

Yellow scarves, red shirts, heated words. Fight continues over scholarship tax credit bill.

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The fight over scholarship tax credits continued Tuesday as an overflow crowd of people dressed in red in support of public education or in yellow scarfs in support of school choice watched a heated legislative hearing.

Lawmakers and their families have been bullied and “intimidated” over the controversial House Bill 205, said its sponsor, House Majority Floor Leader John Bam Carney, R-Campbellsville.

“We’ve had bullying of members, of their families, intimidation, and there’s documentation to prove this. This has got to stop,” he said as he presented the legislation to the House Appropriations and Revenue Committee.

While Carney said misinformation had been spread about House Bill 205, opponents of the bill explained how they thought it would harm public schools.

[Public school superintendents](#) held statewide news conferences Monday to oppose House Bill 205, and the legislation has caused some teachers to threaten a strike.

Under House Bill 205, scholarship tax credits would allow businesses and individuals to receive a tax credit for their donation to a scholarship-granting organization. The organizations would then provide scholarships to private school low- and middle-income students across Kentucky.

The purpose of the program would be to provide more choice to those students and to foster children and to help more students who have special needs, the bill said.

Committee Chair Steven Rudy, R-Paducah, warned the crowd that he would not tolerate outbursts. When a woman reacted to Carney’s comments and said that superintendents had also been intimidated, Rudy asked that she be removed from the room.

Carney, who works in a public school district said the vast majority of his public school colleagues are concerned about putting kids first and doing the right thing. But he said some public school educators are more concerned about the dollars coming into their district than they are about students.

Superintendents at news conferences across the state on Monday described the measure as a back-door effort for private school vouchers that would steer millions from already underfunded public schools. Teachers from the advocacy group [Kentucky 120 United said they are prepared to strike](#) -- under Kentucky law they can only stage sickouts -- if lawmakers move forward on the bill.

No vote was taken after the bill was discussed in committee Tuesday. Carney said that as of Tuesday, he did not have the votes he needed to pass the bill in the House, although [Gov. Matt Bevin said he would sign it.](#)

Carney said after the meeting, that in this non-budget year, he thinks he needs 60 votes to get the bill passed in the House and he doesn't have that at this time.

"It's certainly possible something could come together in the last week or so," he said. "Its a fluid situation, there's a lot of movement on the bill, so that's certainly possible, but it may be an issue that's addressed in a non-budget year when we only need 50 votes."

House Speaker David Osborne, R-Prospect, said House Bill 205 "is still one that is being discussed, but again we are very late in the session. It's a bill that, it's very divisive."

"We are all in this for our children, whether its traditional public schools or a school choice option for our families," Carney said.

He said thousands of families on waiting lists for scholarships need the help the bill can bring. "There's a high level of accountability in this bill," Carney said. Scholarships must be granted on need, he said.

Carney said that under the legislation Kentucky foster children can get full scholarships. The bill says that the total amount of tax credits that can be awarded the first year is \$25 million although that amount can grow over time, Carney said.

He said 18 states have similar laws.

Carney said the bill " is not vouchers" which are illegal in Kentucky.

"I would never support vouchers ... taking public dollars allocated for public schools, allowing that money to go with the child," he said.

He said the bill does not decimate the state budget or disrupt public school districts. He said the tax credit will pay for itself. Carney said that only one percent of Kentucky students would qualify for scholarships under the bill.

Heather Huddleston, the executive director of School Choice Scholarships in Louisville, a non-profit scholarship granting organization, said refugee families, foster school families and the families of public school teachers are among those who her organization helps, but the need is great.

Parents testified about how much scholarships to private schools had helped their children.

Committee member state Rep. Kelly Flood, D-Lexington, spoke against the bill, saying the "constitution does not permit you to get dollars because you give to private schools, specifically religious schools."

Flood said some private religious schools had been "in the headlines for two decades with chronic systemic child abuse."

Rudy told her she was out of order.

Kentucky Education Association President Stephanie Winkler said Kentucky public schools remain underfunded and the legislature's first responsibility is to provide for a system of common schools. She questioned whether private schools that would be accepting students under the bill were equipped to handle a student with severe special needs.

"This is a slap in the face to all of us who give everything we've got for kids of Kentucky," she said of the bill.

Matt Thompson, the superintendent of Montgomery County Schools in Mount Sterling, testified against the legislation. He said if his district lost a projected 43 students under the bill, it would lose \$191,000 in SEEK funding, which is the state's main funding formula for K-12 public schools.

As the hearing ended, Carney appealed to the crowd to "tone down the rhetoric" on the issue and discuss the merits of the bill "on a factual basis."

Herald-Leader political writer Daniel Desrochers contributed to this article.

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