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Colorado school district has wealth, success — and an eye on vouchers

Douglas County Board of Education's plan to introduce school vouchers is being watched around the country.

By Nicholas Riccardi, Los Angeles Times

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Douglas County, a swath of subdivisions just south of here that is one of the nation's wealthiest, is something of a public school paradise.

The K-12 district, with 60,000 students, boasts high test scores and a strong graduation rate. Surveys show that 90% of its parents are satisfied with their children's schools.

That makes the Douglas County School District an unlikely frontier in the latest battle over school vouchers.

But a new, conservative school board is exploring a voucher system to give parents — regardless of income — taxpayer money to pay for their children to attend private schools that agree to abide by district regulations. If it's implemented, parents could receive more than \$4,000 per child.

The proposal's supporters argue that competition can only improve already-high-performing schools.

"We're an excellent school district in spite of our quasi-monopoly structure, not because of it," said Douglas County Board of Education member Dan Gerken. "The more good choices we can offer our parents and students, the better all those choices will get."

Though a formal plan isn't due to reach the board until at least next month, national education experts are watching Douglas closely, because vouchers have previously been used to help low-income families escape failing schools. Some say the district's envelope-pushing idea might help redefine how the U.S. views public schools and could provide a model for new Republican governors from Nevada to New Jersey who are trying to implement voucher programs.

Andrew Coulson, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, said the U.S. operates on a 100-year-old, one-size-fits-all education model that hasn't worked. Douglas' proposal, he said, "is bringing into the public dialogue an idea that people haven't thought about. They're ahead of the curve."

But to others, the idea is an alarming assault on the concept of public education and an attempt to get tax dollars to pay for religious schools. Opponents are already weighing legal challenges, and overflow crowds have filled the school board's meetings since the proposal surfaced in November.

"This whole voucher thing in Douglas County is just for a few privileged people ... who want to attend Christian schools," said Gail McDonnell, who has two sons in Douglas high schools. "I just feel like they're robbing my children."

Vouchers were first popularized in the 1980s, when some market-based school reformers proposed giving parents the tax money that would otherwise pay for their children's schooling to spend at whatever educational institution they chose. The most significant experiment has been in Milwaukee, where vouchers have been given to poor families to help them escape failing local schools.

In 1992, Colorado voters resoundingly rejected a statewide school voucher program. About 10 years later, the Legislature created a voucher program for poor children in failing schools, but the state Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional. The Douglas school district has hired a lawyer who worked on the state law to advise it on its voucher program.

In 2009, the Douglas County Republican Party took the unusual step of endorsing a slate of candidates for the school board. The slate took over the board and started a task force to study ways to expand the district's school choices. Parents can already opt for one of nine charter schools, two online programs or home-schooling. In Colorado, parents can also send their children to any school of their choosing outside their neighborhood, or even their district, provided it has room.

Last fall, the task force made several recommendations, the most controversial of which was the voucher program. The district doesn't like to use the politically loaded term "vouchers," preferring instead "scholarships" or "option certificates." In December, as opponents waved protest signs and banners at a meeting, the board voted unanimously to direct district officials to investigate how to structure a program and to submit a report in March.

Although there is no detailed proposal, the outlines are clear. The district would give 75% of the roughly \$6,000 in state funding it receives per student to parents to spend at private schools that contract with the district. The district would keep the remaining 25% for administrative costs.

Officials say the private schools would have to agree to evaluate students using Colorado's public school testing system; take all applicants they can, including those with special needs; and not engage in religious instruction.

Since all but one of the private schools in Douglas County are religious, however, opponents are skeptical that the latter condition can be enforced.

"It seems odd to me to say that 'we're one of the best school districts in the state, but the only way we can improve is to send our children to these private, religious schools,' " said Jeanne Beyer, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Education Assn., which represents teachers in other districts.

Critics also worry that Douglas will end up siphoning off increasingly scarce state tax dollars as the program grows, at the expense of other districts.

District officials say they believe the program will be relatively small at first — Gerken said it might have just 500 slots. And he said the district would contract with private schools outside the county to ensure there are more secular options.

Gerken also noted that, although the county is generally affluent, 8% of district students receive free or subsidized school lunches.

Some parents hope the idea is enacted. Karin Piper has one child in a Douglas County charter school, one in a private school and home-schools a third. A native of Sweden, she grew up in a country that gives tax money to parents of all income levels to pay private school tuition.

"It's cracking the door open and starting that conversation," said Piper, 39. "I am excited about a board that is adding options and testing the border a bit about where the line for school choice and families should be."

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