

Public Charter Schools MYTHS, FEARS, & FACTS

1. Fear: Federal funding will run out and jeopardize the program.

FACT: Federal funding is only start up money for a school's first three years. As soon as a chartered school opens, basic operating expenses will come from the state and local funds that are allotted to each Maine student attending the program according to current formulas. Programs will have to demonstrate that they will have enough students to meet their projected budget. (See *1 below for more information)

2. Myth: Enough programs for at-risk kids can be started under current Maine regulations and a new approach is not needed.

FACT: As good as alternative schools are, there are about 80 in the state's 200 school districts; mostly operating with 15 to 30 students. Still about 1,700 students drop out of Maine High Schools annually, and our official graduation rate is 87%. We must do better than this. Alternative programs, especially new or small ones, are highly vulnerable to arbitrary budget cuts by school districts. Charters won't be. (See *2 below for more information)

3. Myth: Charter school advocates haven't tried to start programs under existing regulations.

FACT: Many educators have become charter school advocates BECAUSE they find school boards and administrations unresponsive to their efforts to provide high quality programming for high risk students. Key charter school advocates have been involved in alternative education for decades. (See *3 below for more information)

4. Fear: Public charter schools will allow religious groups to run public schools.

FACT: This is completely false. LD 1640 and the Federal Charter School Grant Program are written to prohibit religious groups from running a charter. This is a standard scare-tactic used by opponents of public school reform. (See *4 below for more information)

5. Fear: Public chartered schools will hurt small or rural schools in Maine.

FACT: Lowering the dropout rate will help small or rural schools and their communities. As more students graduate through conventional, alternative, and charter schools, unemployment and social service costs will decrease, and the quality of life will increase. Experience in other rural states does not indicate small or rural schools have been hurt by the establishment of charters, and many have benefited by using the charter school mechanism to retain families. (See *5 below for more information)

For more information on the public chartered school model, please visit www.mainecharterschools.org, or call Judith Jones at 763-3576 or Emanuel Pariser at 236-3000.

NOTES:

***1.** Started under President Bill Clinton in 1996, the Federal Charter School Grant Program is designed to provide funds for the planning and start-up phases of public charter schools, including both new chartered public schools and conversions of existing public education programs. Funds can be used over 3 years for these initial purposes, including professional development for teachers and staff, curriculum development, equipment and technology, etc.

To qualify for the federal grants, a state must have enabling legislation that adds public chartered schools to the state's program of public education and which meets certain criteria. These criteria include: as public schools, chartered schools cannot have any religious affiliation; cannot choose their students and must hold a lottery if more students apply than spaces are available; and must have substantial autonomy over operations and budget.

Congressional appropriations for these grants have risen from \$6 million in 1996 to over \$200,000 annually for the past several years. The federal \$ cannot be used to purchase property or build buildings. An additional \$37 million program has been established for credit enhancement for facilities. This level of funding is strongly supported by a bipartisan group of Congressmen and Congresswomen. FMI, see www.uscharterschools.org.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Schools</u>	<u>Federal Grants</u>
1996	480	\$ 6,000,000
2000	1,700	\$145,000,000
2001	2,110	\$190,000,000
2002	2,431	\$200,000,000
2003	2,700	\$198,700,000
2004	2,996	\$218,702,000
2005	3,344	\$216,952,384
2006	3,625	\$214,782,480

***2.** Existing programs for at risk kids do not begin to meet the needs of Maine children, neither in number or diversity. And there is significant turnover in alternative education programs started under current regulations. As line items in districts' budgets, alternative programs are often the first to be cut when budgets tighten, whether or not they are meeting the needs of their students. These are the children that do not have activist parents who can advocate for them; school boards can cut the programs with little public outcry.

***3.** There are many documented efforts of Maine parents and educators who have attempted to start new programs which were rejected by superintendents and school boards.

Example: Alan Morris, founder of the successful Carleton Project for high school dropouts in Presque Isle, tried futilely for years to start this program within the traditional public school system. FMI, see the profile on the MACS website, www.mainecharterschools.org, under Maine's need.

Example: In Portland, the Many Rivers Elementary School, an open enrollment public school, has had a long waiting list for years, and parents' efforts to get the system to replicate the program have been consistently rejected. Parents' efforts to get the system to establish a similar middle school have also been rejected.

Example: In Freeport, parents who support the 3 different elementary programs in the Mast Landing School have been rebuffed in efforts to start an alternative middle school.

Example: In Kennebunk, a long-time Maine educator's attempt to start an

alternative high school was stymied. While waiting for the public charter school legislation to pass, she started a private alternative school and works closely with Kennebunk HS to provide options needed by some students. But families still have to pay tuition to access this program, and many cannot afford to do so.

How would chartered public schools be different? Different provisions are necessary to encourage educators to start and expand programs to meet the needs of children at risk. These are the lessons learned from the unwarranted demise of the thousands of alternative and progressive education programs started around the country in the 1960's and 1970's:

(1) There should be a public application process for groups who wish to start a public charter school. The process should be defined in the law, be open and transparent, and require written reasons for decisions to be made available to the public.

(2) The law should define a charter school as a public school with its own legal existence, so it cannot be closed if school boards change.

(3) The law should require that as long as a chartered school enrolls students and meets the needs of those students, it will receive the same annual per pupil allocations as traditional schools receive for their students for operating costs. This way, its operating budget cannot be cut arbitrarily or without regard for its success in helping students learn.

***4.** Not only does the Federal Charter School Grant Program insist that public charter schools not be religious, the experience in 40 other states has shown that this is an ungrounded fear. Public charter schools may choose a theme or special approach, but may not have a religious curricula, may not discriminate in hiring on religious grounds, nor have a religiously-affiliated board of trustees. The public chartering authorities in Maine will have the obligation under LD 1640 not to approve charter contracts with groups which violate these provisions.

***5.** For children who have already dropped out of a conventional school, the school has already lost funding for that student, so there will be no effect on the school's EPS funding if a chartered public school enrolls dropouts. On the positive side, small and rural school districts can band together to create a regional alternative education charter school, as have 9 districts in Northern New Hampshire, benefiting the entire region, and taking advantage of the federal grant funds to help establish the program. Some small schools may wish to convert into public chartered schools in order to provide a program that meets the needs of children at risk in their area, perhaps through an arts-based or experiential, hands-on approach, and in collaboration with other area public schools.

FMI, please visit www.mainecharterschools.org.