

Legislature should back charter school law

Maine stands to lose too much by resisting this reasonable reform effort.

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Once again, the Legislature's Education Committee has rejected a bill that would permit the creation of public charter schools in Maine, apparently hoping to hold on to the dubious distinction of being one of only 10 states that do not allow this common-sense reform.

Now it's up to the individual members of the Maine House and Senate to enact this law, which would create a greater variety of learning environments for students, especially those who are not thriving under the present system. Lawmakers who do not vote for this bill should be ready to explain to their constituents why they are against providing the families in their districts this opportunity for choice.

So far, opponents continue to offer the same stale complaints. The most common is the claim that charter schools divert money from public schools. But charter schools are public schools. They are created by contract with a school district or an institution of higher learning and use the same mix of state and local tax dollars on a per-pupil basis to teach the same kids.

It is reasonable to expect, especially at first, that charter schools will start small and attract relatively few students, which should not have major impact on the sending school's budget. But, as Rep. Alan Cassavant, D-Biddeford, pointed out this week, if large numbers of students are fleeing a local school, "that would tell you that something's wrong" with the school and not with the charter school option.

Lawmakers concerned about school funding should consider what they would be giving up if they reject this proposal. New charter schools would be eligible for federal start-up grants.

That means federal money would be spent educating Maine children that would otherwise go elsewhere.

And U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has a \$100 billion fund that will be distributed at his discretion as grants to states. The ones that don't have charter schools, a priority for the Obama administration, don't stand to receive those funds.

Opponents of charter schools tend to be those who have a vested interest in the system the way it is – teachers' unions and superintendents. Lawmakers should look beyond those narrow interests and finally pass charter school legislation for the rest of us.