



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Sen. Millett, Rep. MacDonald, and honorable members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I'm Rep. Justin Chenette of the great city of Saco and I am here to testify in support of LD 1056, an act to require local voter approval for charter schools.

This bill simply adds an additional final step in the process for approving a charter school in a particular school district. It requires that any approval of an application to establish a public charter school by the Maine Charter School Commission, does not take effect unless submitted to and approved by the voters in an areawide referendum that includes the entire community proposed to be served by the public charter school, including all municipalities in which the public charter school would be authorized to engage in student recruitment.

The Maine Association for Charter Schools told the Portland Press Herald that this bill would make it almost impossible for charter schools to open.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes referendum as an electoral device by which voters express their wishes regarding government policy or proposed legislation. How is allowing the public, in the district that the charter school will impact, to weigh in on the matter, making it impossible for charter schools to open? Are we worried that the public might not like the idea of a charter school siphoning money away from an already strapped public education system? Or are we just worried that by allowing citizens to vote, we can't sneak in a charter school approval without accountability of the individuals who will end up paying for it?

Let me be clear, this isn't about whether or not you approve or disapprove of charter schools. It has everything to do with local control. If the residents of my district voted to approve a charter school after having been through an approval process by the Charter School Commission, I would welcome that charter school with open arms. At that point I would know without a doubt that it is the will of the people; the taxpayers who are footing the bill for that education; that want this education venture to establish a presence in the community.

The problem is that is not the case. A gang of 7 people can ultimately force a charter school in a community that they have little to no knowledge about.

Maine Charter School Commission Members:

Jana Lapoint, Chair

Falmouth

Dr. Richard Barnes, Vice-chair

Cape Elizabeth

John Bird

Spruce Head

Shelley Reed

Wayne

Heidi Sampson

Alfred

William Shuttleworth

Lincolnville

Ande A. Smith

North Yarmouth

Falmouth, Cape Elizabeth, Spruce Head, Wayne, Alfred, Lincolnville, and North Yarmouth. Pretty sure Saco wasn't mentioned in that list and yet these people can dictate to Saco taxpayers that their hard earned money will be going to a school other than their alma mater, Thornton Academy. And while we are on the topic of town academies, another concern is a lack of awareness of the public-private partnerships that work rather well in many towns and cities across the state.

Below is a list of private schools in Maine:

ELEMENTARY PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN MAINE:

Municipality	ST	Elementary School
Blue Hill	ME	Bay School
South Berwick	ME	Berwick Academy
Norway	ME	Boxberry School
Edgcomb	ME	Center for Teaching and Learning
Nobleboro	ME	Damariscotta Montessori School
Hebron	ME	Hebron Academy
Old Town	ME	Stillwater Montessori School
Saco	ME	Thornton Academy
Portland	ME	Waynflete School
Yarmouth	ME	North Yarmouth Academy

Secondary (9-12) Students Attending Private Schools**SECONDARY PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN MAINE:**

Municipality	ST	Secondary School
South Berwick	ME	Berwick Academy
Blue Hill	ME	Blue Hill Harbor School
Carrabassett Valley	ME	Carrabassett Valley Academy
Camden	ME	The Community School
China	ME	Erskine Academy
Fryeburg	ME	Fryeburg Academy
Blue Hill	ME	George Stevens Academy
Bethel	ME	Gould Academy
Hebron	ME	Hebron Academy
Bath	ME	Hyde School
Bangor	ME	John Baptist Memorial High School
Kents Hill	ME	Kents Hill School
Lea	ME	Lee Academy
Newcastle	ME	Lincoln Academy
Pittsfield	ME	Maine Central Institute
Kennebunk	ME	The New School
Yarmouth	ME	North Yarmouth Academy
Saco	ME	Thornton Academy
East Machias	ME	Washington Academy
Portland	ME	Waynflete School

Thornton Academy for instance has been around since 1811 and serves as Saco's 'public' high school even though its a co-educational private boarding and day school. It is one of the nation's oldest independent schools and one of the oldest public-private partnerships in the country.



I bring this up because out of the 7 members of the Charter School Commission only 1 resides directly in a town that has a private town academy, North Yarmouth Academy to be exact. Granted I'm glad there is one, but as the State Representative for a town academy community, it is deeply troubling that there is only one member that truly understands the public-private partnership dynamic. How do I know as a Saco resident that I'm being adequately represented on the commission prior to the decision being made? One argument would be that the public has adequate participation already. Surely the public hearing is enough.

Below are two samples agendas for two charter school applicants:

January 28, 2013 - Room 400; Cross State Office Building, Augusta

- Fiddlehead School of Arts and Science
 - Interview 9am - 1:00pm
 - Public Hearing 1 - 3pm
 - Written public comments will be accepted no later than 1pm on February 4 by email to the Charter School Commission or by mail to Maine Charter School Commission, 182 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333.
 - Previous meeting held on Sept. 11th, 2012 in Augusta 11:30 - 12:30am

January 18, 2013 - Cundy's Harbor Community Center, 837 Cundy's Harbor Road, Harpswell

- Harpswell Coastal Academy
 - Interview 10am - 12:30pm
 - Public Hearing 1 - 3pm

- Written public comments will be accepted no later than 1pm on January 24 by email to the Charter School Commission or by mail to Maine Charter School Commission, 182 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333.
- Previous meeting

Upon review of these two agendas, you will find that both included a 2 hour public hearing and a few days to submit written testimony afterwards. For Fiddlehead School of Arts and Science, residents had 4 and half business days to submit testimony and for Harpswell Coastal Academy, the public had 3 and a half business days to submit their opinions. A few hours for a meeting during the day when most parents are working and a few days after to either mail in or email responses isn't sufficient when we are talking about educating our kids. This is fundamentally unacceptable. We can do better than that.

Adding a final step of a public referendum, will enable a lively and educational debate surrounding the charter school approval and the type of education a particular community wants and needs. Much like referendums for casinos, school budgets, and political candidates, citizens have months of disseminating information to make an informed choice at the ballot box. If the charter school is in fact going to significantly improve educational outcomes for a select group of students within a district, then let the Maine Association for Charter Schools and the particular charter school applicant authorizer make the case directly to parents throughout an electoral season. I don't see how that is a bad thing. I see that as helping ensure everyone is on the same page and we know what we are paying for. It ensures local control while allowing charter schools to be put on a higher platform by raising the level of discussion and discourse. It could in fact help the cause for charter schools by increasing public participation.

I urge this committee to exact local control of the charter school approval process by supporting LD 1056. I would be happy to answer any questions you have today or that you come up with prior to work session. Thank you for your time.