



**Baxter Academy**  
for Technology and Science

April 8, 2019

**TESTIMONY for the PUBLIC HEARING on L.D. 307**

TO: Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs  
Senator Rebecca Millett, Senate Chair  
Representative Victoria Kornfield, House Chair  
FROM: Kelli Pryor (Windham, Maine), Executive Director  
Baxter Academy for Technology and Science  
RE: OPPOSE L.D. 307

As Executive Director of one of Maine's public charter schools, I oppose a permanent cap on charter schools.

**Charter schools create opportunity.** This opportunity is not exclusive to the students who attend one of the state's charter schools, but is shared by other public schools and by Maine itself. Charter schools are a value-added investment of taxpayer dollars.

Baxter Academy exemplifies the ripple effect of opportunity.

**Baxter's students participate in a student-centered, project-based, real-world STEM model. They learn 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that translate into leadership and entrepreneurial strengths that serve them well as they both enter college and merge directly into the workforce.** A hiring director at one Maine STEM firm toured our school and noted that Baxter seemed to produce a lot of engineers with "personality," by which he meant strong communication skills. He joked that engineers who can communicate are called supervisors. Our graduating classes send as many as 20 percent of graduates into engineering majors. And our alumni tell us, from across various majors, that they are well prepared for the rigor at University of Maine, WPI, Wentworth, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Bates, Cornell, and Yale, as well as many other excellent colleges and universities. More than 50 percent of our students indicate they are headed into highly technical STEM fields. As individuals, their lifetime earning potential will be boosted by as many as seven figures because they have chosen STEM and the work of building our shared future.

**Other schools also participate in the opportunity presented by Baxter.** From the beginning, we have heard from educators in district schools who have counseled students toward Baxter. Often these students have an affinity for STEM, but sometimes they have an active learning style that doesn't fit well in a more traditional setting. The student struggles, and the school struggles to meet the needs. At Baxter, the same student thrives. The option allows the student

to realize potential and it takes the pressure off another school to meet needs it is not set up to address. As an educational model, neither is better; but either might be better for a particular learner. That is why choice matters.

Baxter also serves as a template for other schools who want to learn more about project-based learning. Teachers from Maine schools have visited to study how Flex Friday works. At least one of our sending districts has implemented flex-learning time based on Baxter's Flex Friday, a pillar of our program in which all our students spend 20 percent of the week designing and driving their own yearlong projects. Baxter students themselves lead makers' workshops in local elementary schools and coding workshops in local middle schools.

**Baxter creates yet another kind of opportunity for Maine itself: community building and workforce development.** Baxter brings students together from 66 different towns, many of them rural. This represents a blending of rural and urban students that promotes understanding and helps create a strong community network of resources. These students learn together, not only about STEM but about one another. Baxter Academy was invited into the Seeds of Peace program because Tim Wilson, director of Seeds Maine, identified the school's unique potential for overcoming ingrained cultural barriers.

And the workforce potential is powerful, too. Baxter's strong engineering program, for instance, will help address the growing shortage of engineers, who are aging out of the field at the rate of about 250 per year. Each of those jobs anchors an average of 55 other jobs. Baxter students study engineering from ninth grade and are engaged with engineering firms in Maine through partnerships, mentorships, and internships. These early ties will likely translate into loyalty that keeps Maine's talented young people in the state.

The school itself also draws professionals with children to the state. You'll see that you have testimony from a Baxter parent who moved her family to Maine so that her son would have the chance to attend Baxter.

Enhancing Maine's educational infrastructure through regional charter resources, like Baxter Academy, is a wise use of taxpayer money. The state would benefit from a continued investment in, and broader access to, schools that meet targeted needs. Charter schools support not only individual students but also other schools and the state's future.

Baxter's young robotics team has distinguished itself in global competition, winning all six engineering awards, something only 23 teams, out of almost 4,000 competing worldwide, have ever done. The team just won its sixth district event, a winning streak that spans two seasons. It is number two in New England.

Why wouldn't Maine choose to prioritize opportunity that promotes excellence and develops young leaders with the skills necessary to build a strong shared future? Maine must choose to be progressive about meeting its challenges. Charter schools have proven they belong in the mix.