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Do vouchers help students?

Both supporters and critics say evidence backs their position on measure Gov. Corbett wants to allow in Pennsylvania.

By John L. Micek, Call Harrisburg Bureau

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HARRISBURG — Ask Gov. Tom Corbett how to fix what ails Pennsylvania's public schools and you'll get an unequivocal answer:

"What we need to do is create the competition," the Republican said recently as he rolled out a revamped school reform agenda at a charter school in York. "When we have failing schools, we know we have failing students."

Corbett wants to foster that competition, at least in part, by allowing parents to use taxpayer-funded vouchers to send their child to a public, private or parochial school of their choice. The child's tax dollars would follow him or her to the new school.

The governor's reform package also calls for additional tax credits for businesses that donate to private scholarship organizations, changes in the regulation of charter schools and new evaluation standards for public school teachers. Corbett hopes to have the proposals approved by year's end and in place for the 2012-13 school year.

The administration's vouchers plan, which still must pass the Legislature, calls for vouchers for students in the worst-performing 5 percent of schools by the start of the 2012-13 school year. The students would also have to meet certain income guidelines. About 140 schools would be affected to start.

But the effectiveness of vouchers as a tool for improving student performance is the subject of intense — and often partisan — debate. Backers say parents struggling financially should have the same opportunity as more affluent neighbors to pull their

student out of a failing school.

"Enabling more parents to choose the school ... their children attend will do more to improve performance and bring accountability than any other factor," said Michael Geer, president of the Pennsylvania Family Council, which supports vouchers.

Opponents argue there's no proof vouchers work. They say that allowing a child to take their tax money with them to a new school will just drain more money from public schools already reeling from state budget cuts.

"I don't see it [vouchers] leading to a viable solution to the problems facing American education," said Michael J. Carbone, chairman of the education department at Muhlenberg College in Allentown.

Academic and official research on vouchers is equally split, with researchers reaching different conclusions about programs already in operation in several cities.

In Milwaukee, where vouchers have been in use for 20 years, state test results for the first time showed voucher students performing "similar or worse" than other poor students in the city, the Wisconsin State Journal reported in March, citing official state data.

Yet research released in January by a group called School Choice Wisconsin found higher high school graduation rates among children who attended voucher schools than those who did not. In 2009, 82 percent of students in voucher schools graduated from high school, compared to 70 percent of students in the city's public schools.

And that's part of the problem: Researchers are still having trouble gauging the effect of vouchers on student performance.

Nathan Benefield, a policy analyst for the Harrisburg-based Commonwealth Foundation, which supports vouchers, acknowledged the difficulty in trying to assemble clean data.

Vouchers work, Benefield said, pointing to a March survey by the Atlanta-based Friedman Foundation of dozens of studies of school choice programs in several states. In general, those studies found vouchers improved public schools. None of the studies showed that vouchers harmed public schools, the foundation's research concluded.

Voucher benefits tended to be modest because "the programs themselves are modest," the foundation concluded.

Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst, the director of the Brown Center for Education Policy at The Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., said the positive effects from vouchers tend to accrue over time.

Citing a vouchers program in Washington, Whitehurst said there were higher graduation rates and greater parental satisfaction, but not an immediate effect on academic

performance.

"You tend to find that, in a choice setting, you see longer-term positive effects," he said. "There aren't necessarily immediate effects."

Whitehurst also noted that the performance of surrounding public schools tended to improve after they had to compete with vouchered institutions because there was a "loss of customers."

Even as the debate over vouchers rages, groups at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum are also arguing for what they say are more effective alternatives.

Writing in the Wall Street Journal last month, Adam Schaeffer, a policy analyst for the Washington D.C.-based Cato Institute, argued that vouchers in Pennsylvania could be stopped in their tracks — as was the case in Colorado — by language in the state Constitution banning the appropriation of public money to "any denominational or sectarian institution."

The tax credit programs for business — which Corbett wants to expand — don't have those problems and have stood up to court challenges. That's because vouchers use public funds. The tax credits apply to private donations, he said.

On Wednesday, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, which opposes vouchers, offered recommendations to improve public schools, including continued state support for early childhood education.

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