

Testimony to the Maine Education and Cultural Affairs Committee on Providing an Opportunity for Future, High-Quality Charter Public Schools to Serve Maine's Families and Children

Good Morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Lana Ewing, and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Charter School Commission. I am here today to provide you with background information related to Representative Gary Drinkwater's proposed bill, L.D. 282. Representative Drinkwater's legislation aims to provide future, high-quality charter public schools the opportunity to serve our state's community by allowing the potential approval of one new charter public school at a time beyond what is already allowed by this body.

As a representative of the Maine Charter School Commission, I want to emphasize that the Commission does not believe in adding charter public schools simply for the sake of growth. Rather, it is important to remember the fundamental purpose of charter public schools: they exist alongside district public schools to provide diverse, innovative educational models that address the unique learning needs of students in Maine. We believe that families have a right to decide what type of public school model is best for their children, regardless of their socioeconomic status, their zip code, or their children's specific educational needs. By expanding the public options available to families, we strengthen the entire public education system. The goal of our charter public schools is to ensure that more students have access to an education that will best support them in achieving their definition of post-secondary success - through college and/or career - so that they are able to attain future economic security and opportunity.

To ensure that any potential addition of new charter public schools in the future is done thoughtfully, responsibly, and in the best interest of Maine's families and students, I want to take a moment to remind this body of the exceptionally high bar and standards that we at the Commission set for charter public school applications, approvals, and renewals.

First, I want to mention that Maine's charter public schools are held to the highest accountability and oversight standards of any public school in the state. Given our limited authorizer system, where the Commission is the primary authorizer for new charter public schools in our state, we can ensure a stringent, transparent, and fair process for new charter public school applications and oversight of existing schools.

Charter public schools, like district public schools, are tuition-free, public, and open to all. They are also governed by a volunteer board of directors, made up of

community members and other local stakeholders. These public board members volunteer their time to serve and share a deep commitment to ensuring every child in Maine has access to a high-quality public school. Like school committees and boards of education, charter public school boards are subject to the open meeting law, conflict of interest law, and public records requirements.

In terms of new charter public schools, the application process is rigorous, and we are committed to approving only those schools that meet the demonstrated needs of Maine students and meet high academic and operational standards. Let me share a few key details about this process to illustrate the thoroughness and rigor we apply.

Currently, we are reviewing two applications for the 10th charter public school in Maine. Each of these applications spans between 300-400 pages, requiring months of preparation and a deep, expert knowledge of teaching and learning, and how to run a school. One applicant reported that it took them over 400 hours to prepare the application, which also requires applicants to demonstrate authentic outreach and engagement in the community. This represents many months of hard work, and is just the beginning of the process.

Each application is evaluated by a team that includes Commission staff, Commission members, and external experts, such as school finance experts and national authorities on charter public school authorizing. The evaluation rubric alone spans 65 pages. Each reviewer receives training and development from a national authorizing expert in how to conduct a rigorous, unbiased review and individually spends 15-20 hours carefully analyzing each application. Afterward, the applicants participate in extensive interviews, including a capacity interview with the review team, an interview with the full Charter School Commission, and public hearings.

From detailed financial plans for the first five years of operation, to rigorous curricular and professional development calendars, to the establishment of a functional governance board, we ask for a comprehensive and well-thought-out plan for every aspect of school operation.

Once a charter school is approved, the Maine Charter School Commission continues to hold that school to the highest standards through annual monitoring. We use a Performance Framework to assess academic performance, operational effectiveness, financial health, governance, and stakeholder satisfaction, including feedback from families, students, and teachers. This process ensures that charter public schools remain accountable for the results they deliver and that they continue to provide a quality education for Maine's students. I would be happy to provide you with examples of our application requirements, rubrics, and any other information that you would find helpful.

By thoughtfully and carefully creating the conditions by which we can approve one new charter public school at a time, we will be able to provide Maine's families with access to additional high-quality and specialized public school models. This incremental, community-centered approach will ensure that any potential new charter public schools are of the highest quality and are meeting an explicit community need.

I know how important it is to members of this body that we ensure responsible stewardship of our state's resources, and ultimately taxpayer dollars, while also maintaining a deep focus on directing support to our communities with the highest needs. Given our high standards and strict oversight, coupled with our commitment to supporting public schools that will meet the unique needs of students and families, I believe that charter public schools continue to offer a meaningful benefit to Maine's education community.

In conclusion, I want to express my sincere gratitude to the legislators who work tirelessly to ensure that all students in Maine have access to the high-quality public education they deserve. Thank you for your time and your ongoing commitment to the children of Maine.

Sincerely,

Lana Ewing
Executive Director, Maine Charter School Commission