

# Maine Opinion

## BANGOR DAILY NEWS

EDITORIAL

### Give Charters a Chance

Posted May 10, 2011, at 9:03 p.m.

Maine is one of only a handful of states that do not allow public charter schools. There is no reason for this to remain the case.

Charter schools allow parents, students, teachers and others to band together to create a type of learning environment not offered by public schools. They can focus on natural resources, as a group in Greenville has proposed; the arts and local culture, such as the Cobscook Community Learning Center; or for children with special learning needs like REAL School in Windham.

When a quarter of Maine teens aren't graduating from high school and more than half the students in some schools aren't considered proficient in basics such as math and reading — despite nearly \$1 billion a year in state funds being spent on K-12 education — a new model is clearly needed.

It is past time for Maine to give charter schools a try.

[LD 1553](#), which is the subject of a public hearing before the Legislature's Education Committee on Thursday, creates a mechanism for such schools in the state. The bill includes extensive language about the standards schools must meet in order to receive a charter. For example, a charter proposal must include a detailed academic plan that explains how the school will offer expanded opportunities for students, especially those at risk of dropping out, to reach their full potential. Proposed bylaws and a business plan must also be included.

Critics warn that charter schools operate outside state and federal mandates, so their quality is suspect. This is not a persuasive argument given the outcomes at too many of the state's schools. The state and federal government cannot — and should not — stop working to improve these schools, but denying students and their families hasn't succeeded in improving quality so far.

Charter schools will only survive if they meet expectations. Given options, students won't stay at a charter school if the teaching is sub-par. Parents won't send their children to a school with outdated teaching materials and technology. Such schools, if they didn't quickly improve, would run out of students and close.

As a growing number of communities face the closure of small schools due to declining enrollment, keeping them open as charter schools could be an option.

The state and local school districts in Maine have lost out on millions of dollars in federal funding for school improvement because the state does not allow charter schools. That money has gone to other states.

It is time for lawmakers to consider a new education model that, with strict standards and oversight, has worked well in other states.