

Statesman

Private school vouchers, once Texas GOP priority, see diminished support

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The issue of **private school vouchers** — shifting public education dollars to private school tuition — once a priority of conservative state lawmakers from suburban districts, seems destined for the back burner during the coming legislative session.

At least a half-dozen more opponents to the idea were elected to the Texas Legislature this month, amid widespread Democratic gains. In past sessions, Democrats and rural Republicans, concerned that a voucher system would erode traditional public schools, blocked all voucher measures in the House. Voucher bills have easily passed the GOP-dominated Senate.

Proponents call the idea “school choice” because it would give some students the option to leave poorly rated neighborhood public schools for private ones.

Meanwhile, the education focus at the Capitol has shifted to repairing a broken system of funding public schools. Last week, Dennis Bonnen, R-Angleton, the likely next speaker of the House, **singled out school finance as the priority** for the chamber, and Gov. Greg Abbott’s school finance plan was introduced at a **meeting at the Capitol**.

That’s left public school teachers and their advocates hopeful that the Legislature won’t have much appetite for a voucher bill.

“I like having the ability to choose when I’m making a purchase, but I don’t see education in that same light. The best opportunity for the population we have is in public education — a well-funded public education system — and if we want to get to the goals that we want to get to, that’s not going to happen by just handing kids a voucher and saying, ‘Good luck,’” said Michelle Smith with Austin-based public school advocacy group Raise Your Hand Texas.

Kara Belew, senior education policy adviser for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which supports using state dollars or resources to help families afford private school tuition, hasn’t yet written off private school vouchers or systems similar to it.

“There will continue to be lots of pressure for the Legislature to offer school choice across Texas. There are 1,066 traditional public schools with 606,036 students that are rated a D or F, which generally means students are not performing at grade level and not learning each year,” Belew said. “In most cases, these students are assigned to these D or F schools and are offered no free alternative.”

Teacher vote

Last legislative session, private school vouchers were among the **priorities for Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick** and Gov. Greg Abbott.

Supporters said vouchers would improve all schools by introducing competition, though lawmakers who opposed voucher legislation said it would take dollars away from public schools which have been critically underfunded.

For teacher groups, the voucher bill was a litmus test for candidates in the March primaries and November general election, with Patrick becoming the top target.

“Emotionally, I really would’ve liked to have gotten Dan Patrick, too, but realistically to gain the kind of seats we had in the House, in the Senate, in the State Board of Education, this was the best-case scenario,” said Troy Reynolds, head of the 28,000-member **Texans for Public Education**, composed of educators and school professionals.

Operating mostly on Facebook, the group created lists of candidates it deemed friendly and unfriendly to public education, basing their ratings on voting records or candidates’ campaign promises.

Teachers supported candidates who were committed to fighting against vouchers, boosting funding for public schools, fixing the state’s crumbling Teacher Retirement System and reducing onerous standardized tests, Reynolds said.

Reynolds believes that his group moved more than 100,000 votes in the November election. Teacher groups also credited the candidacy of Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Beto O’Rourke for helping. Groups believe turnout for teachers was on par with the state’s overall turnout of 53 percent.

“There’s visible lack of support for public education. In Texas, educators can’t strike, can’t collectively bargain, so really their power is in their vote. This is modeling civic engagement for kids,” said Laura Yeager, head of get-out-the-vote group Texas Educators Vote.

Democratic gains

The House gained five more anti-voucher votes — overall, Democrats flipped 12 seats — and the Senate gained one, Reynolds said. In the upper chamber, that might be enough to block any voucher bill.

According to Senate rules, 19 senators must vote in favor of bringing a bill to the floor for debate. Last year, there were 20 Senate Republicans, with Sen. Kel Seliger, R-Amarillo, the lone GOP senator who consistently opposed vouchers. This year, there are just 19 Republicans, and Seliger won re-election.

“And where there were contested primary elections, almost categorically the Republicans who ran as friends of public education prevailed over those who said we need more school choice, we need more vouchers; so I don’t see appetite on either side of the aisle,” said Louis Malfaro, head of Texas American Federation of Teachers.

Among those lawmakers ousted in the House was Rep. Ron Simmons, R-Carrollton, who proposed unsuccessful bills to create a state voucher system and limit transgender-friendly bathroom policies in schools and other government buildings. Rep. Matt Rinaldi, R-Irving, also lost re-election; he was a member of the ultraconservative Freedom Caucus that supports vouchers.

In Central Texas suburbs, four Democrats took GOP-held seats, saying they support mandating the state's share of public education funding be set at 50 percent. It's estimated to be 38 percent in 2019.

"Texas Parent PAC has never interviewed and endorsed so many smart, highly engaged candidates who were really focused on public education. Legislators really need courage to deal with the issues of school finance. We only endorsed candidates who would do what's right," said Carolyn Boyle, head of **Texas Parent PAC, which saw 42 of its endorsed candidates win.**

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