Oklahoma legislator pulls controversial bill that would have created school vouchers

By ANDREA EGER World Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, March 12, 2015 12:00 am

OKLAHOMA CITY — State Sen. Clark Jolley announced Wednesday that he was pulling a piece of legislation that would have created vouchers or “education savings accounts” to remit taxpayer funds to parents to pay for private school tuition.

Jolley, of Edmond, had authored the controversial Senate Bill 609 with Oklahoma City State Rep. Jason Nelson, a fellow Republican. He said he needed more time to “address questions about the benefits of the school choice plan.”

A similar bill died in House committee last month despite the support of Speaker Jeff Hickman, R-Fairview.

“While I believe there is support for passing the measure on the floor this year, I am also very aware that there has been much misinformation about what the bill would or would not do, raising questions and concerns for some legislators and their constituents,” Jolley said in a written press statement. “So rather than pushing ahead, I plan to work throughout the interim to make sure all our members and our citizens have the facts and can clearly understand the value of offering greater choice to parents seeking the best education possible for their children.”

Senate President Pro Tem Brian Bingman issued this statement:

“I am grateful to Senator Jolley for his work on Senate Bill 609, and I appreciate his willingness to keep the conversation moving forward on the issue of school choice. We are all committed to providing the best possible educational experience for Oklahoma children, regardless of their socioeconomic status. A more in-depth discussion throughout the interim will give lawmakers the opportunity to consider in greater detail how expanding educational opportunity for students can help us make progress toward a better education system. Ultimately, our focus must be to improve educational outcomes for all students, and we can do so by working to strengthen schools at all levels.”
Jolley’s announcement comes just two days after a new poll found Oklahomans overwhelmingly oppose using public money to pay for private schooling.

“There is simply no desire on the part of Oklahoma voters to begin providing parents with school vouchers,” said Glen Bolger, whose Public Opinion Strategies firm conducted the poll last week.

Poll results show even base Republicans and strong conservatives become less supportive of school vouchers once they learn more. “In short, school vouchers are a losing issue with swing voters, and also far from a sure thing with the Republican base,” Bolger said.

The poll found that more than 60 percent of parents polled opposed state government giving parents money to pay for private or religious schooling.

Jolley, in his press statement on Wednesday, said he is still committed to the idea.

“I am committed to helping all Oklahoma children receive the best education possible, whether it’s through a public school, a private school, or some other alternative, including virtual schools,” he said. “I firmly believe we need to support Oklahoma parents in their efforts to make the best choice possible for their children. For my wife and me, the choice we made for our children was public education. But that may not be the best option for other parents.

“Education savings accounts would enable more Oklahoma parents to make that choice for their child by allowing them to use part of his or her state education funding to pursue the schooling that best suits a student’s needs. Public schools would actually see an increase in per-pupil revenue as a result of this plan. Other states already offer this option for education, and I am convinced this would enhance our efforts to improve education levels in our state,” he said.

Opponents blasted the vouchers, or ESAs, as an attempt to leave the state’s public schools with a disproportionate share of students that private schools do not want and to financially cripple a state public school system that is already, by most measures, among the lowest funded in the nation.

“We’re excited about moving forward and working with Legislature for the remainder of the session on positive solutions for improving Oklahoma’s public schools,” said Shawn Hime, executive director of the Oklahoma State School Boards Association. “

School board members across the state are consistently concerned about three things: having a high-quality teacher for every classroom, a common-sense approach to testing and a long-term funding plan that allows schools to make sure they are meeting the needs of every child. We look forward to working with lawmakers to address those concerns.”
Tulsa Superintendent Keith Ballard has been vocal in his opposition of directing taxpayer money to private schools, particularly when the state’s budget for all funding needs, including public schools, is on shaky ground.

“I’m very pleased that the caucus decided to drop vouchers,” he said. “What I hope they understand is there is adamant, widespread resistance. I’m pleased that senators were listening to their constituencies. Vouchers are very unpopular across Oklahoma. It was also very ill-advised because we are giving choice — public school choice. We just approved three new charters and the expansion of an existing charter partner in Tulsa Public Schools, so we are clearly advocates of choice. Public school choice is the answer here, not private schools or home schooling.”