

NEW MEXICO SENATE DEMOCRATS

For immediate release

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Senate Passes Bill That Would Take New Virtual Schools Offline for a Year

The Senate passed a bill on a bipartisan vote Wednesday that would put the brakes on any future virtual online charter schools in New Mexico for at least a year so that the state can further study the legality and effectiveness of educating children through the internet.

Senate Bill 338, sponsored by Gay G. Kernan, (R-Chaves, Eddy, Lea-District 42), seeks to place a one-year moratorium on taking applications for new online schools so that the Public Education Department in conjunction with the Legislative Education Study Committee can review outstanding questions and issues regarding the impact of fulltime online charter schools on students and school systems.

The bill, which passed on a 32-7 vote, would also direct the two state entities to identify state laws that might affect or be affected by the establishment of full-time online charter schools and, if necessary, to propose changes to the law to accommodate and regulate full-time online charter schools.

Seven Republican senators voted against the bill, which incited spirited debate on the Senate floor, including Senator Jerry Ortiz y Pino (D-Bernalillo-District 12) who exclaimed that the for-profit virtual schools violate state law by taking public money for private gain.

"I think we hit on a big scandal here," Senator Ortiz y Pino. "I hope this bill sorts it out."

Public Education Department Secretary-Designee Hanna Skandera made national news recently when it was revealed in a Washington Post article that she was in frequent email contact with many substantial donors to former Florida governor Jeb Bush's PAC, Foundation for Excellence in Education. The PAC's policy director wrote to Skandera in one email, "I'm at your beck and call." The emails also revealed that one of the donors was the for-profit Connections Academy, which will contract with the New Mexico Connections Academy. The NMCA was denied charter status by the Public Education Commission, but Skandera overruled the decision and allowed for NMCA to begin operation in the fall.

“We have to remember that these are taxpayer dollars,” said Senator Howie Morales. “I’m concerned (public money) is going somewhere that is profit driven.” SB338 now heads to the House.

Bill Passed Wednesday Would Prevent Mercury from Going Down the Drain

Senate Bill 99, the “Dental Waste Amalgam Waste Act,” passed on the Senate floor on Wednesday on a vote of 38-2. The bill, sponsored by Senator Peter Wirth (D-Santa Fe-District 25) would make dentists statewide equip their offices with a device to separate toxic metals from water going down the drain and into the water system.

Senator Wirth told the Senate during debate that rule is meant to protect water systems from being contaminated with the mercury contained in the amalgam fillings, which dentists used in the past to fill cavities. He said new materials are used to replace the old amalgam fillings, which contain up to 50 percent mercury.

“Most dentists have already moved in this direction,” Senator Wirth said. “It’s a real issue we need to be concerned with.”

It was noted during the debate that dentist would have to install a \$500 piece of equipment on their drain system that separates metals from waste water and captures it in a trap for proper disposal.

Education Committee Passes Bill to Evaluate Current A-F School Grading System

On a party line vote, the Senate Education Committee approved a bill Wednesday morning that would create a school grades council to study and make recommendations on school grading and provide for criteria to be developed that would include reliable factors in determining school grades.

Senate Bill 587, sponsored by Senator Howie Morales (D-Catron, Grant, Socorro-District 28), dubbed the “State School Grades Council,” would amend a section of law to eliminate reference to school grading, and eliminate the current administration’s policy of grading schools on an A-F grading scale without well-developed criteria. The council would be composed of classroom teachers, instructional support providers, principals, superintendents, local school boards, charter schools and other educational experts, business or community leaders or interested citizens.

The council would present the newly developed grading criteria to the Legislature for implementation starting in the 2015-2016 year.

Committee Votes to Raise Minimum Wage on Party Line Vote

On a party line vote, the Senate Corporations Committee voted in favor of raising the statewide minimum wage to \$8.50. Senate Bill 416, sponsored by Senator Richard Martinez, (D-Los Alamos, Rio Arriba, Sandoval, Santa Fe-District 5) and Senator William Soules (D-Dona Ana-District 37), was amended in the hearing Wednesday afternoon and now only will apply to companies with 11 or more employees.

Republican Senator William Sharer(R- San Juan-District 1) motioned to table the bill the measure was also voted down on a party-line vote, which was also the result of another proposed amendment by Senator Sharer to lower the wage down to \$8. Currently, the statewide minimum wage is \$8.50.

In other Senate action:

* The Senate Judiciary Committee approved a bill on Wednesday that would allow people found guilty of a first offense of prostitution or patronizing a prostitute to have the misdemeanor wiped clean as long as they remain out of trouble for six months after conviction and participate and complete a prostitution education-and-intervention program.

Senate Bill 512, introduced by Senator Linda Lopez (Bernalillo, District 11), proposes that the state Department of Health administer the education program through the department of health, in collaboration with the Children, Youth and Families Department and the interagency Behavioral Health Purchasing Collaborative.

First-time offenders would be educated and counseled about sexual assault; assisted in finding a safe house if they were coerced into the crime by another; advised of the legal and health consequences of the of their offense;; made aware of cases in which prostitutes were actually the victims of rape, assault or murder; given alcohol or drug treatment; and helped to find the appropriate social services if needed.