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Compass: Lawmakers should be wary of school vouchers

By ANDREW HALCRO March 20, 2013

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As state lawmakers face the reality of declining oil revenues and calls from Alaska's leading economist to spend billions less, one issue under consideration that should be given extensive public vetting is the proposal to fund private and religious schools.

Senate Joint Resolution 9 (SJR9) would amend Alaska's Constitution to allow public dollars to directly fund private and religious schools. Since this is a constitutional amendment, it requires a two-thirds majority of both the House and Senate to be placed on the 2014 ballot, where voters would make the ultimate decision. If approved by the public, lawmakers could begin adopting school voucher programs as early as 2015.

Supporters of SJR9 have long believed that government should use public tax dollars to pay tuition at private and religious schools. With 94 percent of Alaska's children attending public schools, this change would turn public school funding on its head. It would also open the floodgates to the state treasury while setting up cost shifts to local property taxpayers, which is a major concern of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce.

In Alaska, because residents don't pay any personal state taxes, the burden of funding this new entitlement program would fall on current state oil revenues, or shift costs to local property taxpayers. While some supporters of SJR9 have attempted to stifle any discussion on the issue of cost exposure, this should be viewed with suspicion.

A constitutional amendment by its nature demands a higher level of debate and deliberation before it is put before voters. The refusal to send SJR9 to the Senate Education Committee and the effort to restrict legitimate questions about the process should set off alarm bells. Attempts by school voucher advocates to downplay this legislation as just a simple change and nothing to worry about are incredibly disingenuous.

Opening the treasury to fund private and religious schools would come at a time when oil revenues are declining and local property tax payers are contributing almost 50 percent of their annual property tax bill to public schools. In addition, any voucher program would ensure direct access to over \$1 billion in annual state education funding for some of the most well-connected groups in politics.

The political reality is that many private schools are religion-based and the religious community carries significant weight with many lawmakers. If vouchers were approved, advocates would soon push lawmakers for greater tuition allowances. They'd lobby to operate without the same requirements and facilities as public schools. And if there were any objectionable rules, lawmakers would be pressured to issue waivers or exemptions. Just look at history.

In 2006, following a disagreement with Anchorage city officials over tax exempt properties, one religious group flexed their legislative muscle by lobbying state lawmakers to broaden the home property tax exemption to include religious school teachers. As a result, Anchorage property taxpayers were forced to absorb the cost shifts. With a state-sanctioned voucher program, increased cost shifts to local property tax payers will be inevitable.

More importantly, the proposed constitutional amendment is so vague and broadly written it could eventually be interpreted to mean any type of private school funding. The proposed amendment to Alaska's constitution simply states "nothing in this section shall prevent payment from public funds for the direct educational benefit of students as provided by law."

From a fiscal standpoint, this arguably will mean that public funds can be used to directly build private schools, directly pay for private student transportation or any other "direct educational benefit of students." In 2015 we're funding private school tuitions, in 2016 we're funding private school improvements.

To a former lawmaker who served with some voucher advocates still in the Legislature, these attempts to mask the true end game of SJR9 are simply dishonest. At the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce, one of our legislative priorities is fiscally responsible and sustainable budgeting. Given the current condition of state finances and the specter of structural budget deficits, lawmakers should stop and think about the full ramifications of this amendment before unlocking the doors to the treasury with SJR9.

Andrew Halcro is the president of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce and served as a Republican in the Alaska State House of Representatives from 1998 to 2002.

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