



Published: 03.15.2005

Voucher bill on path to Napolitano

Public tuition funds for private schools need final House OK

By Howard Fischer

CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX - Whether parents will get taxpayer-financed vouchers to send their children to private and parochial schools is up to Gov. Janet Napolitano.

On a 16-12 vote, the state Senate gave final approval Monday to legislation that would provide "parental education choice grants" that could be used to pay tuition and fees at schools outside the public system.

The House of Representatives already gave preliminary approval to identical legislation. Sen. Thayer Verschoor, R-Gilbert, said a final vote could come as early as this week, sending the bill to the Democratic governor.

Until now, no Arizona governor has had to decide whether to sign or veto such a measure. This is the first time both the House and the Senate have adopted the same bill.

The measure, Senate Bill 1506, would provide vouchers of up to \$3,500 for students in kindergarten through eighth grade so they could attend private and parochial schools. The vouchers would be worth up to \$4,500 for high school students.

Schools with higher tuitions would be free to charge parents the difference.

Of the 48 Tucson-area private schools that chose to be on the Arizona Daily Star's 2005 list for parents, published in January, 40 calculate tuition rates by the year. Among those 40 schools, 18 charge less than \$3,500, meaning the vouchers would cover parents' full costs there.

Napolitano made it clear during her successful election campaign that she is opposed to vouchers. If nothing else, the governor has said they are not necessary, citing the state's charter system of schools that can be run by private corporations on a for-profit basis.

Charter schools do, however, receive state aid and are technically public schools, making them subject to most state regulations. They also cannot discriminate against applicants and cannot charge more than the state provides in aid.

Private schools are exempt from most state regulations other than health and safety rules.

Local parents interviewed Monday disagreed on whether the vouchers are a good idea.

What bill would do

- The provisions of Senate Bill 1506, which is awaiting a final vote in the House before going to the governor.

VOUCHERS

\$3,500

Maximum voucher for students in kindergarten through eighth grade

\$4,500

Maximum voucher amount for high school students

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

\$4,700

The average cost to taxpayers of sending a student to public school, plus up to:

\$2,000

more for school construction and other costs

NewsTalk

- *Do you support taxpayer-financed vouchers to help parents send their children to private or religious schools? Why or why not?*

- *What ideas do you have for improving education?*

Share your thoughts on NewsTalk. Responses will be published on the Opinion page.

Sandra Quihuis said she favors the vouchers. She has a daughter who attends San Miguel Catholic High School.

Quihuis said she is applying for financial aid through the school to help ease the cost, adding that the vouchers would help even more.

Debbi Giles, whose two children attend Soleng Tom Elementary School in the Tucson Unified School District, said vouchers would take away from local public school districts. "I like options, but I don't think vouchers are the way to go," Giles said.

Vouchers could work if public education was fully funded, said Dave Tedlock, a parent of a fifth-grader at Collier Elementary School in TUSD.

"If we had complete funding throughout the state for full-day kindergarten and smaller class size, then we could talk about school vouchers," Tedlock said.

Verschuur said he thinks Napolitano might be convinced to change her position on vouchers in return for other programs.

"There's some things on the table she really wants," he said, such as state funding for full-day kindergarten.

But if the governor refuses, that will end the matter. There are not enough votes for an override.

In fact, three of the 18 Senate Republicans, including Tucson's Tim Bee and Toni Hellon, joined with all but one of the chamber's Democrats on Monday to vote against the bill.

Supporters said the measure actually could save state government money - eventually - because students would be required to transfer from a public school to be eligible for a voucher of state funds.

That is based on figures from a legislative budget report, which says the average cost to taxpayers of sending a student to public school is about \$4,700. The actual cost could be up to \$2,000 higher because that figure does not include other funds for school construction, etc.

But the budget analysis also acknowledges that the voucher legislation could be a net drain on tax money. That's because the requirement for prior school enrollment does not apply to students entering kindergarten and first grade.

All students whose parents normally would have enrolled a child in a private or parochial school at their own expense could each get a \$3,500 voucher. That would cost \$25 million the first year, more than the estimated savings from other students leaving public schools.

In fact, the report says a total of 21,000 students would have to leave public schools in one year to make sure the measure didn't cost more than it saves. The analysts do not consider that likely because the current capacity of all private schools in the state is only 45,000.

The report also says these private and parochial schools would need to expand by 150,000 students by 2018 to keep the legislation from becoming a net loss of state funds.

Verschuur conceded that if the measure were to become law, it would be subject to legal challenges. The Arizona Constitution specifically bars the use of tax funds "in aid of any church, or private or sectarian school."

But Verschuur said he believes it is legal because the vouchers - essentially checks payable by the state Treasury - would be given to parents. They could be used, though, only to pay tuition and fees at private and parochial schools.

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E-mail: newsq@azstarnet.com.
Limited to four sentences.

Tell lawmakers

- How to comment to lawmakers on Senate Bill 1506:
- Legislature's Tucson satellite office: 398-6000.
- Via Internet:
www.azleg.state.az.us

Sen. Carolyn Allen, R-Scottsdale, who has supported vouchers in the past, voted no, in part because these private and paro-chial schools would not have to adhere to the same standards as public and charter schools.

"They are able to turn away students," she said. One provision of the bill would specifically exempt private schools from being required to alter their creed, practices or curriculum to redeem grants or to participate in the voucher program.

Allen also noted that students at these schools are not required to take the AIMS test to prove they have acquired the basic skills necessary to advance, and to graduate. Nor do they comply with the federal No Child Left Behind mandates.

But Verschoor said those programs are designed to promote accountability, which he said is unnecessary when parents have vouchers available.

"I think accountability is the parents' choice," he said. If schools are not doing their job, "people will vote with their feet."

- *Arizona Daily Star reporter Aaron Mackey contributed to this report. Contact him at 573- 4142 or amackey@azstarnet.com.*

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