

Maine Association for Public Charter Schools

FEBRUARY 2008 NEWSLETTER

In this issue:

- * MACS will meet on **Monday**, 2/11/08, Augusta
- * The Legislature's Alternative Education report
- * Expanding public school choice makes sense
- * How to encourage new public options
- * Public chartered schools expand nationally
- * National conference 6/22 in New Orleans
- * New resources for chartered public schools

1. NEXT MACS meeting: Monday, February 11, 6-8 pm, Mediation Center, 11 King Street, Augusta.

Emanuel Pariser will brief us on the work of the Legislature's Study Committee on Alternative Education. Plus: discussion on how to encourage new forms of public school choice in Maine in the wake of the school district consolidation process. FMI, call 763-3576.

2. Maine Legislature's Study Committee on Alternative Education

The final report is available at: www.maine.gov/legis/opla/altedprogrs.htm.

Positive recommendations include authorizing the committee to continue its work; defining "alternative learning" and "at risk" in statute; requiring access to alternative learning within regional school units; and continued financial support for the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk (ISSAR) at U Maine Orono.

Unfortunately, the committee has not yet dealt with two important issues: how to allow students to choose among the alternative learning opportunities that may be developed, and how to encourage educators to start new programs.

3. Expanding Public School Choice Makes Sense for Maine

The need for more programs to meet the diverse learning needs of Maine's children has been well documented; (FMI, see www.mainecharterschools.org). As public education options, they will free to parents and available to families of all income levels, expanding the social safety net for poor families and children at risk

The benefits of encouraging more public school options are clear from experience in other states. All participants become more committed to making learning successful. Teachers have new and different professional opportunities, including the possibility of being part of the governing structure or a teacher's cooperative. Parental involvement improves as parents look for programs that will meet each child's needs. New dynamics emerge between staff and families when funds follow each child to the school attended, and parents can transfer a child from a program that doesn't meet his/her needs. When parents can choose among public schools and funds follow each child, administrators

have strong incentives to meet the education needs of those enrolled, and to do so within a given budget, or risk losing students and the funds they bring.

Public school choice takes many forms: intra-district, inter-district, magnet, charter, open enrollment, virtual schools, dual enrollment in high schools and post-secondary options. Maine can review model legislation for choice programs, adapt key ideas and expand its current approaches. The tradition of “tuitioning out” towns provides Maine with a headstart on the mechanics of public school choice, through which public funds follow each child to the school attended. Although under the tuitioning out program, Maine families can choose public and private schools, in or out of state, we advocate expanding choice through public education programs in Maine.

4. Starting New Public Education Programs - What Have We Learned?

What factors will encourage educators to do the hard work to create new programs or to expand existing alternative approaches to public education? Over the past 15 years, over 4,100 new public chartered schools have been started, (and several hundred have failed), so we can learn from this experience. Maine needs legislation that includes:

1. A clear set of rules for designing and implementing new programs, through legislation that encourages intra-district choice, inter-district choice, magnet schools, alternative programs, and public chartered schools open to all.
2. A contract model that will guarantee a set period of operation so budget cuts and shifting school district politics can't derail new programs unfairly. Contracts will also guarantee a stream of operating income based on funds following each child; significant budgetary autonomy at the school level; flexibility for each school in operations and instruction; and multiple monitoring methods.
3. Ways to encourage visionary educators and citizens to create partnerships with community members and organizations, both to add management expertise, and to provide students with avenues for service learning and real world experiences.

5. Continued Expansion of Public Chartered Schools Nationally

This school year there are 4,147 chartered schools enrolling 1.2 million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia. Evidence of improved student achievement comes from studies in California, five counties in Ohio, and Washington, DC, among others. US News and World Report published its first list of the best high schools in America: although enrolling 2% of public school students, public chartered high schools represent 15% of the top 20 high schools, and 4% of the “best” high schools.

In Georgia, the Legislature just established a state commission to authorize charter contracts, since local boards have been so reluctant. In New Hampshire, the Legislature's education committee is debating a bill that would finally fund state-authorized chartered schools more adequately, by setting a per pupil allocation of \$7,000, compared to the \$3,706 currently. In Missouri, the University of St. Louis has just partnered with KIPP to start 5 new chartered public schools. The state's law has allowed public and private universities to be authorizers for 8 years, but Washington University of St. Louis will be

the first private university in the state to take on the authorizer and monitoring role. Elsewhere, California's Stanford University and the University of Chicago are sponsoring public charter schools, as are many public universities in other states. In Wisconsin, legislators have just compromised on a bill to keep virtual public chartered schools alive, and those provisions could set precedents for other states which wish to reap the benefits of virtual learning programs.

Bi-partisan support around the country for chartered public schools continues to grow. Democrats for Education Reform started because, "Two years ago, a group of education reformers in New York and Washington, DC, got together to see if an all-Democratic group could help nudge our party to press for real education reform. We were disheartened by the widespread failure of the public school system to give poor kids in America an opportunity to compete in the modern world, and we were frightened by our own party's unwillingness to take on powerful entrenched interests to help them." (www.dfer.org)

6. National Charter Schools Conference to be Held in New Orleans, June 22-25

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools will host the 2008 National Charter Schools Conference from June 22-25 in New Orleans, LA. Register at www.nationalcharterconference.org. The conference is the largest gathering of charter school operators and proponents in the nation. Attendees will learn and share best practices, discuss national and state policy issues, have the opportunity to volunteer at local charter schools, and enjoy special events featuring New Orleans traditions, food and music! Call 206-463-3344 or e-mail nationalconference@publiccharters.org.

7. New Resources

- Guide to Charter School Facility Requirements, from the Low Income Investment Fund, available at www.uscharterschools.org/cs/r/view/uscs_rs/2370
- Charter School Law Desk Book, 2007 Edition, www.uscharterschools.org/cs/r/view/uscs_rs/2378
- Special Education in the Charter School Sector, www.uscharterschools.org/cs/r/view/uscs_rs/2383
- Charter School Governing Board Training Manual, www.uscharterschools.org/cs/r/view/uscs_rs/2380
- Inside Charter Schools: A Systematic Look at Our Nation's Charter Schools, from the University of Washington's National Charter School Research Project, www.uscharterschools.org/cs/r/view/uscs_rs/2381

FMI, see www.mainecharterschools.org; email inquiries to macs@mainecharterschools.org or call 763-3576.

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