



Wednesday, February 10, 2010

Cheatham defends legislation *NV lawmaker counters critics, says he is not pawn for teachers union*

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State Rep. Dave Cheatham (D-North Vernon), right, talks with Kathy Scheible and others at Friday's Third House public forum in North Vernon.

State Rep. Dave Cheatham (D-North Vernon) defended himself against charges that he is a pawn for the Indiana State Teachers Association (ISTA), saying that his background in education is why he is co-sponsor of a bill that he says will help area school systems.

Cheatham, who has been given \$65,000 from teachers union political action committees since 2005, came under attack from charter schools proponents for co-authoring the bill in the Indiana legislature.

HB 1367 would all but kill the state's charter school movement and curtail other necessary educational reforms, according to some critics.

Speaking at the semi-monthly Third House public forum in North Vernon Friday, Cheatham said that is hogwash.

"I'm not anti-charter school," he said. "Charter schools are actually a different kind of public school."

Cheatham said his background as an educator - he spent much of his career as a social studies teacher at Jennings County High School before retiring from the field in 2006 - has helped him in his work at the Statehouse.

"Education is an important issue to me," he said. "It's natural with my background that I would be involved in educational legislation. My district and the people I represent come first. That's why I have helped with this bill, not because of getting campaign contributions from the ISTA."

Cheatham noted that the bill would give school corporations more flexibility with capital project funding that is now limited in how it can be spent.

"The funds could be used in other areas as needed without being unencumbered," he said. "We are facing drastic cuts in education. The bottom line is keeping a strong and vital teacher-student relationship."

Laying off as few teachers as possible is crucial, Cheatham said, in keeping the teacher-student ratio at acceptable levels. To do that in part, the bill proposes delaying funding for two years for a virtual charter school pilot program and private school tuition tax credit.

"The governor (Mitch Daniels) has proposed a \$300 million cut (in K-12 education), but these programs would expand areas of spending where there has been no state spending before," Cheatham argued. "That seems kind of strange given what the governor has said about being against any new spending."

According to Kyle Olson of the Education Action Group Foundation, the legislation's goal is to kill charter schools, which he says provide healthy competition for public schools, destroy any program that would give families more school choices and divert school improvement funds so teachers don't lose their annual "step" raises and lucrative benefits.

While the bill would be advantageous to the teachers union, it would grossly shortchange the parents and students of Indiana and preserve the educational status quo in the state, Olson wrote in a commentary piece distributed to newspapers in the state.

"The bill is clear evidence the teachers union has no real interest in improving education in Indiana," he opined. "Taxpayers are being poorly served by lawmakers like Greg Porter (D-Indianapolis) (the bill's sponsor) and Cheatham, who are acting to please their campaign sponsors instead of doing what's best for the children of the state."

Cheatham has a vastly different opinion.

"We have to do something or 5,000 or more teachers could be laid off in the state," he said. "That's a worst-case scenario that we want to avoid."