

Re: LD 307, An Act to Limit the Number of Charter Schools in Maine

From: Sarah Mackenzie

Brunswick, Maine

Harpswell Coastal Academy (HCA)

I am writing in opposition to LD 307, An Act to Limit the Number of Charter Schools in Maine

I am the chair of the Board of Directors of HCA, a charter school in mid-coast Maine in its sixth year of existence. Like all the other charter schools in Maine, it has a particular focus and speaks to a specific kind of student. HCA is a place-based, project-based school focused on teaching students in grades 6-12 about sustainability of the local area they know: the farms and ocean at their doorstep. Our students enjoy the small learning community, experiential learning environment, and opportunities to do field work in the back and front yards of the mid-coast.

Public charter schools provide unique opportunities for students based on the schools' mission and vision. Students who have not succeeded or had their learning challenges met in the schools in their district often find a home in a charter that appeals to their needs, interests, and/or learning styles. As much as we want to believe that public schools can serve all students, we know that some learning situations are better for some students. Charter schools in Maine have shown that to be the case. We have many students at HCA who have found their niche and grown into solid students and young adults with brighter futures than their initial forays into education would have predicted.

Presently there are seven brick and mortar schools located in southern and central Maine. The virtual charter schools reach the entire state, and they educate students who have a variety of needs. It's important, though, that educators and interested others in the rest of the state have the opportunity to explore their students' interests and needs. Just as the founders of the present charter schools developed learning environments that offer alternatives to children, people in other locations of the state should be able to do the same. A cap on the number of charter schools at this point would exacerbate the sense that there are two Maines with markedly different prospects for children.

The Maine Charter School Commission has done a fine job of overseeing the application and implementation process of charter schools. There should be no question that Commission members are fulfilling the requirements for oversight of these unique public schools. The good work of the Commission should continue so that it can vet potential schooling opportunities for the many students who presently do not have access to the learning conditions charter schools can provide.