

State of Maine
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony of Deborah Friedman, Director of Policy and Programs

In Opposition to: L.D. 1736

Resolve, To Create a State-run Virtual Academy Providing Maine Students with Access to Online Learning through Their Existing School Districts (EMERGENCY)

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Sponsored by: Senator Langley of Hancock County

Co-sponsored by Representative Hubbell, Senators Millett and Saviello, and Representatives Daughtry, Johnson, Maker, Nelson and Pouliot

Date: February 4, 2014

Senator Millett, Representative MacDonald, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Deborah Friedman, and I am here today representing the Department of Education speaking in opposition to L.D. 1736 - Resolve, To Create a State-run Virtual Charter Academy Providing Maine Students with Access to Online Learning through Their Existing School Districts (EMERGENCY).

The Department supports student access to online learning, and has worked on efforts in the past to expand that access. This bill, however, is likely to result in less access to online learning. It proposes to have the Department and the Legislature spend 2 years thinking and planning for a potential state-run virtual program, while squelching the very real possibility of access through one or more virtual charter schools that could open as soon as this coming school year, if approved by the Maine Charter School Commission. The moratorium on approval of a virtual charter school would end a 2-year process through which the Maine Charter School Commission has clarified its high expectations for any virtual charter that would open in Maine.

Section 1 of the bill directs the Department to design and establish a state-administered virtual academy to provide all public schools in the State access to online courses. Two models are provided – The Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative and the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (or VLACS) in New Hampshire. These are 2 very different models – both would require state funding ranging from half a million dollars (the Vermont model start-up cost) to \$6.5 million (the fully state-paid cost of the New Hampshire VLACS). Vermont's program is a collaborative – school districts pay a membership fee to join, they provide a teacher for a class in return for 25 seats in courses provided by other teachers. The New Hampshire program is a charter school, paid for by the state. Duplicating either of these models would be a significant undertaking, and would involve a lot of work for a purely speculative project. Given that

funding would be required, there is no assurance that a future Legislature would entertain the proposal. That would leave the moratorium in place, with no authority to create a virtual academy. In fact, this bill would also prohibit local school boards from authorizing a charter school using a blended model, i.e., integrated online and on-site instruction pending the creation of a state-administered academy.

The Department supports the idea of a Maine school collaborative through which Maine teachers and schools offer online courses to students around the State. Legislation is not needed to accomplish the creation of such a collaborative. If schools are interested in pursuing this project, the Department would be happy to provide assistance. However, this would be a locally-driven collaborative, not a state-driven one, since it relies on local participation.

For these reasons, the Department is testifying against L.D. 1736 - Resolve, To Create a State-run Virtual Charter Academy Providing Maine Students with Access to Online Learning through Their Existing School Districts. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have, and I thank you for your time and consideration.