

JUNEAU -- The assertion by state Senate leaders that the proposed school-choice constitutional amendment isn't an education bill continues to be a hard sell, with members of their majority coalition saying that not enough is known about the amendment to get their vote.

As the legislative session moves into its final two months, at least two Republican senators, Gary Stevens of Kodiak and Click Bishop of Fairbanks, say they wish the Senate had done more to explore what the amendment would do to public schools.

The amendment is so complex, Bishop said earlier this week, that not enough time remains for an adequate airing, especially with the Legislature's focus on big issues like the proposed gas pipeline.

The amendment would allow public funds in the form of vouchers to be spent by parents at private and religious schools. One of the themes cited by critics at public hearings last week concerned the notion that the amendment wasn't about education.

With two-thirds of the Senate needed to pass an amendment, the votes of Stevens and Bishop would be critical. Two other Republican senators, Bert Stedman of Sitka and Peter Micciche of Soldotna, said they have not yet made up their minds on the measure.

The Senate version of the amendment, Senate Joint Resolution 9, has gotten as far as the Rules Committee, where it will sit unless the leadership can pull together the 14 votes it needs to pass on the floor. The identical House version, House Joint Resolution 1, has two more committees to get through, Judiciary and Finance. It was heard in the House Education Committee last week, where three members recommended passage, three said it shouldn't pass, and one gave no recommendation.

In an effort to address at least some of those concerns, the leading advocate for the amendment, Sen. **Mike Dunleavy**, R-Wasilla, says he has taken a school-choice bill he introduced last year and modified it enough that it could undergo a new round of hearings in the Senate Education Committee, which was bypassed by his proposed amendment.

Dunleavy's Senate Bill 100, which he admits may be unconstitutional unless the amendment passes, would allow parents of home-schooled children to spend their allotment of public funds on supplemental and correspondence classes at private and religious schools and institutions.

Back in February 2013, when Dunleavy first introduced the constitutional amendment, Senate President Charlie Huggins assigned it to the Education Committee for its first round of hearings. Two days later, he rescinded that referral, sending it instead to the Judiciary Committee and then the Finance Committee.

"Quite frankly, it's a legal issue, not an education issue," Huggins said at the time. At a news conference this week, he said nothing has convinced him he's wrong.

"The decision I made and where it went, I'm perfectly happy with that," he said Tuesday, then added: "It's kind of water under the bridge."

'THEY DIDN'T WANT IT TO GO TO GARY STEVENS'

But Andrew Halcro, president of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce and a former Republican House member, said that decision has consequences that are still playing out.

"This is the biggest change to education in the state's history," Halcro said in an interview Tuesday. "Why wouldn't you want the Education Committee to get in there and tear it apart and look at the pros and cons and evaluate the cost and evaluate the impacts on the current public education system?"

Halcro attributed Huggins' decision to a political calculation related to the committee's chairman, Stevens, one of the moderate coastal Republicans.

"They didn't want it to go to Gary Stevens," Halcro said. "Gary would've done a very thorough hearing, he would've called people that actually represented facts and reality rather than cherry-picking data and subscribing to theories."

The overtime crowd that testified at recent public hearings on the constitutional amendment in the Senate Finance Committee was proof that the measure should have taken a stop in his committee, Stevens said.

"I listened to most of the Finance Committee testimony and almost all they talked about was education matters," he said. "My concern is putting this on the ballot and having people vote on it without knowing all the implications and what it really does to education. What will be the accountability we would place on any money we give to anybody? If the state were to fund private and religious education, would there be requirements? We have a lot strings tied to the money we give to public schools. Would we have the same strings, would we have teacher qualifications, would we require special ed, would we require teaching to standards and testing and all of those things? I think folks need to know that before they vote on this."

'JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS'

Jim Minnery, president of Alaska Family Action in Anchorage and an advocate for the amendment, supported Huggins' position that it wasn't an education measure. He said opponents are reacting without seeing any actual voucher or school-choice programs other than Dunleavy's Senate Bill 100.

"It's just one of these crazy things where people are jumping to conclusions way too early," said Minnery.

Instead, Minnery described the constitution's barrier to funding private education as a "lock on a door" that needed to be removed first.

"Inside that door, once the lock is taken off, there's a whole slew of different options, each of which will require the Legislature to be engaged in terms of education and how funds may flow through a tax-credit scholarship, through some kind of voucher program, through some kind of charter school-public school partnership, through homeschool situations where there's homeschool kids that are purchasing classes -- there's so many different options," he said.

But the time for discussing those options, and their effects on public schools, is later, Minnery said.

"It's up to those legislators to make that decision if and when this constitutional amendment passes," said David Boyle, executive director of the Alaska Policy Forum, another supporter of the amendment.

It takes 14 of 20 Senators and 27 of 40 Representatives to get a constitutional amendment to voters. But a simple majority could pass a voucher program once the amendment changed the Alaska Constitution.

Halcro said he finds the "let the people vote" argument "insulting."

"Tell the people what they're voting on. They're asking the people of Alaska to give them access to the state's bank account and they're going to come back next year and they're going to tell you how much they're going to take out," he said. "The political strategy is this: you convince the people that it's just a vote and by God, they have a right a vote. Then when this thing passes the Legislature and gets on the ballot, you're going to have groups like the Friedman Institute come and spend a ton of cash" on TV commercials.

The Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, a nonprofit that promotes private and religious education through vouchers, is already spending money on Alaska lobbyists, paying Ashley Reed and James Lottsfeldt \$15,000 each this year, according to the latest Alaska Public Offices Commission report.

Halcro says his advocacy for public education in general has the chamber board's support, but the board has not taken a stand on the amendment, so he said he was speaking for himself.

'YOU'RE PURCHASING THE COURSE'

Dunleavy, a former Mat-Su **school** board member, said he wouldn't support a **school**-choice program that damages public education -- only one that added options for students and parents and brought healthy competition to schools.

Senate Bill 100 would do that, he said. The current homeschool program allows districts to grant an allocation of state funds to parents to choose correspondence classes with the concurrence of a public **school** teacher. In the Mat-Su **school** district, the allocation is \$2,500, and in Anchorage a couple hundred dollars more. Dunleavy would extend the program to allow parents to spend the allocation on any private or religious **school**, even sending their children to a parochial **school** for a class.

"With SB 100 and SJR 9, they could buy a course in Latin from **Monroe Catholic**," the Fairbanks high**school**, Dunleavy said. "The child could be taking an online course, they could go sit in that classroom and take that Latin course."

But the public money wouldn't be directly supporting the religious **school**, he said. "Nowhere is the state funneling money directly to support a kid's tuition to be there in that **school** all day long, where you're paying for religion, you're paying for uniforms, you're paying for Bibles," Dunleavy said. "I would not suggest they do that. You're purchasing the course, you're not purchasing tuition."

Stevens, the education chairman, said hearings on Dunleavy's Senate Bill 100 would offer some insight into the effects of the amendment, but the bill's scope is limited.

"There's a lot more issues that SJR 9 brings up that are not solved in SB 100," Stevens said. Among them: accountability of private and religious schools in return for accepting public funds.

"If I were the principal of a religious **school**, I might think, 'Wow do I really want to take state money and then have to comply with state standards?' " That's one of the many questions that remain unanswered, he said.

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Update: This story was updated to reflect that the allotment to correspondence **school** parents in Anchorage is several hundred dollars more than in the Mat-Su, not more than a \$1,000.