

MINUTES
SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

DATE: Tuesday, March 16, 2021

TIME: 3:00 P.M.

PLACE: Room WW55

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chairman Thayn, Vice Chairman Crabtree, Senators Den Hartog, Woodward, Lent, Johnson, Cook, Ward-Engelking, and Nelson

**ABSENT/
EXCUSED:** None

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 Thayn** called the meeting of the Senate Education Committee (Committee) to order at 3:02 p.m.

H 294 **Relating to Education; Amends Existing Law to Establish the Strong Students Grant Program and the Strong Students Scholarship Program, Which Provide Funds to Eligible Students for Certain Education Expenses.** **Senator Den Hartog** outlined the bill for the Committee and informed them as one of the authors of **H 294**, she was requesting that **H 294** be sent to the 14th Order of Business for amendment. During the amendment process section 2 of the bill, which deals with scholarship language, will be removed.

DISCUSSION: **Senator Ward-Engelking** asked for clarification on which sections of the bill would be amended. **Senator Den Hartog** said she and Representative Wendy Horman, will remove the language pertaining to the Strong Student Scholarship, found on page 4, Section 33-1032. **Senator Ward-Engelking** asked about section 2, page 2B, which says money could be used for tuition or fees at a private school, even though such funding is not allowed by Idaho statute. **Senator Den Hartog** said funds do not flow to the schools but to the parents, no matter where the student is enrolled, which does not violate Idaho statute.

TESTIMONY: **Alex LeBeau**, President, Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry; **Karla Ehlers**, of Meridian, Idaho; **Jake Ball**, a parent from Meridian, Idaho; **Brielle Thompson**, Student Body Co-President, Eagle High School; **Dr. Sarah Quilici**, Superintendent, Idaho Catholic Schools; and **Kelti Baker**, a parent from Meridian, Idaho; testified in support of **H 294**. They testified **H 294** is not a voucher program. They said this bill will give scholarship money to low-income students to help give them access to education they might not have had access to otherwise.

Paul Stark, General Council, Idaho Education Association; **James Gilbert**, Superintendent, Mountain Home School District; **Rod Gramer**, President, Idaho Business for Education; **Karen Echeverria**, Idaho School Board Association; **Linda Patchin**, Homeschool Idaho (see Attachment 1); **Wendy Johnson**, Superintendent, Kuna School District; testified in opposition to **H 294**. They expressed concerns about money going to private school students. They felt this program would take money from rural areas of Idaho and give money to students in urban areas and private schools.

Kimberly Bowers, Horseshoe Bend, Idaho; **Bailey Cain**, Caldwell, Idaho; **Sheila Murdock**, Meridian, Idaho; **Justice Jim Jones** and **Judge Karen Lansing**, Boise, Idaho; **Amy Buchmeyer**, staff attorney, Home School Legal Defense Association, and the **League of Woman Voters of Idaho**, sent in written testimony in opposition to **H 294** (see Attachment 2). They wrote of their worry about the State Board of Education having authority over homeschoolers and money being illegally given to students who attend private schools.

DISCUSSION:

Representative Horman, co-sponsor of **H 294**, responded to those who testified. She said this bill does guarantee strong accountability. If a parent misuses the funds for items other than education experiences, they can permanently lose eligibility. Page 6 puts robust reporting requirements in place. Rural students will benefit from this bill, she said. The amount of money allocated to students is \$500 and can be used for such activities as speech therapy, music lessons, tutoring services, computer equipment, and for internet services. She also pointed out that public money is already going to private school students through Pell Grant programs, and food stamps go to privately owned grocery stores. **Representative Horman** said 5,000 homeschooled students applied for and received money from the Strong Families/Strong Students grant program. The demand from homeschooled students to receive funding is high.

Senator Ward-Engelking said 93 school districts in Idaho had to run supplemental levies to keep their school doors open last year and many have transitioned to 4-day weeks. She said she finds it troubling that in **H 294**, Section 1, page 2, line 4, says the funds could be used for tuition or fees for private school students, which makes it a voucher program. She would like to find another way to help Idaho students.

MOTION:

Senator Ward-Engelking moved to hold **H 294** in Committee to the call of the chair. **Senator Nelson** seconded the motion.

SUBSTITUTE MOTION:

Senator Cook moved to send **H 294** to the 14th Order of Business for possible amendment. **Senator Lent** seconded the motion.

DISCUSSION:

Senator Woodward referenced page 2, line 4, and asked should this bill have a sunset clause, or be permanent, when amended. **Senator Den Hartog** said she saw page 2, line 4, differently. She said a possible sunset clause can be reviewed, but this is a long-term fiscal note, consisting of one-time funding for the first year of implementation and then ongoing funds to help students. **Senator Woodward** asked if there was a large demand for the program, and how bill sponsors envision funding for it. **Senator Den Hartog** said the amount allocated to fund the program is the amount they would use. They are not asking for a specific amount of money but will use whatever is awarded. **Senator Woodward** said he felt this could exclude students since it would be a first-come, first-served program. **Senator Den Hartog** said income eligibility will remain in place and families may not qualify year after year, which is the same for other programs offered by the State.

Senator Johnson approved of the substitute motion, as he would not have supported **H 294** otherwise, and said he may have family who will benefit if **H 294** passes. **Senator Nelson** said if line 4, page 2, was removed, he would have supported **H 294**.

ROLL CALL VOTE:

Senator Den Hartog asked for a roll call vote on the substitute motion. **Senators Woodward, Lent, Johnson, Cook, Den Hartog, Vice Chairman Crabtree**, and **Chairman Thayne** voted aye. **Senators Ward-Engelking** and **Nelson** voted nay. The motion carried.

ADJOURNED: There being no further business at this time, **Chairman Thayn** adjourned the meeting at 4:09 p.m.

Senator Thayn
Chair

Florence Lince
Secretary