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Oklahoma House of Representatives

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Weekly Review

Tribal Charter School Bill Passes House

Legislation allowing tribal governments to sponsor charter schools in metropolitan areas passed the Oklahoma House of Representatives this week with overwhelming support.

Senate Bill 586, by state Sen. John Ford and state Rep. Jabar Shumate, would allow any of Oklahoma's 39 federally recognized Native American tribes to sponsor a charter school located in a district with more than 5,000 students in a major metropolitan area.

Charter schools operate free of most state mandates, providing increased local control. Those schools have been largely successful in increasing the educational outcomes for many low-income students in the state's urban areas.

Senate Bill 586 passed the Oklahoma House of Representatives on an 87-18 vote today. It now returns to the state Senate for consideration of House amendments.

Legislation to Make District Courts Follow Supreme Court Rulings Passes House

Legislation to address conflicts between the recent rulings of district courts and the Oklahoma Supreme Court has been passed by the Oklahoma House of Representatives.

Senate Bill 1115, by state Sen. Anthony Sykes and state Rep. Mark McCullough, creates a new law that states that local rules and administrative orders of a district court shall not conflict with any statutes of the state or any rules of the superior court. It also requires that the local rules be posted on the Oklahoma Supreme Court Network to be valid and enforceable.

Some district judges were reportedly ignoring the Supreme Court rules, leading lawmakers to enact new regulations.

The requirement that local rules be posted to the Oklahoma Supreme Court Network was included to ensure that the superior courts are aware of what district judges are ruling, McCullough said.

Driver's License Grace Period Signed by Governor

Legislation to eliminate needless hassle during a driver's license renewal has been signed into law.

House Bill 1092, by state Rep. John Trebilcock and state Sen. Brian Bingman, allows an expired Oklahoma driver license to be considered a valid form of identification for the purpose of renewing the license up to 30 days past expiration.

Under current law, an expired driver's license is not a valid ID and cannot be used to establish identification when seeking to renew the license.

Bill to Strip Disgraced Politicians of Pensions Headed to Governor

Disgraced and crooked Oklahoma politicians would lose their state pensions under legislation that now awaits the governor's signature.

Senate Bill 899, by state Sen. Glenn Coffee and state Rep. Jason Nelson, would force public officials to forgo a state pension if they are convicted of a crime related to abuse of office. The bill applies to any felony for bribery, corruption, forgery, perjury or any other crime related to the duties of office, or related to campaign contributions or campaign financing.

Senate Bill 899 passed the Oklahoma House of Representatives on a 91-3 vote. It previously passed the state Senate 46-0.

The legislation is driven in part by the controversy surrounding the outsized pension benefits paid to former state Sen. Gene Stipe, a McAlester Democrat who resigned from office in March 2003 after five decades in office.

Shortly after his resignation, Stipe signed a federal plea agreement related to charges that he funneled more than \$200,000 in illegal contributions to the unsuccessful 1998 congressional campaign of Walt Roberts.

The state Supreme Court has since ruled that Stipe remains eligible for his state retirement benefits because the plea agreement contained a provision saying Stipe's conduct did not relate to his duties as a state senator and were therefore not a violation of his oath of office.

Stipe is expected to receive a monthly benefit of more than \$7,000.

School District Empowerment Program Passes House

Legislation empowering local school districts to choose how to best educate their community's students passed the House 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.

Many basic standards are kept in place in the bill, including the minimum teacher 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 legislation will be implemented over a seven-year period, with the first schools to implement the program to be those on the needs improvement list. Then 20

percent of the remaining schools will be chosen each year until all Oklahoma schools are included. The phased-in schedule will allow lawmakers to gauge the results and make adjustments as needed, Jones said.

One example of the freedoms a school can have under this legislation is Western Village Academy in northwest Oklahoma City. A decade ago, Western Village was facing the possibility of closure after suffering years of declining enrollment and failing test scores.

In the fall of 2000, Western Village opened as one of the state's first elementary public charter schools (operating free of most mandates), and continues to serve children in its attendance area much like a public school rather than a pool of applicants like many charter schools.

Despite claims that relaxing state mandates would hurt public education, Western Village officials have seen their test scores improve, allow no more than 20 students in each class, pay their teachers an average of \$1,000 over the state minimum, have increased their school year by five days and added 30 minutes to each school day.

The bill passed the House with a vote of 60-39 and will now return to the Senate for final consideration.

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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