

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
February 28, 2012
4:05 p.m.

4:05:55 PM

CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Stoltze called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 4:05 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Bill Stoltze, Co-Chair
Representative Bill Thomas Jr., Co-Chair
Representative Anna Fairclough, Vice-Chair
Representative Mia Costello
Representative Mike Doogan
Representative Bryce Edgmon
Representative Les Gara
Representative David Guttenberg
Representative Reggie Joule
Representative Mark Neuman
Representative Tammie Wilson

MEMBERS ABSENT

None

ALSO PRESENT

Neil Denny, Kenai Peninsula School District, Kenai; John Alcantra, National Education Association-Alaska (NEA-Alaska), Mat-Su; Mari Torgerson, Fairbanks Northstar Borough School District, Fairbanks; Bishop Edward Burns, Diocese of Juneau and Southeast Alaska, Juneau; Valerie Kneffel, Teacher, Bethel; Reverend Pat Travers, Priest, Catholic Diocese of Juneau; Bruce Johnson, Executive Director, Alaska Council of School Administrators, Juneau; Mukhya Khalsa, Self, Juneau; Representative Wes Keller, Sponsor; Representative Alan Austerman.

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Tom Fink, Self, Anchorage; Debbie Joslin, Self, Delta Junction; Bob Griffin, Self, Eagle River; Amy Robertson,

Self, Anchorage; Allison Smith, Self, Anchorage; Katherine Hicks, Self, Anchorage; David Boyle, Self, Anchorage; Bethany Marcum, Self, Anchorage; Duane Moran, President, Anchorage Council of Education Alaska Public Employees Association, Anchorage; Allen Hippler, Self, Anchorage; Lon Garrison, President, Association of Alaska School Boards, Sitka; LeDawn Druce, President, Kenai Public Education Association, Soldotna; Erick Cordero, Self, Mat-Su; Sarah Welton, Palmer Church of the Covenant, Professor Mat-Su College, Mat-Su; James Johnson, Self, Soldotna; William Stannell, Self, Anchorage; Joshua Decker, Self, Anchorage; Pete Hoepfner, President, Cordova Schools Board Member; Geneva Columbus, Self, Anchorage; Jill Showman, MSEA, Wasilla; Nate Davis, Self, Anchorage; Anand Dubey, Self, Anchorage; Rose Nelson, Self, Anchorage; Karen McGahan, Self, Nikiski; Dr. Jess Ellis, Self, Anchorage; Eulalia Bunn, Self, Anchorage; Tony Jackson, Self, Nikiski; Marilyn Davidson, Assistant Superintendent, Kodiak School District; Matthew Larkin, Self, Anchorage; Glen Biegel, Self, Anchorage; Richard Koller, Self, Anchorage; Tammy Smith, President, Fairbanks Education Association; Matt Johnson, Self, Chugiak.

SUMMARY

HJR 16 CONST. AM: EDUCATION FUNDING

HJR 16 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

#hjr16

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 16

Proposing amendments to the Constitution of the State of Alaska relating to state aid for education.

[4:07:11 PM](#)

Co-Chair Stoltze remarked that he would invite the testifiers from the previous meeting to speak first.

[4:08:43 PM](#)

TOM FINK, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of HJR 16. He stressed that the amendment was critical to broadening education opportunities across the state. He stressed that thirteen states had passed similar

amendments in the prior year. He felt that competitive systems were better than monopolies. He stressed that children had a free education if they attended public schools. He remarked that parents should be allowed to choose the right school for their children, and the money should be made available. He pointed out that education budgets had not been reduced in the states that had passed similar legislation.

[4:12:39 PM](#)

Representative Doogan queried the source of the poll that stated that 64 percent of parents preferred to send their children to private school.

Co-Chair Stoltze stated that the question would be addressed later.

[4:14:06 PM](#)

DEBBIE JOSLIN, SELF, DELTA JUNCTION (via teleconference), testified in support of HJR 16. She explained that her children were home schooled and she received no funding from the state. She explained that she used Christian curriculum to teach her children. She remarked that her son was excelling in college, and her daughter had received a scholarship. She stressed that her children were given an education with a Christian curriculum and believed they were socially adjusted and received good grades.

[4:17:42 PM](#)

NEIL DENNY, KENAI PENINSULA SCHOOL DISTRICT, KENAI, testified against HJR 16. He explained that he worked with the Connections Program to packet programs for home schooling. He felt that the home schools were not required to meet the same standards as the public schools. He explained that the Connections Program had a 48 percent graduation rate. He felt that there was no accountability in the home school programs.

[4:22:08 PM](#)

Representative Wilson stressed that over half of the public schools in Alaska did not meet the AYP [Annual Yearly Progress] standards. Mr. Denny responded that there were 975 students enrolled in the Connections and home school

programs. The students rotated from the private system to public system and were a severe drain on AYP because they were well below grade level. He noted that for the first year the Kenai Peninsula School District had not met AYP. He opined that any schools would meet AYP in 2014.

Representative Wilson pointed out that it was not a competition between home schools and public schools. The bill was about offering voters the choice to decide whether it was time for an amendment to the Alaska Constitution. She acknowledged a slight sensitivity on the issue as she had home schooled her children.

Representative Doogan wondered what AYP meant. Representative Wilson replied that AYP stood for Annual Yearly Progress.

[4:25:33 PM](#)

JOHN ALCANTRA, NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION-ALASKA (NEA-ALASKA), MAT-SU, testified against HJR 16. He felt that his children had many options for education in the Matanuska Susitna Valley. He stressed that NEA-Alaska "fiercely" opposed HJR 16.

[4:29:20 PM](#)

MARI TORGERSON, FAIRBANKS NORTHSTAR BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, FAIRBANKS, spoke in opposition to HJR 16. She explained that she had four children and taught elementary school for many years. She relayed that she took great pride in Alaskan children. She stressed that public schools provided highly qualified teachers, which may not be the case in the schools that accept vouchers. She communicated that most private schools did not require their teachers to be licensed. She commented that there was a small sector of school (typically special education sections of schools) that was not meeting AYP requirements. She stressed that the home schooled students should be tested in the same way that public school students were. She felt that the resolution might promote segregation. She feared that vouchers would "lower the bar."

[4:33:39 PM](#)

BISHOP EDWARD BURNS, DIOCESE OF JUNEAU AND SOUTHEAST ALASKA, JUNEAU, vocalized support for HJR 16. He stressed

that he was not testifying to judge any group. He felt that parents should be given a choice in how their children were educated. He stressed that there was a desire to provide what the parents felt was best for their own children. He believed that education options were only provided to those who could afford it financially.

[4:37:56 PM](#)

Representative Doogan stated that he was a Roman Catholic and that his parents had paid for his religious education. He stressed that parents should be financially responsible if they wanted their children to receive a religious education; he explained that was the difference between the parochial schools and the public education system.

Bishop Burns agreed that religious education required sacrifice. He stressed that some parents were not able to provide a religious education because they could not afford it.

Representative Doogan stressed that Bishop Burns' perspective was unconvincing.

Co-Chair Stoltze remarked that others would be commenting on that same topic. Bishop Burns replied that parents should be allowed the opportunity to choose their children's education.

[4:42:28 PM](#)

BOB GRIFFIN, SELF, EAGLE RIVER (via teleconference), testified in favor of HJR 16. He stressed that many school choices were given to upper class parents. He felt that competition was essential in every system. He explained that 38 states had adopted similar resolutions for school choice.

[4:47:51 PM](#)

AMY ROBERTSON, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of HJR 16. She stated that she had children who were attending private schools and charter schools. She stated that her daughter was at the bottom of the waiting list at a charter school and was unable to attend the school. She mentioned that children with special needs would not be left behind. She felt that the religious

schools in the state would help special needs students if the need existed. She explained that she could afford to send her children to private schools, but some parents could not. She shared that her daughter had attended a public school and she felt that the school had focused money in the wrong areas.

[4:51:54 PM](#)

ALLISON SMITH, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of HJR 16. She stressed that parental choice was an essential step in solving Alaska's education problem. She felt that public schools did not provide enough options for parents. She felt that parents should be allowed access to the classrooms. She believed there were many statistics pointing to the failures of public schools. She stressed that competition was essential to boosting the success of public schools.

[4:56:07 PM](#)

KATHERINE HICKS, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), voiced support for the legislation. She believed that school choice was a fundamental civil right. She opined that many ABC schools were better disciplined and organized.

[4:58:23 PM](#)

DAVID BOYLE, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), supported the bill. He told a personal story and believed the Alaskan school system was broken. He opined that public schools had a monopoly that was not responding to the customer demand. He noted that poorer students suffered because their families could not afford to send them to private schools. He stressed that with school choice better schools will be formed.

[5:01:55 PM](#)

BETHANY MARCUM, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), voiced her support for the bill. She hoped the question of school choice will be on the ballot for the people to vote on it. She expressed that the role of legislature is not to do what they think best, but what the people want. She did not want to be denied the right to do what the people want.

5:03:23 PM

DUANE MORAN, PRESIDENT, ANCHORAGE COUNCIL OF EDUCATION ALASKA PUBLIC EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified against supporting the bill. He indicated the mixed results in other state's decisions to fund private education. He emphasized that private schools choose the students they want, not the parents. He said that logistics and transportation is a challenge in Anchorage with the accompanying cost. He acknowledged that there were choices for students in Anchorage. He questioned the transparency and accountability for public funds.

5:05:49 PM

ALLEN HIPPLER, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), supported the bill. He believed that competition was needed with schools. He believed that the people of Alaska should determine if they would be better served by a modification to the Alaska Constitution in allowing public funding to private schools.

5:06:48 PM

VALERIE KNEFFEL, TEACHER, BETHEL, testified against the bill. She voiced her concern on how the voucher system would work in rural villages. She mentioned that some classes only had five students and wondered how the voucher system would be offered there. She was also concerned on how the voucher system would serve the all the students. She added that the voucher system could leave some students behind. She believed there can be situations in the home that may not make it possible for the parent to be the best teacher to her children. She wondered how voucher schools will be held accountable.

5:11:16 PM

REVEREND PAT TRAVERS, PRIEST, CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF JUNEAU, testified in support of the bill. He believed that the voucher system could keep those that might otherwise fall through the cracks in public education. He signified that he did not want the public schools to wither. Many parents who might want to send their children to catholic schools may not be able to afford it, but could if there was voucher money available.

[5:15:25 PM](#)

LON GARRISON, PRESIDENT, ASSOCIATION OF ALASKA SCHOOL BOARDS, SITKA (via teleconference), testified against the bill for himself and read a statement from Carl Rose, Alaska Association of Alaska School Boards. He did not approve of public funds going to private education. He noted that the voucher system drains scarce resources from public classrooms. He noted that taxes could rise to cover the voucher system in funding both private and public schools. A public education is free. He suggested that providing all Alaskans with a voucher for fuel or electrical use would be using public wealth to help far more people.

[5:19:07 PM](#)

LEDAWN DRUCE, PRESIDENT, KENAI PUBLIC EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, SOLDOTNA (via teleconference), testified against the bill. She stressed that public schools in Alaska are not failing. She believed that comparison from test scores failures does not work. The Kenai has a lot of choices that are free and within the public system. She disagreed with the idea that the public schools need more competition. She believed that the argument of running schools like a business model does not work.

[5:23:12 PM](#)

ERICK CORDERO, SELF, MAT-SU (via teleconference), voiced his support for the bill. He believed in giving parents a choice on how their children are educated. He disclosed personal research on voucher education choice in countries like Chile, Sweden and New Zealand. He believed there could be an Alaskan way that works for the people. He was supportive of public education as well as private choices.

[5:25:24 PM](#)

SARAH WELTON, PALMER CHURCH OF THE COVENANT, PROFESSOR MAT-SU COLLEGE, MAT-SU (via teleconference), testified against the bill. She did not believe in mixing religion with public funds. She stressed this was another way to fund religion. She pointed out sources that attest to the quality of public schools. The use of public money for private schools goes against her religion on the separation of church and state. The funds will be used to supplant the

money private organizations already have. She attested that resinous schools will be promoting their faith with public funds. She noted that taking away dollars from public schools increases class size as resources are drained.

[5:29:51 PM](#)

JAMES JOHNSON, SELF, SOLDOTNA (via teleconference), testified in support of the bill. He did not understand all the ramifications of the amendment. He believed that public funds should go wherever the parent wants them to go. He did not believe the public should have to pay twice to educate their children. He spoke of using allotment money in home schooling his own children, but also used their own funds. He indicated that competition is what makes America great.

[5:34:29 PM](#)

WILLIAM STANNELL, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified against the bill. He noted that there are already choices available for students in Alaska. He does not expect the government to give financial handouts to parents who want their children to go to private schools. He believed public schools are doing well. He pointed out that parents seem to be expecting handouts from the government. He stressed that he did not want the government involved in his children's religious education. There are poorly run private and religious schools asking for money under the banner of school choice because they cannot manage their own resources.

[5:37:58 PM](#)

JOSHUA DECKER, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified against the bill. He did not believe that public money should go to religious schools. He communicated his belief that there could be open discrimination in private schools. The framers of the Alaska Constitution assured the people that there would be a strong public education system, not a private education.

Representative Wilson asked where his children were educated. Mr. Decker responded that he did not have children.

[5:43:49 PM](#)

BRUCE JOHNSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA COUNCIL OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, JUNEAU, testified against the bill. He supported public funded education for all the children of Alaska. The ACSA organization fosters choice within the public school setting where access and accountability is available to any family. He respected family's choices to choose a private education for their children, however once a program accepts public funds all schools must be held to fair and non-discriminatory admission policies and accountability measures. He noted that there must be equitable rules for all private schools if they accept public funds.

[5:47:18 PM](#)

MUKHYA KHALSA, SELF, JUNEAU, testified against the bill. She made the decision to send her children to a private school, but did not expect the government to pay it. She did not believe public funds should go to pay for her children's religious education. She was concerned that children who might have special needs could be left behind if money leaves the public school sector. She was also concerned that some private school curriculums would not meet the needs of children. She cited the lack of good science education, especially in some fundamentalist Christian religious schools.

[5:50:26 PM](#)

PETE HOEPFNER, PRESIDENT, CORDOVA SCHOOLS BOARD MEMBER (via teleconference), spoke in opposition of the bill. He believed rewording the constitution will not be fair. There can be discrimination in admissions and non-accountability in their standards. He noted that the legislature is demanding accountability in public school who will not receive any funding if they don't comply. He did not see these accountability requirements in private schools. He also noted that public schools must have 10 to be a school, but there is no number limit for private schools.

[5:53:01 PM](#)

Representative Doogan asked Mayor Tom Fink of Anchorage about the source that indicated that 62 percent of the population approved of using public money for private schools. Mayor Fink responded that Bron Research

interviewed 1006 people in September 2011. He mentioned a website AKChoice.org has the complete information. He said that the percentage who approved was 64 percent.

[5:55:13 PM](#)

GENEVA COLUMBUS, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of the bill. She believed there should be a general vote by the population of Alaska on the bill. She believed that competition would provide a jolt to the education system.

[5:57:20 PM](#)

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RECONVENED

[6:30:34 PM](#)

JILL SHOWMAN, MSEA, WASILLA (via teleconference), spoke in opposition of the bill. She believed the language should reflect all of Alaska

[6:31:45 PM](#)

AT EASE

[6:33:15 PM](#)

RECONVENED

[6:33:15 PM](#)

NATE DAVIS, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), testified in support of the legislation. He stated that accountability was an important issue with respect to private schools and said that the state could address that aspect. He offered that the state was already funding and promoting religious experiences for children through school teachers' opinions and views, interpretation of literary documents, interpretation of history, and private counseling. He urged the importance of giving parents a choice of where and how to educate their children and stated that the only people who currently could choose were people with money. He wondered why the state funded religious postsecondary education, but was hesitant to do so below grade 12; under the bill, the state would be funding all religions and not a particular one. He

indicated that there was a fear that public schools would close as a result of the legislation, but stated that the competitive market would help the school system. He concluded that he believed in funding with no strings attached, other than reasonable accountability standards.

6:38:33 PM

ANAND DUBEY, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of the initiative and stated that he had a three and a half year old daughter, who was trilingual, attending a Montessori school. He asserted that choice and competition were what had made America great and if the bill was not passed it would only reinforce a bureaucracy with no competition.

6:40:08 PM

ROSE NELSON, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), expressed support for the bill and stated that she had three children attending charter schools in Anchorage. She remarked that it had taken three years on a waiting list to get her son into the charter school that he was currently attending. She declared that charter schools provided a better education; children who attended them learned better and were more respectful. She related a story about how the charter school system was started in Louisiana and how it improved the education in that state. She stated that more of the funding for education needed to go directly to the children and that less should go to the unions.

6:44:38 PM

KAREN MCGAHAN, SELF, NIKISKI (via teleconference), spoke in favor of the resolution and stated that she had put four children through private schools, while paying taxes to the public school system. She noted that throwing more money into the education system did not mean a better education and concluded that the legislation would create competition, which would result in better schools.

6:46:15 PM

Co-Chair Stoltze stated that committee would stand at ease for the next 15 minutes in order to see if more testifiers signed at various LIO's across the state. He observed that the committee had publicly announced that it would take new

testimony until 7 p.m. and declared that he would like to honor that.

[6:46:40 PM](#)

AT EASE

[6:55:43 PM](#)

RECONVENED

DR. JESS ELLIS, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in support of the legislation and related the importance of a good education. He thought that bill should pass because sometimes the best education available was offered by church related institutions; it was unfair to say that a student could not get an education at a religious institution because it would be a benefit to the church. He stated that passing the legislation was an important step toward getting people the education they wanted and stressed the importance of the right of parents to choose the best education for their children. He added that that the resolution would greatly benefit the minority community.

[7:01:03 PM](#)

EULALIA BUNN, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), expressed her support of the resolution and stated that she had a daughter in the charter school system. She was dissatisfied with the options available in the public system and was shocked at how difficult and lengthy the process was to get her child into an alternative school. In conclusion, she shared that there were a lot of parents in the state that felt the same way.

[7:03:17 PM](#)

TONY JACKSON, SELF, NIKISKI (via teleconference), testified in support of the legislation and related that he had a unique perspective because he had been educated in the public school system, paid for his own private postsecondary education, and had taught in both the public and private schools systems; furthermore, his wife homeschooled their own children. He strongly believed that education was the parent's responsibility and that the legislation would give parents more control in finding an education that best suited their own needs.

7:05:27 PM

MARILYN DAVIDSON, ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT, KODIAK SCHOOL DISTRICT (via teleconference), spoke in opposition to the bill and declared that her education experience also encompassed both private and public schools. She stated that public schools had been built around equal opportunity, had high standards, and were held to the idea of equity. Public schools were for everyone and could not serve specific populations to the exclusion of others. She stated that a teacher could lose their license if they taught a personal point of view or preferred one ideology over another. She spoke about the high accountability applied to the public schools system and stated that accountability was much lower in private schools. She urged that if the initiative were passed, the same requirements on public schools would have to be placed on private schools and concluded that the bill would siphon money away from an already struggling public school system.

7:09:17 PM

MATTHEW LARKIN, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in favor of the bill and stated that he was parent of two who wanted the best education for his children. He spoke about Anchorage's poor education track record and expressed his frustration at the rigorous process involved with getting children into alternative schools. He believed that Alaskans would overwhelmingly support the initiative if it was brought before the voters.

7:10:52 PM

GLEN BIEGEL, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in favor of the legislation and responded to comments made by Marilyn Davidson. He refuted the argument that the bill would destroy public schools and would leave people with disabilities or special needs without options. He furthered that there was no scenario where public schools would go away. He also refuted the idea that every school, regardless its type, should have the "\$75,000 or so" that it took to care for a special needs student; if that was true, there was no solution because not every school could be that highly specialized. He clarified that Marilyn Davidson's suggestion that every school should mimic the public school was a "design for failure." He related that people with money were able to put their children into

schools of choice, but that poor children were the ones who were left out and forgotten. He stated having access to choice in education had proven effective in virtually every system it was tried in and urged the need for access to schools that reflected your own values. He concluded by saying that no amount of competition would eliminate the need for public schools.

[7:14:54 PM](#)

Representative Gara stated that he appreciated Mr. Biegel's testimony, but noted that Ms. Davidson did not have the chance to respond to his comments; furthermore, he did not believe that Ms. Davidson's views were fully or accurately reflected by the testimony of Mr. Biegel.

Mr. Biegel interjected that Ms. Davidson's primary point did not allow people to innovate. He also did not agree with her view of the greater good. He stated that he would like to have a debate to further understand why Ms. Davidson had objections to having different services provided in different schools.

Representative Gara clarified that he certainly wanted to hear public testimony, but that his point was that "going after" the comments of previous testifiers was not fair practice.

Co-Chair Stoltze acknowledged that there had been prior discussion between testifiers.

[7:17:16 PM](#)

RICHARD KOLLER, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in favor of the bill and stated he would like to associate his remarks with the testimony of Mr. Biegel. He stated that he did not agree with the argument against school choice and that increased competition would not harm schools. He concluded that he believed every Alaskan should have the right to choose where they would attend school, rather than being assigned to an institution based on their zip code.

[7:19:26 PM](#)

TAMMY SMITH, PRESIDENT, FAIRBANKS EDUCATION ASSOCIATION (via teleconference), expressed the Association's

opposition to the bill and stated that public money should go to public education. She related that people had many opportunities to receive a good education and that private schools were exclusionary, while public schools were designed for everyone. She furthered that parents should have a choice, but that public allocations should go directly to public education. She urged that it would hurt the public school system to take money away from it; furthermore, as a tax payer, she wanted public money to go towards public facilities. In conclusion, she related that the bill would leave out students from many different kinds of backgrounds.

[7:24:15 PM](#)

MATT JOHNSON, SELF, CHUGIAK (via teleconference), spoke in strong support of the legislation and stated that competition was good for everyone.

HJR 16 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

[7:26:04 PM](#)

Co-Chair Stoltze thanked the testifiers, committee members, and Representative Keller for their time and discussed the agenda for the following meeting.

#

ADJOURNMENT

[7:26:49 PM](#)

The meeting was adjourned at 7:26 PM.