

Road gets rougher for school vouchers

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JAN MURPHY, The Patriot-News
 By

The roller-coaster ride that school-choice advocates have been on this past week would rival any at Hersheypark.

The ride hit a couple of tall peaks, with Gov. Tom Corbett giving a rousing endorsement of school choice in Washington, D.C. The state House voted to expand a popular tax credit program to aid private and public schools.

By week's end, the coaster dropped, leaving advocates sitting on the tracks. Now, it appears any school-choice plan could be delayed for months, possibly into the fall.

The desire to offer families help to obtain some type of school choice has never been stronger in Pennsylvania. But the governor and lawmakers are divided on how to do it. Leaders of the GOP-controlled House and Senate have clashing views and priorities.

Some prefer to stick with a popular tax credit program to spur businesses to fund private school scholarships or novel public school programs.

Others like that program, but want to offer families taxpayer-funded vouchers to help get kids into better schools.

Increasingly, many lawmakers say the school-choice debate is going to have to wait, because attention must be focused on the 2011-12 state budget. The current fiscal year ends June 30.

Proponents of vouchers worry that if there's no action in the near future, it could be harder to ever pass a plan. They worry that delays could erode legislative support.



John C. Whitehead, The Patriot-News

Jayde Isaac, 8, and Kristen Haughney, 11, from St. William School in Philadelphia show their support for the Pennsylvania Grassroots School Choice Coalition on April 12.

A spokeswoman for Corbett declined to discuss the status of the talks in the Legislature.

"At this point, we're just going to say that the governor supports school choice and is looking forward to continuing to work with the members of the House and the Senate," said Janet Kelley, a spokeswoman.

Different priorities

For school-choice advocates, last week started on a high note.

In a speech to the American Federation for Children in Washington, D.C., on Monday, Corbett renewed his commitment to an education system in which money follows the child.

"In the coming days, Pennsylvania will begin, once again, the long path toward making school choice a reality," he said.

One day later, the state House overwhelmingly approved a bill to expand the Educational Improvement Tax Credit. With a 190-7 vote, the House voted to expand the \$60 million program to \$200 million by 2012-13.

Following Tuesday's vote, House Majority Leader Mike Turzai, R-Allegheny County, said his chamber has done its work on school choice for now. He said it's time to focus on the budget.

Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi, R-Delaware County, said unless House leaders change their stance, the Senate likely will put off the voucher issue off.

Pileggi said the Senate won't consider an expansion of the tax credit program without including a voucher component.

The Senate leader said the voucher bill has enough support to pass in that chamber, along with Corbett's endorsement. But the House must act on it.

"The House has not seemed inclined to take up the issue in the weeks ahead. That could change, and if it does change, there's certainly sufficient time to finish our work on that issue" before the summer recess, he said.

Senate Democratic Leader Jay Costa, D-Allegheny County, said his caucus supports expansion of the tax credit program. Still, he said it would be wiser to focus on the budget, particularly the governor's proposed cuts to public schools.

Besides, he said he doubts the voucher bill has the votes to get through the Legislature.

Opponents remain wary

Voucher opponents aren't letting down their guard.

They say there's a lot of time between now and June 30 to get the school-choice discussion back on track.

Opponents of taxpayer-funded vouchers argue that they would siphon money from public schools. They also say the voucher bill does not provide enough accountability to ensure tax dollars going to private or parochial schools are money well spent.

Boosters for and against vouchers have spurred spirited rallies at the state Capitol.

The Pennsylvania State Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, remains vigilant, spokesman Wythe Keverer said.

"We could organize additional events on short notice," he said. The PSEA is urging teachers and the public to keep up the pressure on lawmakers and are airing advertisements opposing vouchers.

Baruch Kintisch, policy advocacy director for the Education Law Center in Philadelphia, suspects the divide among legislative leaders isn't as stark as it appears.

"My experience is those kind of public statements are usually intended as posturing for back-room decisions," Kintisch said.

School choice advocates, meanwhile, hope Corbett uses his clout to get the school voucher bill moving again.

"The momentum is behind us," said Otto Banks, executive director of REACH Foundation, a Harrisburg-based school-choice advocacy group. "Many of the individuals who were not in support of choice are now currently in support of choice."

Some worry that if the bill is delayed for months, legislative support could wane.

"I don't know what will be the climate in the fall — whether the issue will still have the support in the General Assembly that it has now, whether additional issues are raised that occupy our attention — so it appears to be a wasted opportunity," Pileggi said.

"But I said there is still time if there is interest," he added.

Credits vs. vouchers

Many lawmakers who dislike vouchers support the tax credit program.

But Pileggi and others say the tax credit program no longer is enough. Vouchers would bring real school choice to families, he said.

State Sen. Jeffrey Piccola, R-Dauphin County, who is the prime sponsor of the voucher bill, told some media outlets that the House-approved tax credit bill was "dead on arrival." Piccola didn't respond to messages seeking comment.

Piccola's remarks irked a coalition of tea party advocates that sees the tax credit program as providing broad-based school choice.

"Why would Sen. Piccola ... make such an irresponsible remark?" asked Teri Adams, president of the Independence Hall Tea Party Association and a leader of the Grassroots Coalition for Real School Choice.

The tax credit program pleases fiscal conservatives because it's funded by corporate donations. "The program is not a budget buster," said Sharon Cherubin, another coalition leader.

The PSEA once opposed the tax credit program. It is now largely neutral after seeing the benefits it has provided to public schools.

But spokesman David Broderic said the union has concerns about a big expansion of the program, and what the union sees as inadequate accountability measures.

Voucher proponents say the problem is the tax credit program's scholarship funds are limited to the contributions that companies make. They impose an administrative burden on scholarship organizations to raise money.

Voucher fans say the tax credits won't ensure that enough money is available to help lower-income families, particularly those with children stuck in failing schools.

Scholarships that come out of the tax credit program usually don't exceed \$1,100, forcing poor families to seek numerous scholarships to cover private school tuition, Banks said.

Andrew Coulson of the Washington, D.C.-based libertarian Cato Institute argues that private schools have another reason to favor tax credits over vouchers.

He looked at the 20 voucher and tax credit programs in 15 states and the District of Columbia. He found that voucher programs tend to come with more strings attached than tax credit programs.

"If I ran a private school, knowing what I know about both kinds of programs, I would prefer tax credits," Coulson said.

“One of the reasons educators are willing to work in private schools even though the pay is usually less than in the public sector is that they have much more professional freedom. ... With vouchers, a lot of that autonomy is ultimately sacrificed.”

Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Education Reform, said tax credit programs have helped families exercise school choice. But they were a compromise at a time when there was little interest or appreciation of the broader options that vouchers bring.

Giving vouchers to families to find a better school can make a difference in the lives of children, Allen argues.

“The Educational Improvement Tax Credit does not reach everyone who needs help,” she said. “Turning state education dollars into scholarships for kids most in need is a powerful lever for immediate change, for student and school.”

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