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Special session for ed bill

Backing the governor: Republican caucus agrees to postpone voting on the measure that challenges No Child Left Behind

By Ronnie Lynn
The Salt Lake Tribune

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. called a special legislative session for April 20 to give his office, state education leaders and federal officials more time to negotiate flexibility under President Bush's No Child Left Behind law.

The planned special session effectively stalled Rep. Margaret Dayton's bill challenging the sweeping federal law's imposition on state policies and resources.

At least one senator threatened earlier Wednesday to defy Huntsman's appeal to delay a final vote on House Bill 135.

But Senate President John Valentine, R-Orem, and the Republican caucus agreed to honor Huntsman's request.

"I like the bill," Valentine told reporters. "I made a commitment, and I keep my commitments."

Instead, the Senate is drafting a letter to send to the White House outlining concerns with the law and "the caucus' strong support of the bill," Valentine said.

Huntsman and legislative leaders huddled Tuesday and agreed to postpone action on HB135 because earlier discussions with federal officials yielded a deal on how to measure the qualifications of veteran teachers.

The governor believes additional talks could bring more concessions in coming weeks.

State schools Superintendent Patti Harrington, Huntsman education deputy Tim Bridgewater and other state leaders are scheduled to go to Washington in two weeks to see if government officials budge on other Utah requests:

l To allow the state to use its own system on school quality. Utah wants to measure schools based on the number of students who make a year's worth of progress in a year. NCLB measures school quality by the percentage of students who pass state tests each year.

l To permit the state to set its own standards for measuring the quality of special education and rural teachers.

HB135 would give Harrington permission to do both - even if it means breaking federal law.

It's unclear if federal officials would penalize Utah for defying Bush's landmark reform measure.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Education threatened to yank \$106 million in funding if Utah proceeded with Dayton's proposal to boycott the law altogether.

The measure is one of several state-initiated protests of the sweeping federal law, which was Bush's first domestic priority.

The No Child Left Behind law requires schools to make annual progress toward 100 percent student proficiency in reading and math by 2014.

That means schools must post annual test-score gains for all student groups, including ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, English learners and low-income pupils.

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