

MINUTES
JOINT MEETING
SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

- DATE:** Thursday, March 17, 2016
- TIME:** 2:30 P.M.
- PLACE:** Lincoln Auditorium
- MEMBERS PRESENT:** Chairman Mortimer, Senators Nonini, Patrick, Souza, Den Hartog, Anthon, Buckner-Webb and Ward-Engelking
Chairman DeMordaunt, Vice Chairman VanOrden, Representatives Harris, McDonald, Dixon and Kloc
- ABSENT/ EXCUSED:** Vice Chairman Thayn, Representatives Shepherd, Wills, Boyle, Clow, Gestrin, Mendive, Kerby Pence and Rubel
- NOTE:** The sign-in sheet, testimonies and other related materials will be retained with the minutes in the committee's office until the end of the session and will then be located on file with the minutes in the Legislative Services Library.
- CONVENED:** Chairman DeMordaunt called the Joint Education Committee (Committee) to order at 2:34 p.m.
- PRESENTATION:** **Representative Ron Nate** presented to the Committee information regarding the policies concerning school choice. He explained that choice in competition makes life better for consumers and producers; more options are available at lower costs. He compared school choice with restaurant dining options and suggested that it is time to let the market work for education. He stated students could have the best education if the free market was allowed to work for education. He provided examples of the school voucher programs that resulted in a positive impact to public schools and cost savings for states. He cited a U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding the school choice program. He explained that the Blaine Amendment in the Idaho Constitution and said that if it was removed there could be more educational opportunities with possible less expense to the State. **Representative Nate** said that a group formed to write legislation to eliminate those restrictions, which would align with the U.S. Constitution. He addressed that **HJR 1** would remove the Blaine Amendment and allow schools to start innovative and exciting new ways to learn.
- Briana LeClaire**, Executive Director, Idaho Federation of Independent Schools, explained that nearly half of Idahoans would prefer to send their children to private schools, yet that is only available to a minority. With handouts (see attachment 1) she reported what education funds each school district received per student yearly and said there is no way to know if there is direct correlation of cost to value. To put education solutions to work the Blaine Amendment needs to be removed from the Idaho Constitution. She supplied the history of the Blaine Amendment, developed during the Grant Administration, and spoke about the religious influence in school learning and the bigotry that was prevalent during that era (see attachment 2). **Ms. LeClaire** explained that Idaho public funds are being sent to religious colleges through the Opportunity Scholarship and that is seen as public benefit for students and not a benefit to the religious colleges. Until the Blaine Amendment is removed, it will continue to impede Idahoans' access to many excellent schools.

Jean Lockhart, Chief Operating Officer, Boise Rescue Mission (Mission), said she is in front of the Committee on behalf of the students she serves. She oversees all the facilities and runs the children's programs, which at any one time have 50 to 200 children participating. To be eligible for the program, children must be a current or past client of the Mission. She said the focus at the Mission is education, which they believe is the best way to address homelessness, poverty and addiction. When children first arrive at the Mission, all are below grade level. She explained how the Mission works to help those children get an education and highlighted the success stories. **Ms. Lockhart** said the Mission advocates for these children and finds schools that best fit their needs. She stated she is passionate about school choice because school choice benefits underprivileged children.

Representative Kloc said the presentation was great and people do need choices. He asked where the funding comes from. **Representative Nate** replied the proposal to amend the Blaine Amendment requires no funding. If that amendment that is removed and programs are developed, such as a school savings accounts, they could be funded for less than of the current per-pupil spending. **Representative Kloc** asked if these funds would com from the General Fund. **Representative Nate** replied in the affirmative. He explained that the State is no longer responsible for educating that student.

Representative VanOrden asked if the spending per pupil on the handout represents State, federal and local funds. **Ms. LeClaire** replied in the affirmative. She explained that final number is all money spent from all sources.

Senator Souza asked how the Blaine Amendment had been revised in the 1980s. **Representative Nate** explained that at one time State funds could not be used to pay hospital fees if the hospital was run by a religious sect, and in 1980 the State amended that section of the Blaine Amendment. He explained the motivation was not to benefit the hospital but to improve the patient to access medical care. **Senator Souza** asked why the change has not occurred for education. **Representative Nate** replied that the payment of hospital costs would not work like a school voucher. He said the language says State moneys can help with medical facilities;' programs and improve Idahoans access to health care. The funds are not to help the church that is affiliated with the hospital. There is not a direct parallel with school vouchers.

Senator Den Hartog asked if there are implications for private institutions of higher learning when students with State scholarships enroll. **Representation Nate** replied that when money follows the student and goes to a private institution, there needs to be some type of accreditation and regulation. The State, as the steward of funds, has the responsibility to ensure the funds are being spent well. He said there is a difference between accountability and regulation and explained the differences.

Senator Ward-Engelking said when a child goes to a religion school they are being taught religious. When a person is in a religious hospital, they are being treated for an illness. There is a big difference.

ADJOURNED: There being no more business, **Chairman DeMordaunt** adjourned the meeting at 3:28 p.m.

Senator Dean M. Mortimer
Chair

LeAnn Mohr
Secretary