

Charter schools vote: Schools are for kids

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Supporters of the status quo are on the verge of winning the battle against innovation at the Statehouse, where the umpteenth attempt to bring charter schools to Maine is just about dead.

The bill in question, sponsored by Democratic Sen. Dennis Damon of Trenton, would have finally allowed charter schools to be opened in the state. Maine is one of only 10 states that still bar the independently run public schools.

But such schools are apparently a threat to life as it should be. That's at least what a range of interests representing -- tellingly -- superintendents, teachers, principals and school boards told lawmakers in public hearings and work sessions. Charter schools, in their view, will siphon money from public schools, drain away good students and the state funding that goes with them, they're elitist and their establishment will lead to the closing of rural schools.

Despite testimony from teachers, educational specialists and parents endorsing charter schools, lawmakers were cowed into submission by the powerful institutional interests and voted down the bill in committee.

A last-ditch effort to water down the bill has resurrected it for the moment. But a bill that would be acceptable to those threatened by charter schools hardly seems worth the trouble. The amendments to make it palatable include limiting the number of schools in the state to 20; forcing charter schools to have 75 percent of their teachers certified rather than allowing the hiring freedom to bring in non-traditional teachers; limiting the percentage of children in a district who can enroll in a charter school; and denying charter school operators the right to appeal a sponsor's decision to end the charter.

Those amendments will strangle the life out of charter schools.

We challenge the Legislature: If you don't have the courage to stand up and beat off the prophets of doom who are so scared of charter schools, then just reject the bill.

Alternatively, do the right thing and vote for a robust experiment in charter schools, as the bill originally proposed. Maine's children deserve the best teaching we can give them and, lest we forget, that's why we have schools -- for our children.

Editorials represent the opinion of the Editorial Board of this newspaper: Publisher John Christie, Executive Editor Eric Conrad and Opinion Page Editor Naomi Schalit.