opponents who say that charter schools will drain resources from public schools. Charter schools are public schools, and parents wouldn't choose them if the existing public schools were meeting their students' needs in the first place. If anything, once a traditional public school no longer has a guaranteed clientele, it might be forced to improve its own quality.

I hope you won't be swayed by opponents who say that charter schools will "cream off" the "best" students from traditional public schools. In fact, charter schools across the country serve a diverse population, and often specialize in serving students at-risk.

I hope you won't be swayed by opponents who claim that charter schools are the first step toward private school vouchers. That's an old argument, it hasn't come true anywhere else, and it's a red herring.

I hope you won't be swayed by opponents who point to charter schools that have failed. That's a good thing! Don't we all want schools to be truly held accountable?

I hope you won't be swayed by opponents who claim that charter schools are aligned with one political party or another. Nationally, Republican and Democratic administrations alike have supported them.

If we can have public schools in Maine that focus on serving the unique needs of students for whom traditional public schools do not work, if we can have public schools that do not increase the tax burden on Maine's citizens, if we can have public schools that are truly held accountable for results, and if we can have public schools that offer more learning options to parents, why wouldn't we embrace such schools?

Local control has long been a deeply held value in Maine. Enacting LD 1438 would give local parents and other interested citizens an opportunity to develop alternative learning options for Maine's children. We can trust Maine's citizens to implement charter schools successfully. All they need is a chance.

As an educator, as a parent, and as a citizen of Maine, I stand in strong support of LD 1438. Thank you.