



G.W. Hinckley

MAINE ACADEMY OF  
NATURAL SCIENCES

Testimony of Glenn Cummings, Ed.D, President and Executive Director,  
Good Will-Hinckley  
Neither for nor against LD 1783

*Resolve, Regarding Legislative Review of Chapter 140: Public Charter Schools, a  
Major Substantive Rule of the Department of Education*

Monday, January 30, 2012

Good afternoon, Senator Langley, Representative Richardson and other distinguished members of the Educational and Cultural Affairs committee, my name is Glenn Cummings, President of Good Will-Hinckley, home of the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, or MeANS.

Thank you to the Committee and the Department of Education for moving forward in a thoughtful and deliberative fashion to expedite the rules regarding public charter schools.

We are proud to be the first high school in Maine that focuses on agriculture, sustainability, forestry, workforce skills training and independent living. We offer a unique high school experience for active, real-world learners, students who – for a variety of reasons – may be struggling in the traditional educational setting. We remain particularly concerned with the 2,000 Maine students each year who leave high school without a degree.

We tailor our program to our students' specific interests, introducing them to careers in farming, forestry, sustainability, alternative energy and other related fields. When we opened our doors in September 2011, we continued the legacy that George Walter Hinckley started in 1889, with a new focus on project-based, theme-oriented, standards based learning that will prepare students to live successful lives as they continue their education and career training.

**In this vein, please allow me to bring up two significant points related to these rules. First, we strongly endorse Commissioner Bowen's request that qualified Charter Schools be allowed to open in 2012. Secondly, we seek rolling admissions for students seeking to enroll in a Charter School, particularly students considered 'at-risk' or in danger of failing or dropping out.**

#### **Issue #1. Charter School start-time**

We hope to become Maine's first charter school. Our organization considers itself prepared to meet the standards and expectations of the Commission's RFP this year, 2012. And we expect others are as well.

We have our first 21 students from across the state; we have teachers, curriculum, some of the best educational leaders in the state, housing and facilities, a long-standing governance structure, deep public, community and business involvement for interns, co-ops and job-shadowing as well

as modest financial resources to help us get started – thanks to you and private foundations and donors. And we still have one of the most beautiful campuses in the state. The doors are open: the classrooms and beds await students from all corners of Maine.

Little will change from 2012 to 2013 for Good Will-Hinckley. We will still have our facilities, endowment, curriculum and students. However, what will change is our ability to provide a brighter future for more Maine students. Between September 2012 and September 2013 another 2,000 students will have dropped out of Maine high schools – something I think we'd all like to prevent. The missed opportunity for these at-risk students could harm them for a lifetime.

Your expedient deliberations and clear directions to the Commission enhance the likelihood of a 2012 start.

### **Issue #2 Admission timelines**

The MeANS program not only focuses on agriculture, sustainability, forestry and independent living. Students who attend Good Will-Hinckley are students at-risk of 'dropping out' of school; some have, in fact, 'dropped out' for periods of time. There are numerous educational and personal barriers to success these students and their families are grappling with. Instituting a restrictive declaration of intent to enroll timeline for these students and their families to decide that they want to attend a charter school creates another barrier between these students and success.

We understand the need for timely and thoughtful budget processes. But let us keep in mind that many districts throughout the state presently budget for 10 (in some cases up to 20) percent fluctuation in student enrollment – particularly districts in low-income areas. By statute, under worst case scenarios, rural schools could only experience 5% losses to Charter Schools and larger schools 10% in one year. In other words, this Committee, wisely, already has built significant safeguards against unmanageability. It's also important to note that, many students who will leave districts for MeANS are, by definition, students who were at high risk of dropping out of school, and may or could therefore be leaving the budget rolls of the district anyway. Flexible charter school rules provide a way to prevent these students from leaving their education uncompleted.

The MeANS program opened its doors this September. Students were still applying and being accepted as late as August. These students want to learn; they need to learn; and they will be provided the appropriate curriculum to suit their learning styles, capabilities, and state expectations. Asking at-risk students and their parents to make a decision 7 months prior to actually attending would have cut out almost one-fifth, or 20 percent, of the students we are serving today. It's not practical and could severely undermine the intention of the law.

*We request that the Education Committee clarify the rules to allow for rolling admissions in the same manner as the University of Maine and Maine Community College System. This is particularly important for schools who are committed to helping struggling students.*

**Joining us today are students who can personally attest to both of these issues.**