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Bill limiting foreign workers at charter schools to become law without Haslam signature

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Gov. Bill Haslam speaks at a press conference following the adjournment of the 107th General Assembly in Nashville, Tenn., on Tuesday, May 1, 2012. The thanked House Speaker Beth Harwell, R-Nashville, and Senate Speaker Ron Ramsey, R-Blountville, for passing a budget that includes cuts to the estate and gift taxes and the sales tax on groceries. (AP Photo/Erik Schelzig)

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Gov. Bill Haslam will allow a bill that limits the number of foreign workers at charter schools to become law without his signature, the Republican announced Wednesday.

Haslam said in a statement that he questions the constitutionality of the measure and that he doesn't want to harm the state's efforts to improve education standards.

The governor said changes made to the bill late in the legislative session eased some of those concerns.

"I am comfortable that because it is permissive and not mandatory, it does not adversely impact the state's momentum in education reform," Haslam said.

Under the bill, a chartering authority would not be allowed to approve a school's application if it planned for 3.5 percent or more of its staff to be hired from among the foreign workers in the H1B or J-1 visa programs. The bill would allow exemptions to the limit

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for foreign language teachers.

Haslam said he will request a formal legal opinion about the law from the state attorney general, and will seek to clarify the measure for school districts around the state.

"It is important for local educational agencies to fully understand the implications of this law and their decisions about granting charter school applications," he said.

The measure was sponsored by Rep. Judd Matheny of Tullahoma and fellow Republican Sen. Bill Ketron of Murfreesboro. It passed the House on a 63-29 vote, while the Senate approved its version 18-13 — just one vote more than the minimum needed to pass.

Neither sponsor returned messages from The Associated Press seeking comment.

Sabina Mohyuddin, a board member of the American Muslim Advisory Council from Tullahoma, criticized the bill when it passed as "an anti-Muslim bill shrouded in anti-immigrant language."

The Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition on Wednesday said it was encouraged that Haslam shares concerns about the bill, but expressed disappointment that he didn't veto the measure outright.

"It imposes nonsensical new regulations on the charter school system and creates unnecessary obstacles to finding the best teachers available," spokesman Eben Cathey said in a phone interview.

The charter schools measure is the second education-related bill Haslam has allowed to become law without his signature this session. He previously declined to sign a bill that would provide legal protections to teachers who allow students to critique scientific theories like evolution and global warming.

Haslam also announced Wednesday that he would veto bill seeking to exempt college religious groups from nondiscrimination policy because the measure would have applied to private institutions like Vanderbilt University.

Associated Press writer Travis Loller contributed to this report.

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