

The Past and Present of Customized Learning in Maine

By Amanda Clark, Education Policy Analyst

Introduction

Customized learning is a student-focused system where kids enroll in the curriculum which best meets their educational needs. Customized learning is not new and, in fact, is at the heart of Maine's well-rooted educational history going back to the days of town academies. Unfortunately, this individualized method of education never fully flourished to its full potential where every Maine child could thrive in a customized learning environment.

More than ever, Maine needs creative solutions for today's kids. Maine now faces a "Demographic Winter" where the shrinking number of children threatens the very sustainability of the current population level and economy. As a consequence, falling student enrollments will mean fewer educational opportunities for today's children. Yet, specialized career interests, Gifted and Talented programs, apprenticeship opportunities, foreign language courses and more are all what make individual schools unique—almost as unique as the individual needs of our children.

For the sake of our kids and for the sake of Maine's future, customized learning is the best way to grow our students and our economy. Already a few tentative steps have been taken toward building a greater customized learning environment with the recent introduction of charter schools and online learning. More still needs to be done.

This is the first study of a three-part series examining customized learning in Maine. The second study will highlight successful examples of customized learning in Maine. The third study will lay out a policy roadmap to customized learning for all Maine children.

Early Customized Learning: Town Tuitioning

Throughout the late 1700s and the 1800s, many private institutions of learning, known as Maine's town academies or independent schools, sprouted with various purposes concerned with the needs of children. Some schools were founded on religious grounds, some



Berwick Academy in South Berwick, Maine

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offered comprehensive boarding programs, and even one, the Carrabassett Valley Academy, originated as a tutoring establishment for those training in the arts of winter sports on Sugarloaf Mountain.

Berwick Academy (page 1) was Maine's first academy, founded in 1791, nearly thirty years before Maine became a state. The people of Berwick, York, Kittery, Rollinsford, Portsmouth and Wells got together and financed the founding of Berwick Academy, to educate the "deplorable youth in this part of the country."¹ To give you an idea of Berwick Academy's historical timeline, recall that also in 1791, the United States Bill of Rights was passed, King Louis XVI swore an oath as a "constitutional king" during the French Revolution, and Congress created the United States Mint.

The other eleven academies which continue to serve Maine's students today are:

- Carrabassett Valley Academy (1982)
- Erskine Academy (1883)
- Foxcroft Academy (1823)
- Fryeburg Academy (1792)
- George Stevens Academy (1803)
- Gould Academy (1835)
- Hebron Academy (1804)
- Lee Academy (1845)
- Lincoln Academy (1801)
- North Yarmouth Academy (1814)
- Thornton Academy (1811)
- Washington Academy (1792)

Following an 1873 law which provided for the receipt of state aid by public schools, Maine's legislature mandated in 1903 the local towns' responsibility for the education of their respective residing school-aged kids. Even with state aid, many of the towns, especially those in rural Maine, could not afford to build a local high school. The solution in these situations was the ability for the child's town of residence to send a "tuition" payment with each child to the public or private, religious or non-religious school of his choice. Of course, many of the private schools at that time happened to be town academies. Although many of the academies initially did have religious grounding and affiliations, over time, they secularized their missions. Since 1980, due to a ruling by Maine's highest court, religious schools may no longer obtain public funds.

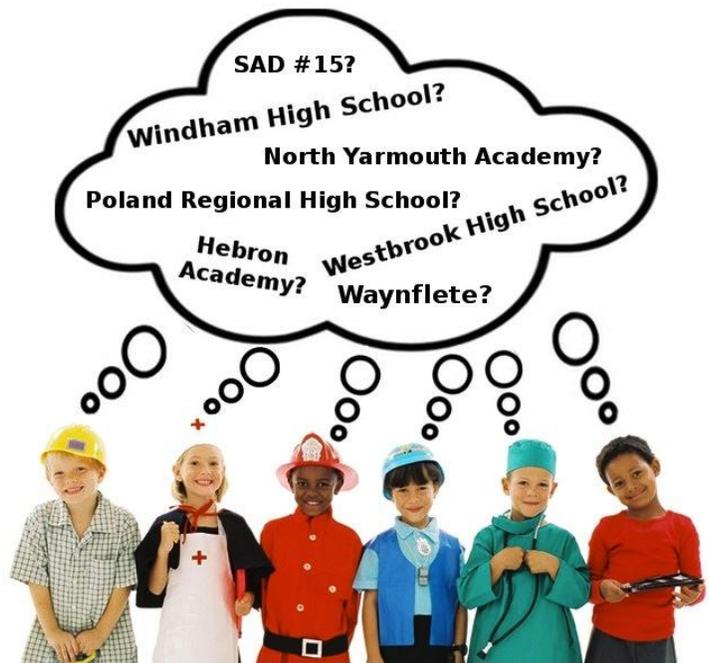
Current Customized Learning: Traditional Public, Private, Charter, Online

Today, Maine's tuitioning system continues. Towns without local public high schools have arrangements that vary in the degree to which they allow customized learning. These agreements range from contracts with a single nearby public or private school (leaving little room for customization per student), all the way to the other end of the spectrum where towns send "tuition" to any school that will accept the funds, in or outside the state of Maine.

Saco, Arundel and Dayton for example do not operate local public high schools. Saco contracted with Thornton Academy in 1889, and its students have enrolled there ever since. Arundel and Dayton also contract with Thornton; Arundel sends their sixth through eighth graders and Dayton sends their high school kids. For ninth through twelfth

grade, Arundel allows its kids customized learning through enrollment at schools including Thornton Academy. Currently, Maine towns “tuition” well over 10,000 students a year to schools outside their residing localities.

The kids to the right, dressed in the uniforms of their respective “grown up” aspirations, for the purposes of this illustration are residents of Raymond, Maine. The town of Raymond has withstood reorganization and consolidation threats to school choice throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Therefore, kids who reside in Raymond are nevertheless privy to the opportunity of seven different schools in Maine. The bubble thoughts are true to their situation today. Their parents are able to offer them a customized education by evaluating a number of school options. All of the schools, by way of their geography, emphasis, tuition, online courses, may have remarkable qualities. However, there’s likely one school that will stand out as the best fit for their child, for the sake of foreign language courses or study abroad programs, their student’s talents or learning disabilities, transportation or ability to walk, career goals or current high school jobs, and more.



More than twenty-five of Maine’s private schools are approved to receive public funds in the form of “tuition” from towns without a local public school. These private schools include L’Ecole Française du Maine in South Freeport, Stillwater Montessori School in Old Town, The New School in Kennebunk, and the Watershed School in Camden. Of course those noted as options in the above thought bubble may also receive public funds.

John Bapst High School (Bangor), ranking first nationwide for the number of its students enrolled in college courses, has a body of which more than sixty percent of its students are tuitioned by towns throughout Maine. At least eleven other private schools collect town tuition for more than sixty percent of their student body.²

Private schools outside of Maine which have been approved for the receipt of tuition payments from Maine’s towns include Montessori High School at University Circle in Cleveland, Ohio, Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and Emma Willard School in Troy, New York. Town tuition payments to these schools may not exceed the cost of education for Maine’s state average public secondary student; that average is \$8,873.46.³

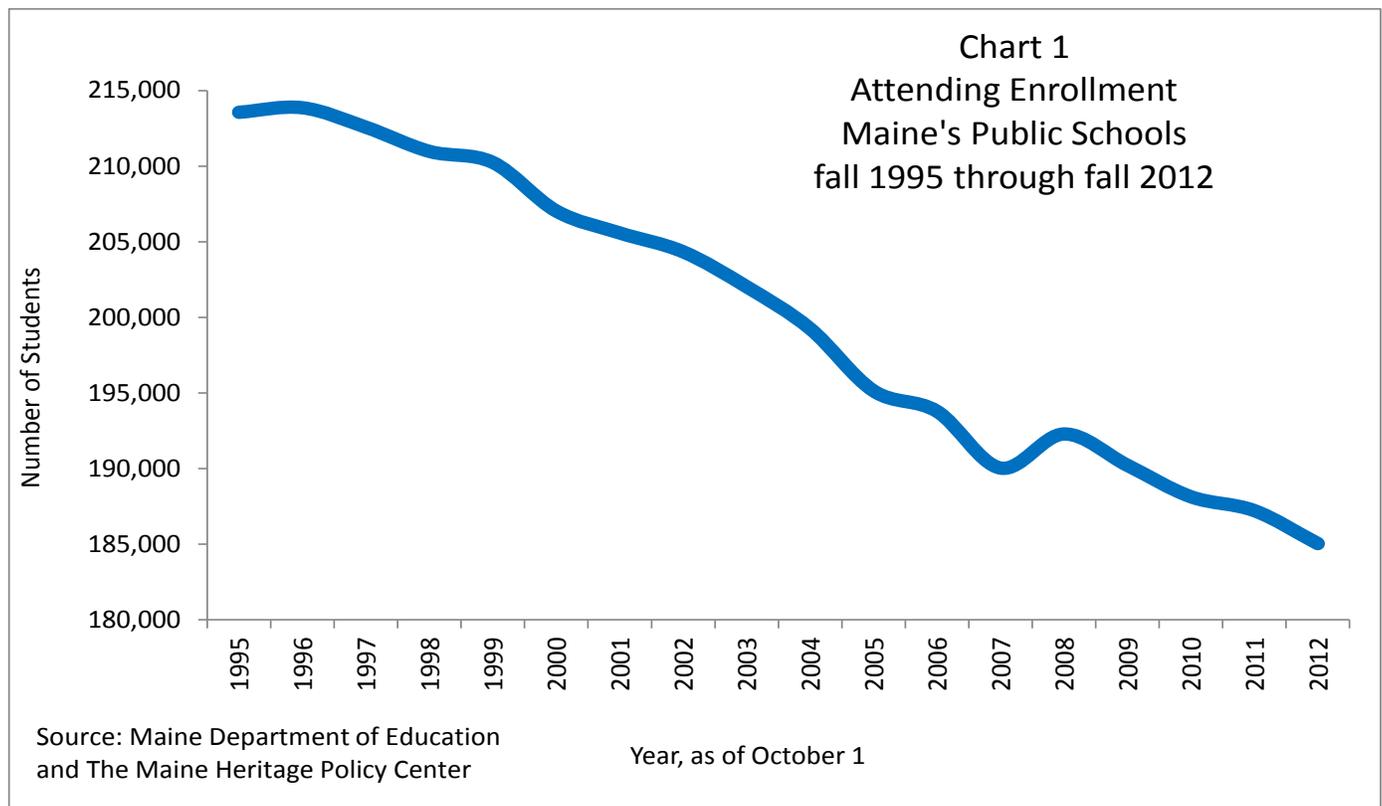
Maine’s newest additions to customized learning are charter schools, also recipients of tuition funds. Maine became the forty-first state to allow for the founding of charter schools when Governor LePage signed L.D. 1553 into law in June of 2011. Although this was a landmark victory for the world of customized learning, we still need to expand the charter school market. Maine’s law allows authorization, given by the Charter School Commission, of ten charter schools within a ten-year span. Local school boards, which are reputedly less apt to push for the founding of neighborhood competition, may authorize an unlimited number of charter schools within that time frame.

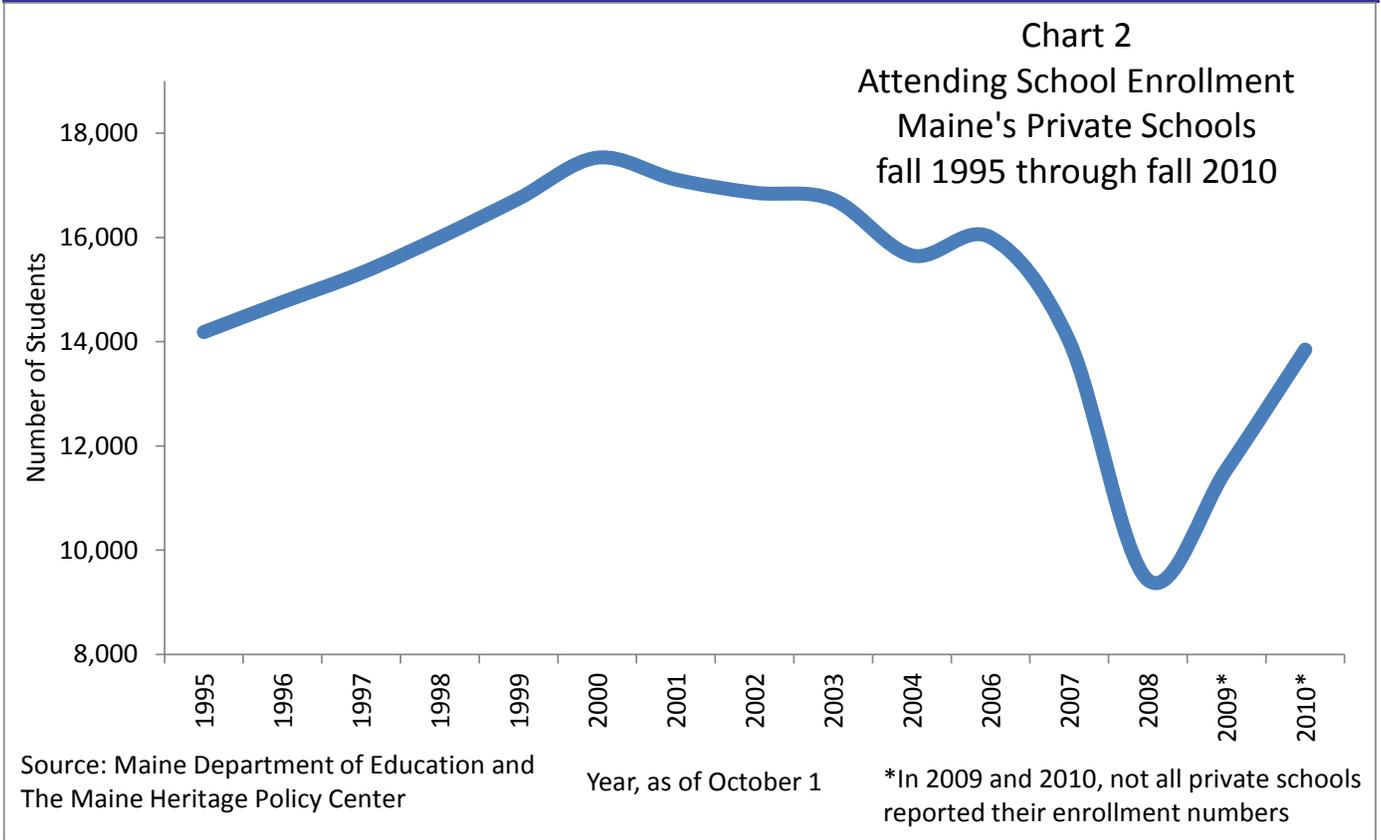
The Commission, composed of seven members (three from the State School Board, and the other four nominated by the original three), was formed in the winter of 2011 and has since approved two schools for operation. Having both opened their doors in 2012, Maine Academy of Natural Sciences (frequently referred to as MeANS) currently serves 46 high school students, and Cornville Regional Charter School has enrolled sixty kindergarten through sixth grade students.

This month, the Charter School Commission received five applications for proposed charter schools, two of which were virtual and had been denied in a review last year but recommended to resubmit come this past review cycle. The Commission approved only one out of the five proposed charter schools to move on with the authorization process; both virtual schools, again, were denied the next step in authorization.

The Commission utterly fails to recognize the inherent accountability system set up within the charter school law. Charter schools are governed by a board independent of the local school system and, of course, rely on the enrollment of parents and students wanting customized learning. The degree to which a charter school does or does not succeed is a direct reflection of the learning experience it offers.

Perhaps the most universal style of customized learning around the world is online learning. Often referred to as “anywhere, any time learning,” online learning is an education model whereby a student completes his coursework through internet-based programs. Of course, this model can take many different shapes. It is possible for a student to enroll in a full-time online learning program which is comprehensive of all the subject matter for his grade level. Or a student may take just one or a handful of courses online while he is enrolled in a traditional brick-and-mortar school.





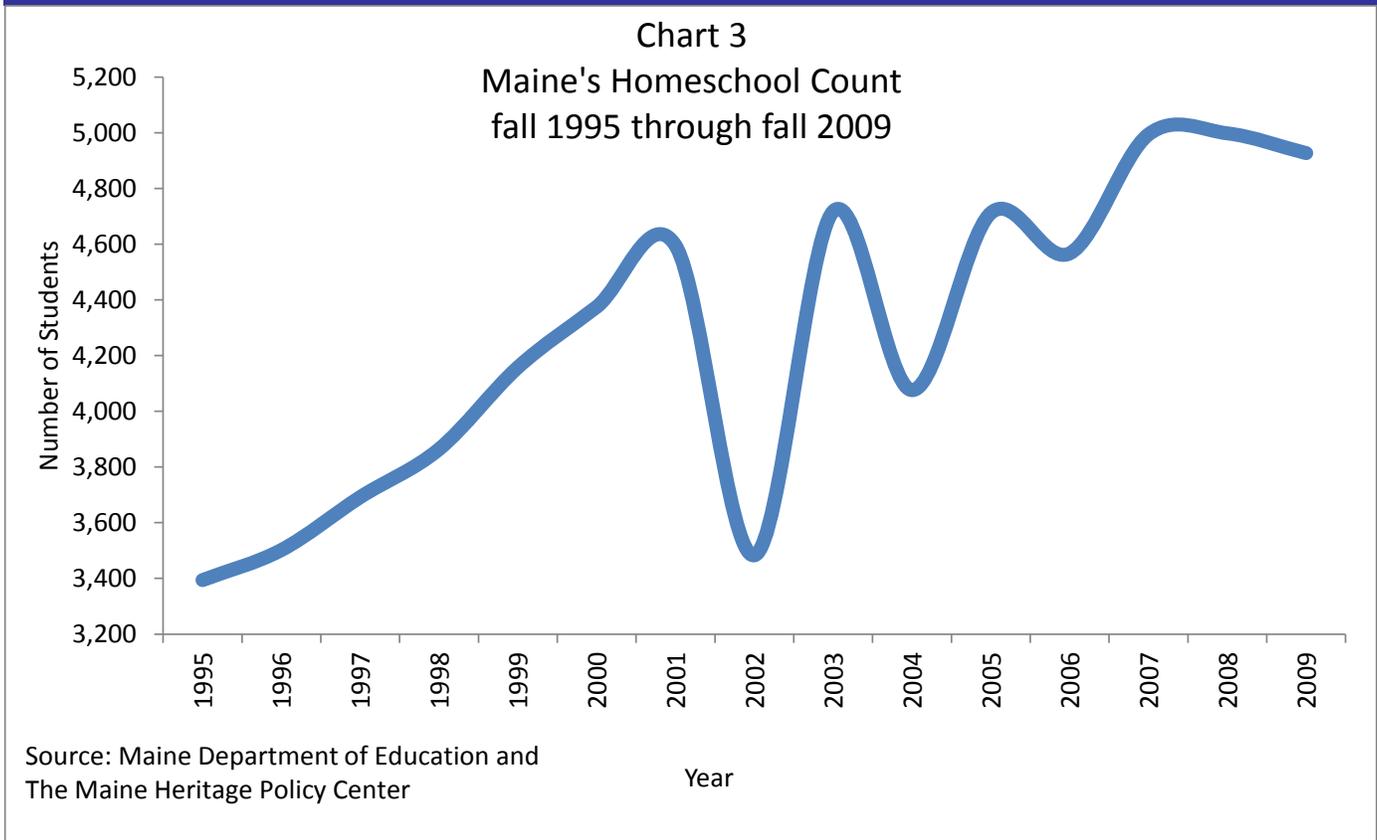
Although Maine’s charter school law does allow provisions for a full time virtual charter school, use of this full-time virtual school model currently exists in Maine only in a home school situation where parents pay for it out of pocket (in addition to their taxes which in part fund the local public school system).

Founded in January 2012, the Maine Virtual Learning Consortium which was established by the Maine International Center for Digital Learning and RSU 19, offers eight courses including Latin, Anatomy and Physiology, and Art History. Schools which choose to participate are called “Partner Schools;” they pay an annual enrollment fee and must contribute two one-semester online courses to be distributed for use throughout the other Consortium Partner Schools.⁴

There are currently seven state-approved online learning providers for Maine. They are Advanced Academics, Apex Learning, Connections Academy, K12, Inc., Lincoln National Academy, PLATO, and Virtual Learning Academy. In recent years, Maine passed a multi-district online learning law by which districts can share online courses and therefore enroll their students in subject areas that they would not otherwise be able to offer due to school finances.

Demand for Customized Learning

Maine’s school enrollment trends, over a stretch of fifteen or more years, reveal to us the desire of parents and students for customized learning. The Maine Department of Education has listed as far back as 1995 the annual attending enrollment for each category of public schools, private schools, and homeschooling. As you can see in Chart 1, the public school enrollment in Maine has declined quite strikingly!



The primary reason behind the decline in public school enrollment is Maine's "Demographic Winter" where Maine's net natural population growth (births minus deaths) is negative.⁵ As a consequence, the younger cohort of Mainers is shrinking and, naturally, that translates into lower school enrollments.

Additionally, the level of private school enrollments and the popularity of homeschooling as depicted in Charts 2 and 3 have eroded public school enrollments. It's safe to say that a large number of parents in Maine are searching for customized learning. Without customized learning available through their town, they are presumably pulling their kids out of the local public school. Parents are then enrolling their kids, at their own personal expense, in various private schools and homeschooling which often cater better toward the unique needs of students.

The volatility shown in Charts 2 and 3 is the result of the most recent recession, which officially ran its course between December 2007 and June 2009 according to the National Bureau of Economic Research⁶. The recession affected all three categories of school enrollment. Public school enrollment experienced a bump up during those years, but that increase was remarkably short-lived. As you can see in Chart 2, private school enrollment took a sharp dip during the recession, and quickly rebounded about the same time that public school enrollment continued to decrease again. Home school enrollment, as shown in Chart 3, has fluctuated throughout the years but, overall, has most certainly climbed. Note also the slight increase during the recession followed by a slight decrease following the recession. We conclude that in hard financial times, some parents were forced to default to the local public school and homeschooling and after getting back up on their feet, re-enrolled their students in the private schools that best met their kids' needs.

Conclusion

Customized learning is nothing new to Maine. The seeds were planted with the founding of Maine's academies and other private schools several hundred years ago. Unfortunately, customized learning has always been limited – offered only to those without a local public or contracted school and to those who are wealthy enough to afford a private school of their choice. Customized learning already exists in Maine – why not allow every Maine kid the opportunity?

Maine's birth rate has been dropping off for years, and we just experienced for the first time a negative birth rate last year in 2012. This same year also marked a negative in-migration rate. Maine is experiencing a "Demographic Winter" with too few young people to support the current population level. Towns must find ways to provide a meaningful education when the traditional brick-and-mortar school model is becoming more difficult to sustain with ever-shrinking student enrollment.

We need creative solutions for today's kids. Specialized career interests, Gifted and Talented programs, apprenticeship opportunities, foreign language courses and more are all what make individual public, private, charter, and online schools unique—almost as unique as the individual needs of our children. For the sake of our kids and for the sake of Maine's future, expanded customized learning, as shown by Maine's own history, is the best way to grow our economy and help our students succeed.

Notes and Sources

¹ Berwick Academy, "History." <http://www.berwickacademy.org/podium/default.aspx?t=112240>

² Maine Department of Education, "John Bapst tops in "challenge index," August 9, 2012. <http://mainedoenews.net/2012/08/09/john-bapst-challenge/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Maine Virtual Learning Consortium, 2012. <https://sites.google.com/a/mevlc.org/mevlc/membership>

⁵ Moody, J. Scott, "The Fiscal Costs of Maine's 'Demographic Winter,'" The Maine Heritage Policy Center, Vol. 10, Issue 5, August 16, 2012. <http://www.mainepolicy.org/2012/08/the-fiscal-costs-of-maines-demographic-winter/>

⁶ National Bureau of Economic Research, "US Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions," September 20, 2010. <http://www.nber.org/cycles.html>

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