

MAINE

For more than a decade parents and educators have tried without success to enact a charter law. While Maine is home to the oldest operating school choice program in the nation, which since 1873 has permitted students in towns without high schools to “tuition out” and attend a private school with publicly allocated school dollars paying the tab, somehow the notion of independent, innovative public schools is too much for the leaders of the Pine Tree State.

The debate over charters has had many momentum swings up and down the field of play. What should be a solid forward pass of a proposal from the House and Senate gets tossed back to committee, is studied and considered, and ultimately fumbled: during the 2006 legislative session, a bill that would have created only a modest charter law failed by only a few votes in both houses of the legislature.

Maine’s most recent special teams coaches, Sen. Carol Weston and Rep. Karl Turner, believe that it’s time for the state to take the ball and run, and for good reason. Despite a fairly homogeneous demographic population and a seemingly higher performing state when it comes to graduation rates and state tests, Maine’s national assessment scores are only on par with other states. Only 34 percent of Maine’s fourth graders were at or above proficient level in math in 2005, and only 25 percent of eighth graders met that mark the same year. Reading at or above proficient is at 27 percent for 4th graders and 34 percent for 8th graders, and the number scoring at advanced levels is a mere 9 percent for 4th graders and 4 percent for 8th graders – all this on what is considered the most valid national test for assessing what students know and should be able to do at various grade levels.

And it’s not for lack of at spending. The state spends approximately \$8,500 on instructional costs; still the four-year graduation rate hovers around 75 percent. Only 70 percent of those students who graduate go onto postsecondary education.

Because charter schools offer a choice to students who may need a different place to reach their potential, and because they are public, they can often solve the problem for families struggling to provide their children with the best education. Some lawmakers in Maine have recognized the progress charters make in other states,



but a combination of union pressure and small town politics, where every recommended change is taken personally in a negative way, has prevented the state from making progress to expand critical options at a time when they are needed the most.

In a state that has a declining population and a net higher education loss each year, charter schools offer a unique stop-gap and potential to reverse the shrinking of Maine's intellectual capital. The most recent legislative attempt gave community colleges authorizing power, a terrific prescription in a state where high schoolers are often discouraged too early. These public entities have an infrastructure and a mission to help students that need additional support but may not be ready or right for four-year higher education. Exposing them to community college support early would increase the likelihood that high school students would go to college and potentially stay in Maine.

Making Maine economically competitive is at the top of the Governor's and the business community's to-do list. Higher education and sustaining a populace are two keys to fulfilling that goal.

Colleges have stepped in to approve and support charter schools in states like Indiana and Michigan, which while they differ in some ways, also share several similarities with Maine's educational and demographic environment. Nearby Rhode Island has a fairly restrictive bill that few would suggest as a model, but with some tenacious civic leaders, 11 highly successful charters have started. In Providence, a town not unlike Portland, charters are giving poor youngsters who have never known the state's maritime industry a glimpse at life in and on the water, as well as providing them technical skills, foundational learning and a hope for their future.

