

Stevens to Hold School Voucher Hearings, Despite Pulled Resolution

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Casey Kelly/KTOO

Alaska Senate Education Committee Chairman Gary Stevens will hold hearings on school vouchers, even after Senate leaders pulled a resolution dealing with the issue out of his committee.

Senate President Charlie Huggins, a Wasilla Republican, caused a stir last week when he removed Senate Joint Resolution 9 from the Education Committee and referred it to the Judiciary and Finance Committees. The resolution would ask voters to amend Alaska's Constitution to allow public funds to be spent on private or religious schools.

In a Senate floor speech Tuesday, Stevens said he has not encountered a more momentous education issue in his 13 years as a legislator. The Kodiak Republican said the Education Committee does not need specific legislation to consider the merits of vouchers or, as supporters call the issue, "school choice." He promised to have experts from both sides testify before the committee at a series of hearings.

-- (Stevens 1 :06 "Because we have to be ready with information, with facts, with testimony of experts when issues are on the horizon.")

Stevens said he does not like the concept of vouchers because he believes they violate the separation of church and state provisions of the Alaska and U.S. Constitutions.

While Huggins and other Senate Majority leaders claimed the referral change was made because the resolution deals with amending the state constitution, it was widely seen as a move to get the bill in front of a more favorable committee.

However, Stevens said the resolution would not have been held up by the Education panel based on his personal objection.

-- (Stevens 2 :16 "I have never held a bill in a committee I have chaired because I did not like it or simply because I

had the power as the chairman to do that. I made it clear that if the Education Committee had a resolution of any sort, it would be carefully considered and then moved along to the next committee.”)

Stevens joked that he was “Clueless in Kentucky” when Huggins pulled the resolution from his committee. That’s because he was at a Council of State Governments event in Lexington last Friday.

Huggins released a statement Tuesday saying the resolution would be heard in the Education Committee if, quote, “significant education issues arise” in other committees.

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