

Senate adds voucher provision to public school finance bill

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article originally was posted May 23. Late on May 24, the Texas House of Representatives voted 101-45 to reject the Senate-supported voucher-type program.

AUSTIN—The Texas Senate attached an educational savings account provision to a public school finance bill, but the voucher-style program faces stiff opposition in the House.

The Senate voted 21-10 to approve HB 21, originally drafted by Rep. Dan Huberty, R-Houston, chair of the House Public Education Committee, to simplify the system by which money is allocated to public schools. The original bill would have provided \$1.6 billion in additional funds for public education.

However, Sen. Larry Taylor, R-Friendswood, amended the bill to include educational savings accounts for parents who want to send their children with disabilities to private schools or to homeschool them.

“This bill opens doors to Texas students by providing more funding and empowering parents of the most vulnerable students with options,” said Stephanie Matthews, senior policy adviser with the Center for Education Freedom at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. “With this bill, parents of special needs students will have the ability to determine the best educational environment for their child.”

Senate and House at odds

Gus Reyes, director of Texas Baptists' Christian Life Commission, called the

Senate's action "highly disconcerting."

"Instead of meaningful and much needed school finance reform, the proposed Senate changes to HB 21 would undermine both public education and religious liberty," Reyes said. "We need to now hope, pray and communicate that the House will not allow this to happen."

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has made educational savings accounts and similar voucher-like programs for private education a legislative priority.

In contrast, the [House](#) voted 103-44 in favor of a budget amendment that said taxpayer funds "may not be used to pay for or support a school voucher, education savings account, or tax credit scholarship program or a similar program through which a child may use state money for nonpublic education."

A majority of Texas Senators succumbed to "the legislative bullying of their leadership," said Charles Foster Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children.

"It is abundantly clear that the leadership of the Texas State Senate does not believe in public education for all children," Johnson asserted. "For them to persist in saying so is a deception that we take no pleasure in confronting. Such hypocrisy is morally unacceptable."

'Simply wrong to underwrite private education with public funds'

Even if vouchers are earmarked for children with special needs, it is "simply wrong to underwrite private education with public funds," he said.

Ninety percent of Texas schoolchildren are educated through the public school system, which serves 5.3 million students, he noted.

"Private school vouchers provide for the few at the expense of the many," Johnson said. "They are inherently unjust."

Furthermore, school vouchers violate the separation of church and state, he asserted.

“When the voucher supports a religious school with public dollars, whether Baptist, Catholic, Muslim or Wiccan, it is a government establishment of a religious cause,” Johnson said. “In doing so, vouchers violate God’s principle of religious liberty for all people without interference from any government authority.”

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