

Editorials

Charter schools should be part of dropout debate

Public school choice is one way to keep more students on track for graduation.

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If state Sen. Justin Alford, D-Portland, is serious about taking on the thorny educational issue of reducing Maine's high school dropout rate, he should consider changing his position one more time on charter school legislation.

Alford was listed as a co-sponsor of a bill that would have made Maine the 40th state to include public charter schools in its educational offerings.

But he later voted against the measure when it came to the floor of the Senate, saying at the time that voting for charter-enabling legislation showed a lack of confidence in Maine's schools.

Now, Alford is submitting a bill to reduce the dropout rate that offers some reasons a reasonable Mainer might lack confidence in the school system's ability to serve every student.

For instance, Maine does not require schools to teach students if they have been suspended. It's a policy that practically guarantees that already troubled students will fall even further behind and helps push someone who is teetering toward dropping out off the ledge.

Alford's bill would create a panel to study current law and policies and make recommendations to the full Legislature.

That sounds like a good idea, but it's too bad that earlier this year Alford and his colleagues in the Senate killed charter school legislation, which would also battle the dropout rate.

It's not that Maine schools are bad, or that the people who work in them don't care. It's just that, like any large institution, public schools don't work for everyone. Some people don't get the help they need, others can't see the relevance of what they're supposed to be learning and some get sidetracked by involvement in illegal activities.

Charter schools, which are small public schools with more flexibility than traditional schools, have a chance to reach students in each of those categories.

By focusing on the arts or a specific subject matter, they can reach the student who has lost interest in school. By holding class at night or during the weekend, they might reach a student who wants to leave school to work full time. By partnering with a social service agency, they could work with students who are in the juvenile justice system.

The important thing charter schools offer is choice, and that can mean a way into education for students who aren't being served by the traditional offerings.

The Legislature should look into the laws and policies that could lead students to drop out of school, but they should not ignore something that 39 other states find a useful tool in their school structure – charter schools. Charter school opponents in the state Senate should take another look – and change their minds.

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