

An Update on School Vouchers

We are now over a month into the latest session of our state legislature. It started with the Governor setting his agenda as he delivered the State of the State Address. In his remarks, he challenged the lawmakers to pass legislation that would allow students who choose to attend private schools to receive state money that would otherwise be sent to public schools. That money would instead be sent to the private school to 'assist' in funding tuition or other needs for the student. Proponents of such a practice will link it to various catch phrases about empowerment or school choice but this is more accurately referred to as a voucher.

On Wednesday, March 2nd, I listened to the author of Senate Bill 1647, Senate Pro Tem Greg Treat of Oklahoma City, argue for his bill to the Senate Appropriations Committee. This bill would place public money in the hands of private entities who lack virtually any oversight required of public schools. Yes, he wants to give public money to private schools who in most cases are parochial and in order to do so will take it from public schools. So much for any separation of church and state or for that matter, oversight of public funds. This is as poorly conceived as the charter school debacle that we have watched unfold over the last few years as Epic Charter School funneled tens of millions of public dollars into their private corporation where those dollars became shielded from the public scrutiny that is required of all public schools. The money grab as the bill was originally written would come from across the state through the state funding formula. Essentially, all public schools (even charter schools) would lose funding in order to provide the voucher payments for any and all private school students even if they were attending the private school before and had the means necessary to afford the tuition. This bill is non-selective in which school districts would pay as even school districts without a private school in their community would have funding funneled to private schools who are mostly located in the Oklahoma City and Tulsa metro areas. As you can imagine, it is a tough sell to take money from rural Oklahoma with virtually no private school options and transfer those dollars to schools in Oklahoma, Cleveland and Tulsa Counties. Naturally, this concept met with much opposition from many of the common sense educators who can easily recognize a pig in a poke such as what Senator Treat had proposed.

Let's go back to that March 2nd argument in front of the Appropriations Committee by Senator Treat, arguably one of the three most powerful political figures in state government. Seldom will you see concessions in a bill by someone possessing the power of the Pro Tem. On this day, we saw significant changes when he was afraid the bill would not advance out of committee. His first concession was to remove families choosing to homeschool from receiving the voucher. The original version included those families despite no oversight placed on how their education is administered. His second concession was to place an income ceiling on the eligibility for such a voucher of \$154,000 for a family of four. He mentioned in his remarks that he reluctantly placed this condition in the bill as he wanted it available for all Oklahomans. I guess Senator Treat truly believes someone with an income higher than \$154,000 per year has a financial hardship in choosing to send their children to a private school. His comments also lead me to conclude that he believes rural schools in Oklahoma are more than adequately funded based on his original version of the bill. The next concession was possibly the most troubling in his efforts to move this bill forward. He pledged to replace any money lost by public schools due to the diversion of funds to private schools through this voucher program with other state dollars.

Please keep in mind, the Oklahoma Constitution is very clear that our state will have a balanced budget every year. Yes, that is correct, when the educators and rural lawmakers cried foul, he said ok we will take money from somewhere besides education so we can fund the vouchers. Now funds for ODOT, DHS, Corrections and other state agencies are in jeopardy if this bill advances.

So what does this pay for? The bill, in its current form, would provide \$3,619 of aid for each student in a family of four with an annual income under \$154,000. To provide some perspective, the most expensive private high school tuition in the OKC metro area is Casady at \$23,225 per year. That is followed closely by Heritage Hall at \$22,780. The least expensive in a recent poll was Crossings Christian at \$10,700 annually. Much of the rhetoric around this bill is that it will allow low income families to send their children to a private school. The reality is it will allow low income families in the metro area to send their child to private school if they can find another \$7,081 to \$19,606 per year before fees and associated costs. Additionally, this will not include transportation and private schools are under no obligation to accept entry if the child has special needs. At the same time, it will rob either rural schools or other state agencies of funding and remove those taxpayer funds from public scrutiny.

This legislation has been on life-support since it was introduced. The Speaker of the House, Charles McCall said his chamber will not hear the bill. While that seems to seal the death of SB 1647, the continuous tinkering of the bill by Senator Treat while looking for support reminds me of the Kim Wilde hit from 1986, "You Keep Me Hangin' On". I would love to say this bill is dead but it is truly Hanging On!

If you think this legislation helps Guthrie Public Schools, we probably need to talk. Email me at guthriesupt@guthrieeps.net . Until next time, I'm going to try not to keep you hanging on!

Go Bluejays!!