

MACS Newsletter – September 2008

A. New National Support for Public Chartered Schools!

1. Presidential candidate Barack Obama on September 9th in Ohio repeated his support for expanding school options, including doubling the Federal grant funds for planning and start-up for public chartered schools. Senator Obama stated,

“I believe in the public schools, but I also believe in fostering competition within the public schools.”

2. Commenting on Obama’s speech, Dennis Van Roekel, President of the National Education Association, said,

“Those of us in the education community can learn from charter school success stories and failures... The key is to identify what is working that can be sustained and reproduced on a broad scale so that as many students as possible can benefit.” Van Roekel added he was glad to see that “Obama's plan for charter schools included accountability, both academically and financially.”

3. On the same day, the American Federation of Teachers, the USA's second-largest teachers union, announced it will put up \$1 million and seek additional philanthropic funding to help school systems try

“sustainable, innovative and collaborative reform projects, including union-run charter schools similar to those the AFT manages in New York City”

B. Maine Education Policy Should Expand Public School Options

In order for Maine to address the diverse education needs of all children, MACS supporters believe that Maine should expand our system of publicly-funded education to include a wide variety of programs open by choice. As public programs, they would not charge tuition and would be non-religious. Encouraging families to choose the public education program that is appropriate for each child begins the positive dynamics of choice. More children will succeed in school, in work, and in college if their needs are addressed early and well through affordable public school options that address their needs.

Maine should adopt policies to help educators develop local, regional and statewide options that will respond better to students’ needs. Such options usually do not require new state funds -- much can be accomplished by redirecting existing funds among options open by choice of families and students. Policies that can help more students succeed include have been pioneered and proved in other states, such as:

- Fostering intra-district and inter-district choice among public schools (easy application process; help with transportation);
- Helping visionary educators to start new programs (using proven mechanisms such as contracts, local school budget autonomy, choice by families and teachers);
- Encouraging public chartered schools and public magnet schools;
- Establishing statewide virtual education programs.

C. Enabling Legislation for Public Chartered Schools & Public School Options in Maine

MACS recently heard someone assert that “public charter schools are illegal in Maine.” Thank goodness that is not correct. Under current Maine law, any public school district could “charter” a special program, using a contract to spell out the nature of the program, who will manage it, how existing funds will follow a student to that public program, accountability measures, etc. However, for such programs to be eligible for the large Federal grants for planning and start-up costs, each state has to pass specific enabling legislation that meets certain Federal criteria. Forty states and DC are eligible for the Federal grants, which Senator Obama now proposes to double from \$200 to \$400 million per year.

MACS is gathering support from Maine legislators of all parties for proposed legislation that would enable districts and organizations to form innovative and accountable public chartered schools in Maine, and be eligible for up to \$450,000 per school in Federal start-up grants.

D. Next MACS Meeting - October 21st

The next meeting will be Tuesday, October 21st, from 6-8 pm, at the Mediation Center in Augusta (11 King Street). We hope to arrange a speaker phone for those who wish to participate by telephone. FMI and/or directions, please call 763-3576.

MACS would like to hire an administrative assistant to help reach out to families, educators, and organizations to inform them about current and potential options. If you are interested in this part-time position, please contact MACS, macs@mainecharterschools.org.

E. Alternative Education Association Meeting - November 14

The Fall Conference of the Maine Alternative Education Association will be Friday, November 14, 8am to 3pm, at the China Lake Conference Center. FMI, contact Pender Makin, pmakin@windham.k12.me.us.

F. Youth Peer Leadership Conference - November 14 & 15

The Maine Youth Action Network’s annual youth conference will be November 14 & 15 in Bar Harbor. FMI, see www.MYAN.org or call 874-0060.

FMI about public school options, and to register your support for allowing public chartered schools in Maine, please call 207-763-3576, and visit www.mainecharterschools.org, www.uscharterschools.org, and www.publiccharters.org.