



**Report on Public Hearing  
LD 1438 “An Act to Permit Charter Schools in Maine”**

May 5, 2009

The Education Committee’s public hearing on LD 1438 finally got underway at 3:45 pm after a ½ hour delay due to extended debate in the House, and then the hearing for another bill which was scheduled first.

Due to the late hour, the hearing for a second bill was postponed; work sessions scheduled on other bills for later in the afternoon were canceled. When the hearing for LD 1438 finally commenced, due to the number of people waiting to testify, testimony was limited to 3 minutes and eventually 2 minutes, and few questions were asked by the Committee.

**Proponents**

Twenty people testified “for” the bill, four “against”, and one “neither for nor against”. Senator Dennis Damon (D) was prime sponsor and spoke first. Co-sponsors Rep. John Piotti (D, House Majority Leader) and Rep. Gary Knight (R) followed. Rep. Andrea Borland (D) had planned to speak, but due to the time she declined.

Former Democratic Rep. David Miramant led the citizens speaking for the bill. Dr. Judith Jones of MACS then outlined the policy implications of LD 1438. Andrea Berry of The Real School, a private pre-school for autistic children in Portland spoke with her 6 week old daughter Cora in her arms. Colleen Foley-Ingersoll, Director of the Reach School also spoke. Testifying next were representatives from the Reach School - a parent, Nora McGrath, her son high school student Aedan Sheehan, and, and Louisa Carl.

Emanuel Pariser, co-founder of The Community School, a private school for at-risk students testified and then Martha Kempe, Director of the Passages Program for Teen Parents at the Community School.

Stephen Bowen, Education Director of the Heritage Policy Center discussed two reports on charter schools which the center has compiled from national research, one in 2007 and a new one released that day which supports charter schools as centers of innovation.

Dr. Richard Dale, Professor of Education at U. Maine in Farmington spoke of his experience as Director of the Pennsylvania Charter School Office and with special education programs.

Joe Gauld, founder of the Hyde School in Bath and four charter schools in DC, NY, and Baltimore testified next, and talked of how the right school impacted the life of his son. Laura Friedman, Director of the Center for Creativity spoke of an at-risk student she taught who would have benefited by the flexibility afforded by a charter school.

Ginny Mott, Board Legislative Representative for the Maine PTA spoke in favor of charter schools, mentioning a concern that only 50% of teachers needed to be certified according to the bill, and that teachers not certified be able to receive some specific training prior to teaching.

Justin Belanger, a parent, testified next about the problems with the public school system in his town, and the need for a public alternative for parents and students.

Anne Weisleder, Chair of the State Board of Education then spoke in favor of “provisions of LD 1438”, and said the Board supported a “thoughtfully designed and limited public charter school pilot in Maine.

Finally, Roger Brainerd, Board Chair of MACS spoke of the comprehensive and complex nature of the bill, and how it was designed to promote the slow and deliberate creation of quality schools.

Several supporters who planned to testify for the bill had to leave early due to the late hour, and they included Sarah Ricker, from Camp Kieve, Arlene J. Leighton, an experienced online teacher, John Ross of the Westbrook Alternative and Adult Education Programs, Wendy Pastio, who had been a charter school teacher in Florida, Gina Volkwein of the Blue Hill Harbor School, and John Bird of the Island Institute. Ten other supporters were present and a number of others submitted written testimony.

### **Opponents**

Speaking against the bill were Supt. Patricia Hopkins representing the Maine Superintendents Association, Erica Kimball representing the Maine School Boards Association, Steven Crouse for the Maine Education Association. The Maine Principal's Association submitted written testimony. One citizen spoke against the bill, saying the present system provides enough educational opportunities, though it needs to do more to empower parents.

### **Neither For Nor Against**

Commissioner of Education Susan Gendron then spoke for the Department of Education as being "neither for nor against" the bill. To quote,

"The Department of Education supports the concept of implementing a limited number of pilot charter school programs under the guidance of local school boards, and we recognize that enabling legislation for charter schools in a state may provide opportunities for future federal funding. However, we have strong concerns about the impact on local funding for all our schools during these difficult budgetary times.

The effect of charter schools on student achievement is well-documented nationally. What the information also tells us is that it is critical to implement policy and rules very deliberately and carefully. For that reason, I would propose that, before any charter schools begin operation, that the Department receive concept applications from school administrative units who wish to pursue a charter school. The Commissioner would review the proposals based on the criteria provided in any bill recommended by this Committee and enacted by the Legislature. Based on this review, the Commissioner would make recommendation to the Governor and file a report with the Legislature no later than June 10, 2010. This report would recommend that those applications that meet the legislative criteria, and that have no fiscal impact on the local school administrative units, be approved to be operational by September, 2010.

We will also monitor cost effectiveness to ensure that taxpayers' limited dollars are wisely used to increase and improve student and teacher learning.

For these reasons, and within these parameters, the Department is testifying neither for nor against L.D. 1438 An Act To Permit Charter Schools in Maine."

We at MACS are very happy with the show of support for LD 1438 at the public hearing and in the excellent letters sent to the Committee. We are now reviewing the testimony of the opponents and the Dept. of Education for rebuttal. Shortly, we will contact those of you living within a district represented by a member of the Education Committee, asking for your help in getting them to support the bill. We will let you know as soon as the work session is scheduled.