

Kodiak Delegation Dubious of School Voucher Bill

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

There's been a lot of discussion about school vouchers in the state capitol these days. In mid February Senate Joint Resolution 9 surfaced, which called for a constitutional amendment to be put to Alaska's voters.

The amendment would change the way the state's education system is funded and allow state money to go toward private and religious schools. The resolution was to be heard in the Senate Education Committee, where Kodiak's Senator Gary Stevens serves as Chairman, but was moved to the Senate Judiciary Committee instead. Senate President Charlie Huggins of Wasilla made the decision to move the resolution while Stevens was out of town. Despite that, Stevens has remained very active in the school voucher discussion. In general, he said looking at new ways of educating Alaska's youth is never a bad thing.

-- (School Vouchers 1 :35 “There's been a lot of talk about alternative forms of education. Some of them are really, really good. I mean I look at the charter schools that exist around the state. I had one when Homer was in my district, a really nice charter school there, a small school. And the parents and the kids and the teachers, they all just loved it, and it is a great school. So charter schools are a good approach. The voucher program, though, I have some real concerns about that. Because you know if you look at American education system, what really is one of the greatest things we've done in this country is provide a free education to every child.”)

A lot of the debate surrounding school vouchers spawns from the fact that religious schools would be included in the funding. Stevens said he has respect for those institutions, and said his children attended St. Mary's Catholic School in Kodiak, but noted it might not be the best thing for the state.

-- (School Vouchers 2 :24 “And I certainly, I appreciate people who belong to religions and want some funds to go to their church-supported school. I just think the constitution says that's not a good idea. You know we have a separation of church and state and there's a reason for it being there. The founders wrote it in constitution, it's in the Alaska State Constitution. The only way you can go to a voucher program is to change the state constitution, and I'm just uncomfortable doing that.”)

Kodiak's Representative, Alan Austerman, said he can't get past the religious aspect of the proposal.

-- (School Vouchers 3 :24 “The voucher program itself, I could probably have a better conversation about that if I could set the religious aspect about, but because it's a constitutional amendment, it draws that religious aspect into it and makes it more difficult to have that conversation. And the conversation should be about how we protect our current structure of an education system.”)

Stevens added

that despite allocating funds to the schools, vouchers may not be that beneficial because of the state inspection and control that could follow.

-- (School Vouchers 4 :46 “If I were in charge of a school that was depending on vouchers, I’m not sure that I would want state money coming in. Because that would mean that you could not Prosthelytize, you want your kids to be Catholics or Muslims or whatever you want them to be or what you want to teach them your religion, that’s great, but if the state comes in and gives money the state may say you can’t do that. You know, if you are a Catholic school, you have to accept Muslim kids, and you might not want to do that. You have to accept kids that are special education kids, and I think most private schools are not set up to do that. You have to make sure that you teach to some educational standard, and you have to have teachers that are well qualified. So I’m not sure that that would be the answer for private schools, I’m not sure they want to have that kind of interference by the state.”)

Even if private schools were OK with the state’s involvement, Austerman said he isn’t comfortable sharing funds in part because of recent investments in the state’s public school system.

-- (School Vouchers 5 :36 “We spent hundreds of millions of dollars on infrastructure of high schools and grade schools and elementary schools, and if you start weeding out or pulling out a bunch of students out of those and take them to another private or religious school, and you don’t backfill the amount of money that you just pulled out because you pulled all these students with the voucher program out, what does that do to your stranded infrastructure? It weakens it so bad that I don’t know what would happen, and that’s my concern. If we really have a problem with our current public education system, let’s fix it. Let’s not just weaken it so bad that it falls apart.”)

Both Stevens and Austerman agreed that they aren’t particularly satisfied with the education system in Alaska, and Austerman said he hopes some sort of working group can be created to really go out and pinpoint the problems, draft solutions and get the ball rolling to improve things.

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