

MEA - Charter School Complaints - *Challenged!*

The Maine Association for Charter Schools has prepared this response to nine assertions by the Maine Education Association in a recent handout given to Maine legislators.

1. MEA - *“Charters are best described as publicly funded private schools that experiment with the education of our children with little oversight or input from the public.”*

Charter schools are not “private”. Charter schools are public schools by definition and by law.

Charter schools do not “experiment”, they innovate.

- Charter schools have been a successful, systemic innovation in public education since 1992;
- They have 18 years of experience with innovation, in 5,000 charter schools today;
- They now educate 1.6 million students who choose to attend their innovative educational programs;
- Most charter schools have waiting lists of students wishing to attend, attesting to their success.

Charter schools have a lot of public oversight and public input.

- By law, they are monitored closely: by local and statewide Authorizing Authorities, by the parents who send their children by choice, not by mandate; by Maine’s Commissioner of Education; and by the Maine Legislature.
- By law, they are accountable for producing positive results in student achievement with financial integrity.
- By law, they can be restructured or closed (after a public renewal and revocation process) if they do not produce promised results.
- By comparison, traditional public schools are seldom restructured or closed for poor educational achievement or financial inefficiency.

2. MEA - *“We’re talking about diverting money to create more schools at a time when local districts are facing substantial budget cuts and have been losing aid since 2008.”*

- A district can face financial shortfalls for many reasons: when students drop out, choose homeschooling, attend a private school, or a family moves to find a school that better meets their child’s educational needs.
- What is important is the success of all students. The number of schools is irrelevant.
- Charter schools do not have to be new schools - they can be existing schools that choose the charter model for the flexibility it affords in operations, allowing it to meet the needs of more students in a more efficient manner.
- Each individual student who chooses a charter school, in effect, invests the public money allocated for their education where they believe it is most effective in meeting their educational needs;
- Without a public charter school option, students who leave their assigned public school lose the public money allocated for their education.

3. MEA - *“Both the state and local (property tax) funding follows the child in a charter and that could leave small public schools already operating on tight budgets without the critical mass of operating funds needed to do their jobs.”*

There are hardship provisions in the proposed Maine law to protect existing schools from excessive loss of students to a new charter school. And towns can convert their small school to a charter to keep it from closing.

4. MEA - *“In communities that are low-receivers of state aid ... that means most of the money flowing into the charter would be local tax dollars, yet there is no vote of the people required to start a charter.”*

- Money flows to a charter school only when individual students seek more appropriate education options.
- Each town votes on its education budget, which determines the amounts that follow a child to a charter school.
- Local people may vote to authorize their own charter school if they perceive the need.
- Local people also “vote with their feet” when they choose to send their children to a charter school.

5. MEA - Why *“build more schools at a time when we are closing schools all over Maine.”*

- Charter schools receive no public funds for facilities under the proposed Maine law, since many public and commercial buildings are now vacant, and Maine has no money for new school construction.
- Charter schools in Maine will usually use existing buildings.
- Local communities whose small schools have closed or will be closed may re-open them and operate them more efficiently using the flexibility afforded by the charter school model.

6. MEA - *“The proposed bill allows a statewide board appointed out of Augusta to approve new charter schools across the state without any other review of the charter proposals and without local voter approval.*
- See 4. above;
 - A new school district in Maine should be formed with caution:
 - A district is a monopoly that can enforce compulsory attendance laws;
 - A district may tax local people to support itself.
 - A new charter school may not tax.
 - A new charter school gives students and parents a choice of public schools, and does not compel them to attend a school assigned according to their street address.
7. MEA - *“Local school boards already can create the equivalent of a local charter under the innovate (sic) school law passed last year. And, places like Portland also have created charter-like schools under language that has existed in school law for some time.”*
- By law, local school boards have been able to create innovative new programs for 15 years using “waivers” from existing regulations - but they have not.
 - Though possible, only one school district has applied for a waiver in 15 years - and it was denied.
 - The 2010 “Innovative Schools Law” does not (as the MEA rightly says) add anything new.
 - Portland’s innovative Casco Bay H.S. was created with a major foundation grant and does not enjoy the protection of the charter school model.
 - Few in-district innovative programs survive: they can be eliminated when key people leave, political winds shift, or funds get tight – regardless of whether the programs are successfully meeting the educational needs of their students.
 - Charter schools earn a 5-year contract, protecting their programs during the fragile “start-up stage”.
 - The charter school’s 5-year contract is monitored and assessed; contract renewal is not guaranteed - the school is held accountable for its performance.
8. MEA - *“Why should we...create charters that nationwide have not made significant improvements in student performance?”*
- The MEA refers to a study by The Center for Research on Education (CREDO) at Stanford University. The study’s methodology and conclusions have been severely critiqued, even by other researchers at Stanford. (See www.publiccharters.org/CREDO+Reconsidered+Memo.)
 - The study averaged its estimated charter school results across 15 states and tried to generalize to national averages. This procedure ignored critical differences among the charter school sectors in each state based on very different charter school laws, and therefore very different types and numbers of charter schools.
 - CREDO has also published studies of individual states. In its January 2010 study of charter schools in New York City, public charter school students were estimated to be out-performing traditional public school students in reading and math.
 - The most recent study on Indiana, March 2011, found very positive results for public charter schools. These studies are available at the CREDO web site - <http://credo.stanford.edu>.
 - The CREDO studies are among dozens of studies that try to compare student achievement between public district and public charter schools. (See “Charter School Achievement, What We Know,” Fifth Edition, 2009, www.publiccharters.org/What+We+Know+5.)
 - As with all public schools, other measures of student outcomes are important to review: student and teacher safety, surveys of parent, student, and teacher satisfaction, attendance, retention, graduation rates, and graduates’ subsequent education enrollments.
9. MEA - *“We already have a new law on the books that allows for the establishment of innovative schools in existing districts to meet the unique needs of students. This is what the law, just passed last year, would allow if given a chance to work:” (A repeat of 7 above)*