



Debate heats up over Delaware education savings account bill

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The Parent Empowerment Education Savings Account Act was introduced in the House Education committee Wednesday and tabled after a lengthy and impassioned debate.

Under the proposal, parents of special needs students could take state money allotted for their child and put it in an education savings account. That account could then be used to pay for a variety of educational services, including private school, tutoring, and online courses.

"We really need to make sure parents have access to their very best education options," Rep. Deborah Hudson, R-Fairthorne, the bill's co-sponsor said. "We really don't have the fullest extent of choice. And that's what this bill is about today."

The proposal has pitted much of the state's education establishment against parent advocates and free-market conservatives.

Governor Jack Markell, the state teacher's union, the state's union for school administrators, and the group representing Delaware's school boards all oppose the bill.

"We have concerns about any initiative that would funnel public dollars away from our public schools," wrote Alison May, spokesperson for the Delaware Department of Education.

The bill's supporters include parents of students with disabilities and conservative-leaning think tanks such as the Caesar Rodney Institute and the Goldwater Institute. Their uncommonly coordinated efforts in support of the bill include a [website](#) with parent testimonials.

Education savings accounts have emerged recently as a popular alternative to traditional school vouchers. In a voucher system, parents can take state money allocated for their child and use it to cover tuition at a private school. In essence, the state pays the private school to educate the child.

Education savings accounts are more flexible.

The state takes money it would have spent to educate a child and deposits it in a savings account. Parents can use that money on a vast array of pre-approved educational services. The parent could use the money to subsidize private school tuition or they could use it on a customized blend of services. They could even save the money and use it later for college tuition.

Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, Nevada, and Tennessee have all passed education savings account laws, according to the Friedman Foundation, a school choice advocacy group named after famed economist Milton Friedman. Similar to the proposal in Delaware, the laws in Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee are limited to students with disabilities.

"Generally speaking I think it makes good policy sense for a lot of states to start with accounts for students with special needs," Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank said. "They are most clearly the students who need resources outside the traditional classroom."

Proponents of education savings accounts say they allow parents to craft unique solutions for their children while reducing the burden on public schools.

"We're asking the public school system to be all things for all kids," Jonathan Butcher of the Goldwater Institute said. "That's not fair to the public school system."

Opponents say the measure would suck taxpayer dollars out of public schools, compromise state oversight of special education services, and potentially force local spending cuts if special education students flock to private providers.

"I feel this is a step to destroy our public schools," Rep. Harvey Kenton, R-Milford said. He added, "All 19 school districts have contacted me, not one in favor."

Other legislators worried the system could violate state law because it would steer state education money to private schools, including, potentially, religiously-affiliated schools. Arizona's education savings account law survived a challenge to its constitutionality. Nevada's proposal is on hold pending a court decision.

"To me the state constitution forbids this legislation," Rep. Paul Baumbach, R-Newark said.

The Delaware bill is intended to be cost neutral. If a special needs student opted for private school, his or her school district would lose the state funding attached to said student. The district, however, would no longer be responsible for educating the departed student and would thus save money.

But the promises of cost neutrality come with a couple of caveats.

Districts that lose special education students would receive less money and have lower costs. In essence they would become smaller districts, which could force them to lay off staff.

"I didn't get an answer on how many current teachers are gonna lose their jobs," Kenton said. "That's a big concern."

Delaware educates just under 20,000 special education students, a number that has climbed in recent years. Delaware's Office of Management and Budget estimates that for every six special education students that leave a school district, the district would lose about \$78,000 in state funding.

Other legislators, including Rep. Kim Williams, D-Newport, worry that current private school parents--those with no intention of ever sending their children to public schools--would enroll their children in local school districts just so they would be eligible for the savings accounts. They would then use the

money allotted through the savings accounts to subsidize their private school tuition bills. Were that scenario to play out, Delaware's education costs would rise because officially more students would be enrolled in the system.

Butcher, of the Goldwater Institute, believes those fears are unfounded. He says those that use the accounts tend to be parents of children with highly specialized needs that can't be met in traditional public schools.

"The parents that are going to sign up are highly motivated," he said. "They know what they need and they're upset."

Some of those parents testified in Legislative Hall on Wednesday. With voices quivering they told of exhaustive searches to find recourse in the traditional public schools. Many said they eventually blew through their personal savings to pay for private school.

Donna Alexander from Bear, Delaware, spoke about her son, Ryan, who was born with a rare brain disorder.

"He's going to be this amazing person, but I need to help him," she said.

This isn't the first time Delaware has considered an education savings account proposal.

A 2014 bill would have allowed parents of all Delaware students, not just those with special needs, to open education savings accounts. That measure, also sponsored by Rep. Hudson, was also tabled in the House Education Committee.