

# Bill Lifting Enrollment Cap on Maine's Virtual Charter Schools Slated For Consideration in Legislature Next Year

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By Libby Palanza

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Charter schools may once again be a topic of discussion in Augusta next year.

A bill lifting the enrollment cap on Maine's virtual charter schools — sponsored by Rep. Barbara A. Bagshaw (R-Windham) of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee — was listed among the 60-plus working titles released by the Legislature last week.

This past Friday, the Legislature released its list of bill requests that are slated for screening going into the second regular session, which is scheduled to begin January 3, 2024.

The preliminary list is comprised of each request's working title and sponsor. No additional information is yet available concerning the specific contents of these potential bills.

Despite this, Rep. Bagshaw's intentions for the bill are quite clear from the working title included in Friday's publication — "An Act to Remove the Enrollment Cap on Maine's Virtual Charter Schools."

Maine's two virtual charter schools — Maine's Virtual Academy and Maine Connections Academy — are currently capped at a combined enrollment of 1,000 students.

This restriction was implemented by the State Legislature in 2019 at the same time that they voted to indefinitely institute a measure allowing no more than 10 charter schools to operate in Maine at a given time.

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Out of all Maine's charter schools, Maine's Virtual Academy and Maine Connections Academy have the two largest wait lists for the 2022-23 school year, comprised of 57 and 93 students respectively.

"A strong cap on virtual charter enrollment is not serving students and families," Bagshaw told the Maine Wire.

"Undoubtedly there is a need for workable remote learning solutions. Red tape is keeping many needy students and families out of the mix," Bagshaw said. "This cap hurts students and families who are looking for another option."

"It's a simple fix that will empower parents and students with options for them to achieve a more satisfactory education experience," Bagshaw said.

Of the five bills sponsored by Bagshaw during the first legislative session, four were related to education, and two were specifically aimed at expanding opportunities for educational freedom.

One of the bills — LD 1741 — aimed to address a number of education-related issues, including the restrictions currently in place for charter schools.

In addition to lifting the enrollment cap on virtual charter schools, LD 1741 also sought to remove limitations on the total number of charter schools, as well as expand the list of eligible authorizers to include the University of Southern Maine and certain non-profit organizations.

This bill was ultimately defeated by a party-line roll call vote in the House and a nearly-partisan roll call vote in the Senate, where one Democrat lawmaker — Sen. Mike Tipping (D-Penobscot) joined the Republicans in support of the measure.

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Given the omnibus nature of this bill, it is unclear whether LD 1741 serves as a useful predictor of how Bagshaw's bill — which is significantly more limited in scope — will fare this session should it move forward in the legislative process.

This was the only working title submitted by Bagshaw for consideration going into the legislature's second session in January.

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