

Senate approves limited voucher-like bill

April 4, 2017

AUSTIN—After making a concession to rural Republican lawmakers, the Texas Senate voted 18-13 in favor of a bill to create education savings accounts and a tax credit scholarship program to fund private school tuition.

Limited in scope

The substitute version of SB 3 limits the scope of the programs to counties with populations greater than 285,000, unless 5 percent of registered voters petition for access.

It also limits eligibility to students who have attended public school at least one year.

Proponents conceded the changes after rural legislators, whose constituents have fewer education options, objected to the original version.

“It succeeded only after procedural maneuvering and bad-faith legislative manipulation that is beneath the dignity of a democracy,” said Charles Foster Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children.

Rural senators who agreed to the substitute bill “supported a policy that they would not have for the children of their communities,” Johnson said.

Three Republicans—Sen. Kel Seliger of Amarillo, Joan Huffman of Houston and Robert Nichols of Jacksonville—joined Senate Democrats in voting against the bill. Sen. Eddie Lucio of Brownsville cast the only Democratic vote in favor of the measure.

Accountability and disabilities

Debate on the Senate floor focused primarily on issues of accountability and whether the bill would benefit students with disabilities.

The Senate rejected an amendment from Sen. José Rodríguez, D-El Paso, which would have required private schools to be graded by the recently approved A-F rating system for public schools.

“Essentially, what this bill does is provide a new government entitlement program for poor families to place their children in woefully inadequate private schools far inferior to their neighborhood public schools—all without the proper accountability and oversight that should accompany tax dollars,” Johnson said.

Senators did approve an amendment from Sen. José Menéndez, D-San Antonio, requiring letters to be sent to parents who accept the subsidies, letting them know private schools are not required to serve students with disabilities.

The bill now goes to the House of Representatives, where voucher-like bills have had considerably less success in recent years.