Biden testing political waters in Florida

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Approaching a time of decision, Vice President Joe Biden tested the political waters in Florida on Wednesday as he mulls over whether to join a 2016 presidential race that's left a lot Democrats wanting more choice.

Biden attended a fundraiser Wednesday night for Senate Democrats after a speech at Miami Dade College promoting the administration's education agenda. At every turn, he's been watched for any hints about his 2016 ambitions as Democrats debate whether the race would benefit from his taking on Hillary Rodham Clinton or whether he'd be coming to the contest too late.

He may have dropped a hint at the college, saying, "People who aren't willing to risk failing never succeed."

But the remark, at least on its surface, was about the courage it takes for students to go back to community college after being out for years.

Biden later mingled with the types of donors he'd need to challenge Clinton for the nomination.

At the fundraiser, Biden spoke about the need to elect more Democrats to the Senate but did not address his 2016 plans, according to two donors who attended the event. The donors, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss Biden's remarks at the private fundraiser, said the vice president offered a lengthy defense of the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran.

View gallery

Vice President Joe Biden talks to students and guests Wednesday, Sept. 2, 2015, at Miami Dade Colleg …

The donors said Biden did not touch upon Clinton's campaign but praised Sanders for doing a good job energizing the party. The dinner to benefit the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee was attended by several Clinton fundraisers.

At Miami Dade College, Biden said he and President Barack Obama had sought to address the economic disparities between the wealthy and poor and that the nation was on the verge of an "economic renaissance." He spoke about the administration's plan to provide two years of free community college to students as a building block for future generations.

Noting the large press corps following him, Biden joked, "Their interest in community college has impressed me greatly!" At one point during his speech, what appeared to be a butterfly soared overhead, prompting Biden to quip, "The butterfly agrees with me!" He later brushed off reporters' questions on whether he would run.

Interest in a Biden bid has intensified in recent weeks as Clinton has struggled with what some Democrats consider a lackluster start to her campaign and scrutiny over her use of a private email account and server as President Barack Obama's secretary of state.

"There's a malaise inside the race right now with Clinton," said Tony Bisagnano, an Iowa state senator who backed Biden's campaign in 2008 and wants him to run again. "People I know who are supporting her are not necessarily withdrawing, but are unenthusiastic."

But he cautioned, "We're getting close to where it's going to be a tough race if he waits much longer."

A Democrat familiar with Biden's deliberations said recent discussions have focused on whether Biden's family would be ready to pursue a third presidential campaign only months after the death of the vice president's son, Beau Biden.

Also under consideration is whether Biden can meet the basic criteria to be a serious contender, such as whether he would have a plausible path to victory in the campaign and whether he would be able to raise enough money to be competitive.

The Democrat spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about the private conversations.

Biden's trip to Florida, one of the nation's premiere campaign battleground states, includes meetings with Jewish leaders on Thursday who are skeptical of Obama's effort to win support for the nuclear deal with Iran.

He then heads to Pittsburgh to march in a Labor Day parade on Monday with AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, who met privately with the vice president last week and says "the field is still wide open" if Biden decides to run.

The travels mark the latest chapter in Biden's deliberations, which have included private discussions with family members and longtime aides at his Delaware home and a Naval Observatory meeting with Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a popular liberal whose endorsement would be coveted by any Democratic candidate.

Warren said Wednesday that she and Biden had "a good long rambly policy conversation" at the Naval Observatory. Asked whether Biden raised the possibility of her running for vice president with him, Warren would only say, "It was a long conversation."

Biden is expected to decide within a month and Democrats say he would need to join the field in advance of the first televised debate on Oct. 13. Should he do so, he'll face several major obstacles against a field that includes Clinton, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, an independent, former Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley and others.