

Texas Senate approves school voucher plan

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AUSTIN—The Texas Senate approved a voucher plan that would use taxpayer funds to provide scholarships to private schools—including religious ones.

The plan, modeled after a program Florida launched in 2010, allows businesses to donate up to half of their state business tax bill to educational nonprofit groups that would provide scholarships to private schools. The program is capped at \$100 million per year.

The measure still requires approval in the Texas House, which traditionally has shown less support for school vouchers.

“We are disappointed that [SB 4](#) passed the Senate, but we are hopeful that the Texas House will choose a different course of action,” said Gus Reyes, director of Texas Baptists’ [Christian Life Commission](#).

Victory for ‘school choice’

Proponents—including Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick—touted the plan as “a clear victory” for school choice.

“Giving our children the flexibility of attending a better school, for their future, is about giving them opportunity,” Patrick said. “No parent or student should ever feel trapped in a failing school.”

Diversion of funds

Opponents insist the plan diverts much-needed funds from public education and violates the separation of church and state.

“The Senate spurned the dedicated, overworked and underpaid schoolteachers of our Texas communities and neighborhoods by sending their already inadequate public school money to private religious schools—all against the expressed will of their constituents,” said Charles Foster Johnson, a Baptist minister and executive director of [Pastors for Texas Children](#).

“In doing so, they violate God’s law of religious liberty by assigning government support for religion.”

Threat to religious liberty

School vouchers—and the government rules that inevitably accompany them—threaten religious liberty, Reyes insisted.

“We oppose using state funding to teaching religious views,” he said. “Our religious beliefs and institutions are sacred and must be free of government controls and regulations, which appropriately accompany government funds. Religious schools that accept this funding will ultimately be accountable to the commissioner of the Texas Education Agency and not church leadership.”

Failure to provide for public schools

The Texas Constitution requires the legislature to “establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools,” Johnson noted.

“The very representatives of the people of Texas sworn by Bible oath before God to uphold the constitution of the State of Texas voted overwhelmingly to abdicate that oath by doing what no legislature in Texas has ever before done—provide private school vouchers with public school money,” he said.

“They did so while the state of Texas is once again unlawfully underfunding

our neighborhood and community schools.

“Our state benefits from the good fortune of a robust Texas economy, while we hover near the bottom of our nation in per-pupil spending. In short, we continue to feast at the table of bounty, while our children subsist on crumbs falling from that table.”