

**Testimony before
The Joint Standing Committee
on Education and Cultural Affairs
March 12, 2025**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members:

I stood before this committee thirty years ago to explain why charter schools were important in the big scheme of school reform. As you all know, charter schools are public schools and trying to make positive change within the existing structure of Maine schools was important to me. Charter schools were relatively new across the country and non-existent in Maine. I was a public-school teacher and administrator at the time. A group of hard-working advocates for meaningful reforms carefully researched, presented, and defended, for three years, a bill that would have put Maine on the map as a leader in Charter School Development. That bill took the very best of what had been done nationally, learned from the mistakes of similar bills across the country and created a bill that, in my opinion, was very pro-student. It would have offered much needed support for students identified as “at risk” (of school failure), and all within the realm of improving public school options for all students.

I couldn’t imagine, at the time, who would not support the bill or who couldn’t understand why this was important for student success. I was idealistic and much younger. I understand now. I met the lobbyists for The Maine School Management Association, the Maine Principal’s Association, The Maine Teachers Association, The Maine School Boards Association, The Maine Superintendent’s Association, and other agents for “no change” in Maine. I watched them present “facts” that were not facts, data that was not real and any information they could muster as to the damage that charter schools would inflict upon the status quo of public schools that were doing well. They were doing their job for their constituencies, not students. I understand that and I got to know some of these people who have remained friends throughout my career. I’ll even admit that, at the time, per pupil costs in Maine were among the lowest in the nation and achievement scores were in the top ten. That is not the case today and I would guess that members of this committee know what we are up against. We no longer enjoy the same measures of success. Just the opposite, with some of the highest per pupil costs and lowest test scores in the nation.

After three years of presenting our bill, in a meeting with Duke Albanese, then Commissioner, and his associate, Yellow Light Breen, I was told that a charter school law in Maine was ten years away (it was thirteen, to be precise) and that Maine had long established private school regulations that would help make it possible to start a private school that could do the same thing. It’s a long drive from Augusta to Aroostook County and by the time I arrived home, I had decided to give it a try. I had experience, the necessary credentials, and thirteen years in public education. Carleton Project, at the time was an established summer school option for credit recovery in high schools on both sides of the Maine-New Brunswick border. I’ve taken over seven hundred kids to the summit of Mount Carleton, the highest mountain in Canada’s Maritime Provinces, kids who stayed connected to their learning over the summer and earned

credits in Science, Health, Art, First Aid, Social Studies, Wilderness Camping and Canoeing Skills. The jump to starting a private school was not much of a stretch for me. And here we are, battered and bruised like everyone else, but still making a difference in the lives of kids that still need our help. There were no Maine examples to draw from and there were many roadblocks. A public-school guy with a private school. A Department of Education that really didn't know where to "plug in" an "Alternative Private School". This bill will fix that.

One of my biggest beefs, at the time, were the references to "at-risk" students, a term still thrown around to this day, who were funneled to Alternative Programs where they got a watered-down version of what other kids were getting. I know this because I ran one in Caribou and was also the President of The Alternative Association of Maine for a couple of years. There were some good alternative schools because there were some great people working in them, but their frustrations were very similar to mine. Think about it. Students were required to earn the same credits as other students traditionally enrolled but already with a record of unsucess. These programs ensured continued funding for the school but did little to address why students were failing. Smoke breaks and a couple of sofas is not the answer. It wasn't then and it isn't now. Also, my early Boards (of Directors) were lifelong educators and student advocates, and we were quick to discover that many of the students we identifying were the ones that would remain living in the community. Public schools not meeting the needs of the kids most likely to remain living in the community has consequences that go far beyond not finishing high school.

If you were to visit our school with the goal of learning why we are still here after 25 years, I would direct you to a meeting with our students. There, you would learn why our school is important to them, how it is helping them and why they come every day when attendance was always an issue in their previous placement. They will speak of their hopes and dreams and how somebody listened to what they were saying. Don't ask them what their curriculum is. Ask me. I'll sum it up for you: Concepts are bigger than content. We focus on five of them: Self-Esteem, Leadership, Interpersonal Relationships, Resourcefulness and Participation. We reinforce these concepts using Math, English, Social Studies, Science, PE and Health. Additionally, students complete 200 hours of workplace experience, complete community service projects, engage in regular group sessions to share concerns or successes and learn computer applications and Internet safety. All students complete a Senior Project which is often community-based. Every kid is different, and every education plan reflects that.

This is not a funding bill though it looks very much like one on the surface. Our request is to show that there are other of ways to measure success. We can show, with your support, that access to educational services for underserved populations can only improve the record and efficiency of Maine Schools. We are genuine and we are well organized. We have expertise working with our target population. We get results. For 25 years we have successfully met all requirements for Maine Private School Approval. A successful transition from our school, when they are ready, includes entering the workforce or going to school, or both. The funding we are asking for is already being spent with no results when kids are not attending school but remain in public school enrollment, generating funding. We can see when that happen in our NEO account that all schools use for reporting. We are asking for funding that follows the children who need it most and who are in the least position to ask for it. The current funding mechanism is not

working for them and continues to favor the status quo by prioritizing school funding, bloated administrations and well-entrenched systems that are difficult to change or challenge.

This bill is not about public schools, teachers, administrators, and it really isn't about money either. It's about kids. That's it. Ten of them. And it will save money. And they are counting on the adults in this room for help. I believe we have the expertise in Maine to make our schools better, more inclusive, and safer. Right now, that's not where the conversation is headed, and I am concerned for our children and communities.

I hope you will seriously consider LD 420 after reflecting on our presentations and supporting materials.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan D. Morris", written in a cursive style.

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Philosophy - *Social Influence Theory*

Social influence recognizes a change in behavior influenced by one person's interaction with another, intentionally or unintentionally. Our goal is to create a safe place for our students to influence each other positively and to try on new behaviors and address some that have not worked in the past. Our school recognizes that growth takes some risk and inherent with that is failure. All schools have to provide places where it is as safe to fail as it is to succeed and provide the resources for both.

We recognize the diversity of our school population and honor the learning and teaching styles of each member of our community. Their previous experience is our starting point for a new dialogue. Our approach is one of openness where everyone has a voice. It is our belief that participation, in what and how we learn, will affect a positive outcome. We check our egos at the door and get to work on our plan for our future. All of us, staff and students alike.

Curriculum - *Concepts vs. Content*

Learning concepts implies a higher order of thinking measured by application of that learning to multiple situations (Exposure, Assimilation and Application) and utilize content areas to practice and reinforce concept mastery.

- o **Self-Esteem** - How am I feeling about school and what is working?
- o **Leadership** - Am I helping others?
- o **Interpersonal Relationships** - Am I pulling my weight around here?
- o **Resourcefulness** - Does someone have to tell me what to do?
- o **Participation** - Do I do what I say I'm going to do?

Curriculum design is a fluid process depending on student needs and skill levels. We are all responsible for our own learning. We focus on quality of work and do not accept work that is not of the highest quality. We first focus on writing which allows for the most student success by virtue of multiple assignments. This also allows students to learn about each other through editing and helps our students process their own lives in a healthy and supportive way.

Academic requirements are prescribed by law and we add an additional health requirement (1/2), Computer Applications Credit (1), Work Experience (200 hrs.), WACUP Credits (10), a Senior Project (1) and a one year post-graduation plan.

Approach vs Methodology

- celebrate learning when and where it occurs, custom schedules that students plan
- individualized approaches to learning, portfolio presentations and relevant assignments
- parental input for problem solving and school issues, targeted case management
- high expectations for personal and academic growth
- direct your own learning and gauge your own progress, develop graduations plans
- community support from area businesses and other partners
- technology applications, online classes, latest software and web site construction
- WACUP (Willingness to Achieve, Communicate, Understand and Participate) Sessions

Who We Are (Students, Staff and Community)

A common denominator among students that find their way to Carleton Project is that most have not found success in their previous school setting, regardless of the reason. It is our job to help turn that around and celebrate the uniqueness of each of the high school students who have, in some cases, fought very hard for their seat in our school. These seats have value because they can offer a pathway for change instead of punishment for the failure to conform. Their value also has something to do with the success of some of our graduates who have remained living in the surrounding community and continue to support the school. And many graduates who have moved from Aroostook County continue to support or be involved in the school. For many, their experience at Carleton Project was life changing.

Building strong communities, big or small, is important, and both students who are successful in securing a seat at the school and those who work with our students are joining something bigger than themselves. Figuring this out always takes time.....longer for some, less for others. Both require patience. And this includes both students and staff. In both cases, common practices and behaviors will be challenged. While it seems universal that supporting each other will ensure the success of any group in the pursuit of any goals, it is always important to remember that any crack in the armor spreads quickly. In our experience, that crack is ego, however it first presents itself. Honesty, openness, constant participation and an eagerness to succeed reaffirms that we all have work to do we need to do it together. (H.O.P.E)

The population of kids we serve is often referred to, in some school-reform literature, as uncategorized youth, meaning only that they demonstrate the inability to thrive in traditional school settings and do not qualify for Special Education Services under strict federal guidelines. To Carleton Project, they are kids who may present with an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. It may present as an inability to build or maintain relationships with peers and/or teachers. There may be supporting documentation of inappropriate behavior in school or community settings. Students themselves might articulate general unhappiness or even depression and some can even show a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. But one thing we know for sure is that no kids show up thrilled about their previous school placement or with a good plan for successfully completing their high school career. It takes a certain kind of courage to recognize when something isn't working for you and you need a change, and both students and their families must be supported. And participation is always voluntary. We have consistently demonstrated that including all stakeholders in the process means more investment in the outcome.

It seems that high school students come as kids and leave as young adults. This is not a new observation. All graduates from high school should leave fully engaged in the rest of their lives, confident in both their abilities and limitations, secure in their feelings and with a plan for success, however they have chosen to measure it. If you can talk to a current Carleton Project student or any one of our graduates, you can see that they have defined it. They are the experts. We should listen.

What We Do (We are a school not afraid of the hard lessons)

We help each student earn their high school diploma in a relevant and meaningful way that is both participatory and targeted. We honor their previous experiences and look to the future with a clean slate. We acknowledge their special talents. We provide a safe and friendly environment where all students pitch in to help in the ways that they can. We give them the opportunity to acquire both the academic and personal skills to realize their personal goals and become confident in their ongoing understanding of themselves, the important people in their lives and the world around them.

How We Do It (With love and Understanding)

We are caring professionals with an amazing team of certified teachers that put their heads together and meet the needs of each student.

The best way to explain our approach is that we go beyond content learning to teach equally important concepts. In fact, we use content to teach five concepts that we identify, listed below.

Learning any concept has steps. First, a learner needs exposure to the concept before they can, secondly, internalize what it means to them. Finally, they can apply their learning in different situations. This takes a lot of practice in a supportive environment that rewards excellence and supports growth through risk-taking.

Differences in Pedagogy can work together:

Public School Curriculum - Content	Carleton Project Curriculum - Concepts
English	Self-Esteem
Social Studies	Leadership
Science	Interpersonal Relationships
Math	Resourcefulness
Health / Physical Education	Participation

Given the freedom to do it, most teachers could easily design a learning activity from the lists above by picking a concept and a content area. TRY IT!

	ACTIVITY		CONCEPT		CONTENT
	Introduce	O	Self-Esteem		English
X	Teach		Leadership		Social Studies
O	Reinforce		Interpersonal Relationships	X	Science
	Personalize	X	Resourcefulness	O	Math
	Review		Participation		Health /Physical Education

And write your idea below and send it to us! Here's a couple of examples:

X	One way to teach resourcefulness using science might be to showing students found objects that can be used to conduct valid experiments outside of a lab setting.
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O	One way to reinforce self-esteem using math might be as simple as having a student who has mastered a skill be able to teach it to another.
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Here's My Idea!	One way to (Activity) _____ the concept of _____ using content in _____ might be _____.
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SUBMIT

Why these concepts?

Self Esteem: When we learn more about ourselves and what makes us feel good or bad, we learn the same about others. When our feelings are supported by others, we feel better about ourselves. When our failures are not judged and our crazy ideas are encouraged, we know we are not alone. Understanding ourselves never stops. This is universal.

Leadership: When we think about the concept of Leadership, we can all recognize that direction is important. Some people are natural leaders but don't always lead in the right direction. When we learn the concept of Leadership, we also learn how to NOT be led by others and to find our own voice.

Interpersonal Relations: Our behavior has a domino effect. The things we do can have a huge effect on others and we need to get this lesson, even if we learn it the hard way. You are not just a student here. You are a kind, courteous, honest and purposeful member of our school community or you are not.

Resourcefulness: Are you waiting for somebody to tell you what to do? How to do it? When to start? We ask, what do you want to do? How do you want to do it? When do you want to start? Take responsibility for your learning. Find out what you need to do to get your high school diploma. We can help with that. Need to earn credits? We can help with that. Need a schedule that is supportive. We are in! Simply put, you take the first steps, and we supply the support. Success builds more support. Take charge of your life!

Participation: We all participate in many groups. We have peer groups, team members, families, classmates, church groups, bands and others. You have responsibilities to these groups and Carleton is no exception. If you don't show up, you're not getting it. Participation means participating.