

Mike Dingman: Vouching for SJR 9

Mike Dingman | Posted: Thursday, February 28, 2013 9:26 am

If you have read the newspapers or watched the news on television in the last couple of weeks, you may be pretty well convinced that the Alaska State Senate is trying to give away education funds in the form of vouchers. Additionally, if those are the news sources where you are getting your information, you may also believe that such an important education decision is going to be made without ever being heard by the Senate Education Committee.

Well, that's not what is happening.

The real story is that Senator Mike Dunleavy (R-Wasilla) has sponsored a resolution that, if passed, would put a constitutional amendment on the ballot for the next state election. The resolution, SJR 9, adds a sentence to the section of the Alaska Constitution that deals with education. The current language reads, "No tax shall be levied, or appropriation of public money made, or public property transferred, nor shall the public credit be used, except for a public purpose."

The resolution would add the following to the end of that sentence: "however, nothing in this section shall prevent payment from public funds for the direct educational benefit of students as provided by law."

The resolution, if passed, would also allow voters to remove one sentence from the Constitution. That sentence says: "No money shall be paid from public funds for the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational system." Voters would be asked in a statewide election whether to make those two changes to the Constitution.

So this is how the process works. First, a constitutional amendment has to pass both houses of the legislature with a two-thirds vote. The measure would then have to be placed on the ballot in a statewide election. If it wins a majority of the votes, the change would be made in the Alaska Constitution. Then, state or local communities would be given the flexibility to incorporate a voucher system to supplement their educational choices. However, the creation of that system would first have to go through the legislative process, similar to the one SJR 9 had to go through.

To imply that the legislature is on the verge of passing a voucher system is false, nothing could be further from the truth. They are simply discussing a legal procedural matter that would allow an amendment to the Alaska Constitution on the general election ballot. This is why they removed the referral to the education committee. While the resolution is about education in a

roundabout way, its passage would have no direct impact on the educational system in Alaska or Alaska's communities in any way.

However, there is another reason why the resolution will not be headed to the education committee that may not be as obvious. The Senate Education Committee is chaired by Senator Gary Stevens (R-Kodiak). Stevens was the Senate president last year when the Senate was run by the "Senate Bipartisan Working Group," which put Democrats and moderate Republicans in control. Last year's election, however, was far more favorable to Republicans and they took charge of the Senate. There is likely a sense amongst the new guard in the Republican-controlled Senate that Stevens could tie up this bill in the Education Committee as a means of retaliation.

The fight between the Senate and the House in the Legislature over the last few years has been epic. It all happened over oil taxes, and with Republican control in both houses after redistricting, the fight over oil taxes will probably come to a conclusion this session.

Parents and students in this state deserve to have more choice in their educational options. No parent should be forced to send their child to a failing school, simply because of where they live. Vouchers are one way that many communities have helped provide this choice. Advocates say a voucher system can improve the budget of the local school district because they generally pay up to 90 percent of what it costs to provide a student an education (depending on the family's income level). This leaves at least 10 percent of the money for that student in the district's budget, without the cost of providing that student an education.

There are better options available, however. The charter and optional school models allow for a great deal of flexibility for parents and students and because charter schools are generally on their own for funding extra-curricular activities, they help save money in the school district budget.

Vouchers may not be the best option for providing school choice, but that is not the debate happening right now in Juneau. While many might think there is more going on in SJ9 than simply a resolution to create a ballot measure, that is all it really is. Let's not put the cart before the horse on this issue—let's be honest about what is actually happening and then the discussion will be fair.

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