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## MAINE VOICES

Progress in Maine education blocked once again.

A coalition of public school officials and unions kept charter schools at arm's length.

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BATH — For 10 straight years, Maine families have been denied the option of charter schools. This year's rejection really hurts: Maine schools now will not qualify for a share of President Obama's \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" educational funds.

Charter schools are proven and presently copied by seven other nations. Maine kids suffer a 25 percent dropout rate; only two out of 10 U.S. ninth-graders make it to college. Who keeps blocking such help?

The powerful monopoly of the Maine teachers' union, supported by the superintendents, principals and school board associations -- together with its three skilled lobbyists -- vigorously opposed the charter school bill, as it has every educational reform that threatens its control of Maine's educational system.

The Maine Senate simply supports this monopoly.

In 1991, Hyde nearly opened a Hyde high school in Springfield, Mass., having 650 student applications. But at the last moment, the teachers' union announced, "We need a year to consider the project."

Since the union had previously conducted a successful strike to gain its demands, it was game over.

I experienced the power of the Maine teachers' union when we established a Hyde "school within a school" program in Gardiner in August 1992. The 120 students and their parents welcomed the Hyde challenges, but unfortunately, the seven teachers and principal didn't. By November, the school board had suspended the program.

Hyde's Gardiner faculty support then went to zero. The union always speaks as one voice. In January, the program was reinstated, but by June, while the two foundations involved called the results "impressive," they added, "It won't develop in this environment."

Then in Baltimore, the superintendent wanted Hyde to take over management of one of the city's large high schools. In our information meetings, we ran into some strange opposition. At the last moment, the superintendent changed his mind.

A year later, I invited the president of the Baltimore teachers' union to see our Hyde Leadership High School in New Haven, Conn. She was impressed, and in an honest moment, told me, "We undermined you in Baltimore. Nothing against Hyde; just part of

our effort to get rid of EAI." (a firm managing 11 Baltimore schools.) The union succeeded.

Our success in establishing Hyde-New Haven was a testament to a strong superintendent, who liked our character program and weathered some very strong opposition. Today it sends 98 percent of its graduates to college, has won many state athletic championships, and has a waiting list of 400 applicants.

Hyde's greatest growth has come with charter school legislation, which makes us responsible only for effective administration and results, while eliminating constraints like unions and bureaucracy.

In Washington, D.C., our Hyde-DC pre-K-12 school has now graduated seven classes where 100 percent of those who graduated attend four-year colleges; at last count, 74 percent of entering students either graduated or are still there.

The bigger story in D.C. is 36 percent of all public schools there are now charter schools. They graduate 91 percent of their students compared to 69 percent in other D.C. public schools, and achieve 47 percent academic proficiency compared to 34 percent elsewhere.

The D.C. public schools now have a dynamic superintendent, Michelle Rhee. She has a plan to make her teachers among the highest paid in the country, if they forgo seniority as to how they are assigned, retained and rewarded.

You'd think this option would be excitedly welcomed; after all, you can take it or leave it. But the teachers have no say; this option is being negotiated -- not the local union, but by the president of the American Federation of Teachers!

So far negotiations have taken 18 months, even with a respected mediator.

At Hyde charter schools, we have no teachers union; our union begins with students and parents, together with teachers and administrators.

Hyde founded a very successful charter school in South Bronx, one of the poorest areas in New York City, for grateful students and parents. Once again, in both New York City and the entire state, charter schools are significantly outperforming traditional schools.

The real issue of charter schools in Maine is change. Many parents want change; many students need change.

But change threatens Maine's educational monopoly, which doesn't want any kind of competition. Its arguments against charters are exposed by what other states have actually experienced with charter schools.

A poll says 70 percent of Mainers support charter schools. It's time we called our lawmakers and find out if they truly represent us -- or the monopoly. Do it for Maine kids.

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