

Democrat Proposes Chicago Vouchers

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Interview with Dan Proff: School Vouchers Coming to Chicago?

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country's worst school districts. Approximately 80 percent of Chicago fourth graders are not proficient in basic math and reading, and half the city's students drop out.

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SPRINGFIELD — Lottery tickets can give 1,000 Chicago kids school choice, one Chicago Democrat says.

State Rep. LaShawn Ford (D-Chicago) has introduced legislation that would pull nearly \$6 million from the Illinois lottery for K-8 private school "scholarships."

Lawmakers opened Illinois' lottery in the 1980s to "save" public education. Illinois' education budget was nearly \$4 billion last year, and the lottery pumped about \$600 million into it. House Bill 78 would use \$6 million of it for scholarships.

"In one ZIP code in Chicago alone there is nearly \$60 million in ticket sales," Ford said. "Why don't we take some of that and use it to give kids in that area a choice?"

His legislation would apply to Chicago students only. Chicago has long been one of the

Backers and Opponents

John Russell, who heads school choice group Freedom to Learn Illinois, said Ford's plan will put the Democrat at odds with Chicago's teachers union.

"Teachers — most teachers — care about their kids, but teachers unions only care about the union," Russell said.

Russell said because tension remains between the Chicago Teachers' Union and Mayor Rahm Emanuel over September's teacher strike, Ford's legislation may find more supporters.

Illinois' last serious attempt at school choice failed in 2000 when the Illinois House voted down a plan to let students attending poor-performing schools choose another.

Russell said Illinois' powerful teachers union killed that legislation. The Illinois Education

Association, one of the state's largest teachers' unions, did not respond to calls for this story.

Careful Labeling

Ford said he does not think Illinois would adopt a full school-choice program yet, which is why his legislation offers "scholarships."

"Illinois OK'd civil unions because they were called civil unions, not gay marriage," Ford added. "The value of a scholarship is the same. It's just not called a voucher."

HB78 would allot \$6,000 for each student's private tuition through eighth grade.

The \$6,000 is just below Illinois' required per-pupil public school funding level of \$6,100. Chicago Public Schools spend \$10,000 per student, according to the Cato Institute.

Bill Prospects

Ford said he can get his legislation to a vote this spring, but he's sure it will become law.

"We have to convince individual lawmakers that we need innovative ways to educate our kids," Ford said.

Russell said Ford may have a shot at getting his school choice legislation approved, in part because of the mayor-union spat.

CTU members walked out of classrooms in September 2011 in a fight over pay and teacher evaluations. The union is still bickering with Emanuel over the mayor's desire to close several half-empty Chicago schools, and possibly turn them into charter schools.

Ford said it's too early to tell how that fight will influence his bill.