



## Summary of the Maine Forum on Public Charter Schools

October 14, 2009

The October forum on public charter schools brought national experts together with Maine educators and others interested in the possibilities of allow public charter schools in Maine.

About 40 people shared information about the charter school model in public education, ideas for encouraging related innovative public programs, and experience with public charter schools in other states. The heightened interest among participants was clear from the questions and networking during the meeting, and the forum was covered by several print and television reporters.

The major themes of the forum were:

- Why public charter schools are important for improving education outcomes in Maine;
- Charter schools in relation to the US ED competitive education grants such as the \$4.3 billion "Race to the Top" fund;
- The essentials of effective state legislation to launch a quality charter school program;
- The important role of authorizers in ensuring a quality charter school program;
- Examples of successful charter schools in other states, such as the EdVisions Schools and the Hyde Schools (both in Maine, but ineligible to be public charter schools without an enabling law);
- Funding public charter schools in Maine according to proposed legislation.

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### Forum Presentations

**Scott Pearson**, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Office of Innovation and Improvement of the US Department of Education, made the following points:

- Public charter schools are now a key, broad-based component of education reform efforts nationwide, and they promote a renewed focus on accountability. They currently enroll 3% of all public school students in the U.S.
- The flow of dollars in response to demand, brought on by charter schools and a choice among public schools, encourages efficiency, safety, orderliness, achievement, and engaged parents.
- Public charter schools are an important tool that should be available to every superintendent. They promote four key benefits to public education: a) greater innovation, b) choice among approaches, c) competition that produces ripple effects, and 4) the attraction of new and different leaders, teachers, board members, and philanthropists to the public education system.
- States that ban charter schools (such as Maine currently) will be definitely be disadvantaged in the Race to the Top grant competition to be awarded in 2010 to states for documenting that they are innovative in their public education system). Criteria in the "R2T" competition includes the evaluation of other aspects of state charter laws - whether they promote good authorizing, allow autonomy at the

school level, and provide for equitable funding of both operational and facilities costs.

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**Todd Ziebarth**, Vice President for Policy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, gave an overview of the charter school movement. He echoed Pearson's statistic that public charter schools now comprise 3% of public school students nationally, and added that they are now 9% of public schools in the state of Arizona, 55% in city of New Orleans, and 35% in Washington, D.C.

Nationally, 62% of public charter school students are non-white compared to 47% in public district schools; 48% are eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch (45% in other public schools); 56% of public charter schools are located in cities, 25% in suburbs, 6% in towns, and 14% are in rural areas.

Ziebarth said that:

- Public charter schools try to level the playing field for all families through open admissions and lotteries.
- Charter schools allow funds to move from one public school to another public school depending on children's needs.
- Charter schools expand the definition of public education.
- Charter schools bring in new resources from the private sector and increased parent and community engagement.
- Public charter schools are entirely voluntary – for states, districts, educators, and families.

Ziebarth reviewed the 20 essential components of a good charter school enabling law, and provided copies of the recently-published National Alliance's "Model Law" which includes the entire list of recommended provisions. The top 5 elements of a good law are:

1. There are few or no caps on the number of charter schools;
2. A variety of structures are allowed for organizing schools;
3. There are multiple authorizers of charter schools;
4. An accountability system is specified for authorizers;
5. Autonomy exists at the school level and each has an independent board.

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**Elizabeth Evans**, a consultant with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), described the important roles that Authorizers play in creating quality charter schools. Using contracts, they are responsible for approving, supervising, and supporting public charter schools, and ensuring that the charter schools operate with:

- High academic standards;
- Safeguards for the public dollars they spend;
- A focus on outcomes for students; and
- Fair treatment for all students.

NACSA has just published new policy guides, available at [www.qualitycharters.org](http://www.qualitycharters.org).

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**Ron Newell** was a founder of an award-winning charter school in 1993, the Minnesota New Country School. He is now Learning Program and Evaluation Director of EdVisions Schools, which is funded by the Gates Foundation to replicate the original student-centered, project based school in rural Minnesota. EdVisions Schools has grown to a network of 80 schools around the country, including the Blue Hill Harbor School in Maine. The EdVisions Schools governance

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model is unique, with a teacher cooperative as the owner (Board) and manager (administration) of a school.

Newell discussed the founding of public charter schools as mission-driven programs. EdVisions schools focus on developing a different kind of student: a self-directed, life-long learner able to perform real-world activities and take advantage of opportunities as they arise. He described a growing tension, however, with the NCLB focus on achievement test results.

Newell believes that the human development strand of education reform supports a strong academic focus, though it is often ignored. Engagement of students in their own learning is key to achievement, and is fostered by an appropriate school structure and culture. EdVisions schools focus on each student's growth in maturity and hope, which research has directly linked to their engagement and success in academics.

Research has shown that the EdVisions model can work with almost all students, however, since not all students respond equally and not all parents want this approach, it is important for state policy to encourage many different options within public education.

The EdVisions Schools embraces the small schools movement and they have shown that they can operate schools on a financially sustainable basis with only 40 students, an important factor in a small, rural state such as Maine.

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New Hampshire State Representative **Kim Casey (D) and Eileen Liponis** of the N.H. Charter School Association discussed the political situation in New Hampshire related to charter schools, and some of the lessons they had learned in advocating for charter schools to legislators.

They had found, for instance, that using the word "option" was more politically acceptable than using the word "choice" in discussing charter schools, as "choice" is often associated with vouchers. They also stressed the need to find opportunities for collaboration, rather than "pushing charter schools down legislators' throats".

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**Judith Jones**, MACS Board Chair, is a sociologist and education planner who became an early advocate of public school options while living in Washington, DC. She joined Maine charter school advocates after moving to Maine in 1998.

Jones reviewed potential funding sources and funding mechanisms for public charter schools in Maine according to LD 1438, enabling legislation which was based on the model bill described by Ziebarth, and which was narrowly defeated by the Maine Senate last June.

Jones described how "savvy superintendents" can make public charter schools work for students and for districts. She indicated that creating or converting alternative education programs to charter schools can bring \$450,000 per school through the federal Charter School Grant Program. The Maine existing EPS formula would apply to operating funds, so that the existing average per pupil allocation would flow to either the charter school or district school a student attends.

However, because of the current downturn in state revenues, proponents and sponsors of Maine's charter school legislation chose not to propose that charter schools be eligible for state funds for facilities or pensions at this time.

FMI on any of these presentations and the public charter school movement in Maine, please visit [www.mainecharterschools.org](http://www.mainecharterschools.org).

**Still needed:**

1. New Hampshire presenters.
2. MACS presentation of next steps.

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