

TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO

L.D. 282

AN ACT TO RAISE THE LIMIT ON THE TOTAL NUMBER
OF PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

March 12, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Steven Bailey, the executive director of the Maine School Management Association, testifying on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Boards Association and the Maine School Superintendents Association in opposition to L.D. 282, An Act to Raise the Limit on the Total Number of Public Charter Schools.

This bill proposes to essentially remove the cap on the number of public charter schools in our state over time. Our associations feel strongly that this is the wrong approach. We believe the current mechanisms in Maine law already allow for experimentation and expansion of successful approaches, and this bill would only take money away from our traditional public schools and students at a time when resources are already extremely limited.

When the Maine Legislature passed a law in 2011 authorizing the creation of charter schools throughout our state, the goal was to “improve pupil learning by creating more high-quality schools with high standards for pupil performance”, to help close achievement gaps, provide alternative educational models, and use different, high-quality teaching approaches.

We believe this is a worthwhile goal, and our associations are not against public charter schools as a whole. However, the results of this experiment have varied. With proper oversight, some schools have thrived and offered excellent learning opportunities for Maine children. Others have struggled. Student turnover from one year to the next has been an issue. Three years ago, the Maine Charter School Commission was forced to close one school that struggled to meet its academic and behavioral targets. The performance of multiple Maine public charter schools has been mixed, raising questions about whether we should be expanding at all.

Meanwhile, for those public charter schools that are performing up to standards, our state already has a mechanism to help them expand further: allowing these schools to increase their enrollment. Schools have expanded from elementary grades into high school, or added kindergarten and pre-K classrooms. We feel this is the appropriate process – allowing for slow, incremental growth if a school shows success, providing for a balance of experimentation and oversight.

Our associations also feel that if our state wants more experimentation in Maine’s education system, that work should be done inside our traditional public schools, with locally elected school boards. Over the past few years, more and more districts have begun the process of experimentation. They’ve added outdoor learning

programs, virtual academies, and new pathways to graduation, in an effort to improve student behavior, attendance and proficiency.

Look at examples like the Kennebec Valley Multiple Pathways Academy in Madison, where students harvest fish and sell them to local businesses to help teach entrepreneurship and business skills. Districts across Maine have designed their own versions of these “schools within a school,” that meet student needs in new ways. Another bill introduced this session, L.D. 81, would remove additional barriers and expand opportunities for school districts to implement more innovative approaches. We believe this strategy – not removing the charter school cap – is the best approach to meeting student needs.

This strategy also ensures that state education funds stay within our local schools and are not spread out too thin. Maine currently spends about \$34 million on its nine charter schools. The cost of education is already high statewide. Many local taxpayers are already struggling to pay their tax bills, and we do not want the state to pass new laws that could decrease enrollment and further thin out school budgets.

Given the already increasing cost of education in Maine, we feel it is in the best interest of our state – and our taxpayers – to focus our attention on the schools that are already open, rather than expand our public charter school system even further.