

Hearings on school absenteeism, juvenile justice issues held

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Thursday, 13 February 2014 00:00 -

Letter Back Home

By Senator Mark Christensen

We had a hearing on two amendments this last week in the Judiciary Committee regarding school absenteeism and juvenile justice issues.

We have literally come full circle on the school absenteeism issue and are making strides to improve, correct and clarify juvenile justice issues related to last session's LB561.

Specifically, I would like to talk about the changes in AM1674 and AM1734 dealing with school absenteeism.

If you have been watching the news over the last year or so, you might have seen some of the troubling results to the recent changes in the truancy laws to move us to an excessive absenteeism model.

The results were not good. It took too much discretion away from parents and allowed some school districts in the state to misuse the new policy. This resulted in clogging up the juvenile courts and overwhelming county attorneys.

Many of the students and parents caught up in the mess mostly had excused absences, but were having legal actions taken against them. Some school districts were using zero common sense implementing their attendance policy.

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Because of this, I worked with a statewide parents group to find a solution. We were able to get changes put into AM1674 that would change the current 20 excused or unexcused absences trigger to report to the county attorney, to 20 unexcused absences.

Sen. Ashford from Omaha filed AM1734, which seeks to make further changes.

One change would strike the requirement that all absences due to illness be documented. This was an obvious burden for the poor, and for students who just had the flu or a cold; forcing kids in these scenarios to go to school or to an unnecessary doctor visit just doesn't make any sense.

The hearing was productive and everyone seems onboard to fix the obvious problems. So, if you have a child that ran into some attendance problems even with excused absences, I'm confident we are going to get this fixed.

On Tuesday, Feb. 11, LB993 that I introduced will have its public hearing. This is a bill that will provide clarification that health care sharing ministries like Medi-Share or Samaritan Ministries are not considered insurance in Nebraska.

This will make sure Nebraska law reflects the same exemption that the federal Affordable Care Act currently recognizes with health care sharing ministries.

As always, if you have any questions or comments, contact my office. Mark R. Christensen, PO Box 94604, Lincoln, NE 68509, 402-471-2805 or mchristensen@leg.ne.gov.

Weekly call

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During his weekly call Tuesday, Christensen said they haven't been making a lot of progress.

Eight hours will have been spent by mid-day Tuesday on a bill to repeal the helmet law. Only three other bills were up for discussion Tuesday.

Presently, the senators spend the morning on the floor with afternoons and early evenings spent in committee hearings or committee meetings.

Last week a hearing was held on LB 1047, introduced by Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha.

The bill would remove statutory designation of fully-appropriated or over-appropriated river basins in the state.

Presently the Republican Basin has been declared, by statute, fully-appropriated, with a portion of the Platte Basin being deemed over-appropriated.

The bill seeks to have the designations determined instead by best science practices.

The Upper Republican Natural Resources District and the Nebraska Association of Resource Districts testified in opposition the bill.

Surface water districts in the state favor the bill.

The NRDs are concerned about certain language in the bill that could result in a large shutdown of groundwater wells.

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Christensen said there's been a lot of political maneuvering by senators looking to trade votes to get their own legislation passed.

He said he supports a \$50 million annual appropriation to address water issues.

He said some Omaha senators said they would vote for the water money only if he would vote for the Medicaid expansion bill.

"Then I told them I guessed there wasn't going to be any money for water and walked off. They couldn't believe it," he said.

Christensen said he has not traded votes to get support for one of his bills and doesn't plan to do so in his last session either.

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