

House committee defeats school voucher bill

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The **House Education Committee** this morning defeated SB 539 to create a **statewide school voucher program** to spend \$3 million a year to send perhaps 400 students a year to private schools.

There was extended debate and some Republicans sided with public school forces that opposed the bill. I don't have the final count, but it was split, with 11 votes needed to advance. **Rep. Bruce Cozart**, the committee chair, had declared it passed on a voice vote, but the roll call fell short.

The count was announced as 7 for and 11 against, with two not voting — chair Cozart and vice chair Reginald Murdoch. Republicans Gary Deffenbaugh, Nelda Speaks, Frances Cavanaugh, Jonathan Eubanks, DeAnn Vaught, Jana Della Rosa and ~~Les Evans~~ Brian Evans voted no. Democrats Fred Allen, John Walker, Denise Garner and LeAnne Burch also opposed the bill.

The next question is whether this opens a door to revive Gov. Asa Hutchinson's bill, killed in Senate committee, that would start a voucher program solely in Pulaski County. It faces a likely legal challenge, as well as philosophical, as local special legislation.

[This bill debated today](#), by **Sen. Ken Bragg of Sheridan** (whose district has no private schools), is a scholarship version of several types of voucher programs around the country. Taxpayers get a direct tax credit for sending money to a nonprofit that will dole out vouchers equal to the almost \$7,000 a year the state provides for public school students. In other words, their tax money goes to private schools, not to state general revenues. Public schools lose those students. The treasury loses the money, about half of which goes to public schools, the rest to other public services.

He got many questions, including from **Rep. LeAnne Burch** who pressed him on what he'd say to those who think the bill is an assault on public schools. He kept reiterating the word "choice." **Rep. John Walker** couldn't get a specific answer to his question of who exactly the bill was meant to help, except those from lower income.

Questions also were asked about what happens if more people seek the credit than can be given in a year. Bragg said DFA would have to work that out.

Rep. Fred Allen asked if the bill opened a "Pandora's box"? Bragg acknowledged that the bill could be expanded, but, again, "it's just a choice."

Said Allen: "Any time we start a new program, or picking various students, that Pandora's box is open. The next thing you know we'll have an influx of people who want to do the same thing."

Rep. Reginald Murdock criticized Bragg for not including in planning for the bill those people supposedly targeted.

Rep. Walker noted that \$6,800 won't cover private school costs at many private schools. "That doesn't expand choice does it? It only restricts them to schools that will accept \$6,800."

Rep. Mickey Gates (R-Hot Springs), the accused felony tax cheat, suggested programs in other states hadn't crippled public schools. Bragg said he had not seen detrimental effects.

Rep. Denise Garner (D-Fayetteville) asked if there was a church-state issue in opening the program to religious schools. She noted the difficulty of rural students in reaching private schools. "So the very students we're trying to help are not going to be helped by this bill?" Some will, he said.

Rep. DeAnn Vaught said a private school in her district was concerned that the state might influence what is taught. Bragg said the state couldn't dictate that. Vaught said the private schools still fear use of tax dollars might open the door to scrutiny of them. Technically, he also said, the money wouldn't be tax dollars after being laundered through the nonprofit agency. And, this of course, is but one of many examples of why the program isn't accountable.

Brian Duffy, superintendent of the Jacksonville-North Pulaski District, objected to accountability, or lack of. Private schools aren't held to the same requirements as public schools on any number of areas relative to staff, curriculum and more.

Rep. Grant Hodges asked why Duffy cares, if it's a parents choice. Simple, Duffy said. State money is tied to the private school.

The School Boards Association opposed the bill for lack of standards. A spokeswoman for Catholic schools said the bill would provide more support for existing scholarship students in Catholic schools. She also said the schools meet private school accreditation standards.

A rural education association spokesman wondered why some of the richest people in the country are pushing the voucher agenda. He suggested the movement is to create private, for-profit schools. "This seemingly innocuous bill is just the beginning," he said.

Richard Abernathy, director of the Arkansas Association of Education Administrators, opposed the bill. He emphasized accountability. It includes an assessment of students. This program and an earlier smaller voucher program for student with learning problems has no assessment requirement like that for regular public school students.

Grant Hodges wanted to know what private schools can do by way of waivers that public schools cannot do. "Turn down students," was the response.

In the end the argument was about a non-existent "right" for poorer families to get public money to go to private schools and the lack of oversight of private schools comparable to that given public schools in return for state money.

Rep. Stephen Meeks said there was no harm in trying a pilot program that could be folded if it failed.

Walker objected. "We need a uniform accountability system. ... That has to be fundamental. We cannot be experimenting with our children."

Rep. Burch [noted the state analysis of significant legal problems](#) in how the bill was written.

Rep. Mark Lowery (R-Maumelle) said there'd be no harm to public schools because they'll be funded regardless. He also bridled at criticism of "philanthropists" who support the school choice effort.

Rep. Jana Della Rosa said this wasn't philanthropy. It was giving the state's money to private schools.

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