

Mike Ritze, D.O., M.F.S.A.

State Representative, District 80

HOME:

18574 E. 101st St. S.
Broken Arrow, OK 74011

CAPITOL:

405/557-7338
2300 North Lincoln Blvd. Rm. 327
Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4885
mike.ritze@okhouse.gov



Committees:

Public Health
Public Safety
Appropriations and Budget Subcommittee
on Public Health and Social Services

Oklahoma House of Representatives

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Weekly Review

School District Empowerment Program Passes House Committee

Legislation freeing school districts from costly and often unfunded state mandates passed a House Committee this week.

Senate Bill 834, the School District Empowerment Program, allows local school districts to choose which state mandates to implement, if any. The decision will be made at the local level to help better address community needs and give districts increased resource flexibility.

For years education officials have complained about the unfunded mandates coming out of the Capitol. In response, Senate Bill 834 gives school districts the freedom to do what is best for their individual students without bureaucratic interference.

The legislation does keep many standards in place, including the minimum salary schedule; participation in the Teacher's Retirement System; use of the state Health Insurance Plan; background checks; teacher evaluations; teacher certifications; payroll deductions; administrator certification and school board training; and graduation requirements.

The first schools to implement the program will be those on the needs improvement list. Then 20 percent of the remaining schools will be chosen each of the next five years until all Oklahoma schools are included.

The bill passed the House Common Education Committee and will now move to the full House for consideration.

Lawmakers Vote to Prevent Unnecessary Teacher Layoffs

Lawmakers have voted to prevent teachers from being told their contracts will not be renewed until the state budget picture becomes clearer.

Senate Bill 394, by state Sen. Gary Stanislawski and state Rep. Dan Sullivan, changes state law on teacher contract renewal. Current law requires that contract notices be provided no later than April 10. The bill would move that date to the first Monday of June.

Due to the recession and the uncertainty surrounding the use of federal stimulus money, it is very unlikely schools will know exactly how much money they have before April 10.

The state faces a \$900 million shortfall this year. Some of that gap may be filled by federal stimulus money, but the federal government has not made clear what restrictions will be placed on the use of that money.

As a result, a state budget written without the inclusion of the stimulus money will indicate greater cuts than what will likely occur and could prompt layoff notices to be sent to teachers who may actually be retained, Sullivan noted.

Senate Bill 394 was approved by the House Common Education Committee. It now proceeds to the floor of the Oklahoma House of Representatives.

Voter ID Legislation Headed to Governor

Legislation requiring identification to cast a ballot is headed to the governor's desk following House passage.

Senate Bill 4 would require citizens to provide "proof of identity" before voting. Under the bill, proof of identity could be established by producing a document containing a photograph of the voter that was issued by a state, federal or tribal government.

The legislation also would allow voters to cast a ballot if they showed their free voter identification card issued by their county election board.

If the voter is unable to provide any proof of identity, they would be allowed to sign a statement under oath swearing to his or her identity. Anyone found to have signed the oath falsely would be subject to felony punishment.

States with voter identification laws like Georgia and Indiana saw increased voter turnout this past election cycle.

The bill also extends the state's early voting, allowing Oklahomans to start voting at 1 p.m. the Wednesday prior to a general election. Currently, Oklahomans can vote early on the Friday, Saturday and Monday prior to an election.

Senate Bill 4 passed the House today with a vote of 71-27 and now goes to the governor for final consideration.

Shawnee Girl Lobbies Legislature to "Stop the R-Word"

Shawnee High School Senior Alie Walsh lobbied state lawmakers this week, giving a speech on the floor of the Oklahoma House of Representatives urging them to help prevent the use of derogatory terms to describe people with disabilities.

Alie, whose older sister Jenny has a disability, specifically urged legislators to discourage the use of the words "retarded" or "retard" as derogatory terms.

"To me to hear someone use the word 'retarded' as a putdown just doesn't line up, because I would never think of something that describes Jenny as a putdown," Alie said.

She noted her sister was the prom queen at Shawnee and participates in competitive swimming and dancing activities.

Alie said lawmakers and other adults can help by simply being good role models.

Gov. Brad Henry also issued a proclamation in support of the effort, declaring March 31st to be "Spread the Word to End the 'r' Word Day" in Oklahoma. That proclamation declares that "when the words 'retard' or 'retarded' are used without thinking to mean something stupid or bad, it is hurtful to people who have disabilities and the people who love them" and it "perpetuates prejudice and discrimination towards people with disabilities."

Lawmakers Vote to Improve DHS Tracking of Adoption Issues

State lawmakers have voted to require the Department of Human Services to provide greater information on unsuccessful adoptions.

Senate Bill 794, by state Sen. Clark Jolley and state Rep. Jason Murphey, would require DHS to publish a report on unsuccessful adoptions similar to its public reports on successful adoptions.

Murphey said the legislation would provide greater transparency and help policymakers determine the quality of DHS work in these cases. When the state fails a child, he noted it is important to understand why the adoption was unsuccessful and use that information to improve the process and outcomes.

Officials with Peppers Ranch, an organization located in Guthrie that cares for boys in foster care, requested the law after seeing more children returning to the system after an unsuccessful adoption.

After Senate Bill 794 passed out of a House committee, DHS officials indicated that only two adoptions were dissolved in 2007.

That statistic contradicted the reports of individuals actually working within the system. Murphey believes the agency is using a very restrictive definition of "dissolved adoption" that leads to underreporting.

As a result, he amended Senate Bill 794 today to require DHS to report on all adoptions that dissolve after the adoption is finalized and prior to the time the child reaches 18 years of age.

Senate Bill 794 passed the Oklahoma House of Representatives on a 90-9 vote. It now returns to the Senate.

House Approves Legislation to Protect Pregnant Women

Legislation increasing legal protections for pregnant women and their unborn children passed the full House this week.

Senate Bill 1103, by state Sen. Glenn Coffee and state Rep. Mike Thompson, would create the "Use of Force for the Protection of the Unborn Act."

Under the bill, a pregnant woman is legally justified in using deadly force if she "reasonably believes" an attacker is "threatening her unborn child" and "use of force or deadly force are immediately necessary to protect her unborn child."

According to the American Pregnancy Association, 240,000 pregnant women are subject to domestic violence each year and pregnant women face twice the risk of battery.

Senate Bill 1103 passed unanimously in the House. It will return to the Senate to consider House amendments to the bill.

As your Representative, I will always strive to be pro-business by reducing the burdens of government regulation on the Free enterprise system. Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 1-800-522-8502.



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