

Editorials

Charter schools deserve another look from state

Maine cannot afford to lose out on federal funding or a chance to innovate any longer.

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Less than six months after the latest defeat of a proposed charter school law in the Legislature, it might seem pointless for backers to try again.

Key players in the education establishment, especially the teachers' unions, hate the idea, and their opposition is shared by members of the legislative leadership, especially in the Senate.

The bill got further than ever this year, and some might think it would be good politics to spend the next year laying groundwork for another bill in 2011, when term limits would change some members of the leadership cast.

But there's really too much at stake for that, and charter school advocates are right to be pushing their cause for another bill in 2011.

Gov. Baldacci should use his authority to introduce a bill that would get the issue back before this Legislature when it reconvenes in January and he and Education Commissioner Susan Gendron should use their influence to get it passed.

There are two reasons for this urgency: The first is that at a time when state school funding is under attack, charter school legislation would bring money into Maine education and not, as its critics incorrectly charge, take money away.

The Race to the Top fund has put over \$4 billion of stimulus money at the discretion of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, which he plans to distribute to states at the forefront of education reform.

Being one of only 11 states that have lagged behind on charter school legislation puts Maine at a disadvantage when competing for those funds.

Charter schools are public schools created by contract with a school district or institution of higher education.

They accept public school students and receive the same per-pupil support that other public schools receive. Any federal funds that would come to the state to support charter schools would mean more money for Maine education, not less.

TOO MANY LEFT OUT

The second reason for the government to act now is that the system as it is currently constituted is not working for a significant number of students.

About 3,000 Maine students drop out of high school every year, putting themselves at a tremendous disadvantage in a job market in which even a high school diploma is not enough for success.

Research suggests that the dropout problem is multifaceted, with roots that go as far back as early childhood. For some students, waiting until they start kindergarten may be too late.

But the state's fiscal crisis and tight budgets in municipalities make it unrealistic for school districts to have the resources they would need to create new programs to bring dropouts back to school or to develop programs for young children that would keep them from dropping out later in their school career. Charter schools, because of their ability to be jointly supported by school districts and non-profit agencies, offer a way to develop programs that would be impossible under the current budgetary restraints.

A charter school law could permit the creation of a school that meets on weekends or at night that could reach one set of dropouts.

Or it could facilitate the start-up of one geared specifically for students who are leaving one of the state's juvenile correctional facilities and reach another set.

An early-childhood education program, could be developed in partnership with a social service non profit, and could bring a program on-line that school officials would otherwise just dream about starting under the current budget straits.

INNOVATION LABORATORIES

Charter schools are small and offer districts a chance to experiment. Some superintendents, like Portland's Jim Morse, understand that this legislation would create flexibility to add to a school district's programs, not drain resources away from them.

The law would also create a structure that could ease cooperation between districts for specialized programs, allowing them to share costs and save money while innovating.

School districts, like all of government agencies, will have to be creative during this economic cycle.

This is not a time to hunker down into comfortable arguments in favor of preserving the current system until the economy comes back.

Kids now in the system can't wait few more years. Their time in school goes by too quickly and they deserve everybody's best effort to innovate quickly, before it's too late for them.

Charter schools are not the answer to every problem, but they could be part of the answer. At a time when the state is looking hard for every dollar it can cut, it makes no sense to reject an idea that would bring money into Maine and create opportunities for school districts in innovate.

This is an old debate, but it's time for some new thinking. The governor should submit the bill again and legislators should finally make it the law.