

Proposals on school vouchers split GOP

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For the second-straight regular legislative session, state lawmakers, led by Republicans, rejected GOP-backed legislation to use public funds on private-school tuition.

The disagreements have caused frustration and some inner-party conflict.

Supporters of the voucher programs see the opposition as an aspersion of the Republican Party of Arkansas' platform, but the GOP lawmakers who are leery of such programs see them as the state turning its back on its most basic responsibilities to public education.

Senate Bill 539 by Sen. Blake Johnson, R-Corning, would have created a tax-credit scholarship program for low-income, kindergarten-through-12th-grade students, capped at \$3 million a year. The Senate approved the bill, but it died in the House Education Committee under the opposition of seven Republicans and four Democrats on the 20-member panel.

The second proposal, Senate Bill 620, also by Johnson, would have created a pilot program focused solely on Pulaski County. It never made it out of the Senate Education Committee.

The strongest opposition to the voucher proposals came from public school district superintendents. Rep. Ken Bragg, R-Sheridan, the House sponsor of SB539, said that group can sway legislators.

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"It is pretty frustrating," Bragg said of the opposition from within his party. "It mainly comes comes back to the influence of superintendents and local schools. That outweighs the commitment to that part of the [the state Republican Party] platform. I think they have the perception that they'd lose votes."

The two voucher proposals were the most debated education issues of the 2019 regular legislative session, which recessed last week pending final adjournment. Democrats uniformly opposed the bills in both chambers, while Republicans, who have the majority of seats in both houses, split.

Both of the proposed programs would have created scholarships for low-income students to attend approved private schools. The voucher amounts would have equaled the state's base per-student funding rate for public schools -- \$6,781 this school year.

SB620 was introduced with much more fanfare, including news conferences from Gov. Asa Hutchinson and the state Republican Party, but the immediate opposition was just as loud.

In a surprise move, Johnson presented SB539 to the Senate Revenue and Taxation Committee on the same day that many expected him to present SB620 to the Senate Education Committee.

SB539 succeeded in the committee and in the full Senate, where it passed 21-10 with two Republicans voting nay, two not voting and one voting present.

The bill drew a much longer debate in the House Education Committee, where representatives from both parties questioned whether the bill's language was clear and if it included the proper accountability structure.

The bill -- needing 11 votes -- failed after lawmakers voted 7-11 on a motion to send it to the House.

Rep. Nelda Speaks, R-Mountain Home, who voted against SB539 in the House committee, said in an interview that she had "deep concerns" that the program would hurt public schools. She noted that schools would not only lose the state foundation funding attached to each student that transfers to a private school but also any federal lunch assistance money.

She added that Arkansas already has school choice, referring to the state program that allows students to attend participating public schools outside the district where they live.

"When you open that door, you're not going to get it shut," Speaks said, referring to private-school vouchers.

Rep. Jon Eubanks, R-Paris, also voted against SB539 in House Education, but he said he didn't have any philosophical objection to the proposal. For him, it was about funding priorities. He said he wanted to first increase money flowing to other programs, namely career education.

"We know how important that is for our businesses today," he said. "Personally, I didn't think it was time to start a new program when we're not adequately funding the programs we already have."

A similar fight played out in 2017. Senate Bill 746 by Johnson passed in the Senate, and it even cleared the House Education Committee before failing in two floor votes before the full House, where a number of Republicans voted against it.

That bill proposed creating tax-advantaged education saving accounts to fund private-school vouchers. The accounts, under that bill, could be funded by individual taxpayers or by corporate taxpayers who would receive a tax credit.

Rep. Jim Dotson, R-Bentonville, was the House sponsor of that proposal, and he expressed some frustrations when that bill failed two years ago. He was one of seven Republicans who supported SB539 in the House Education Committee, evoking similar feelings.

"People should ask their representatives where they stand on these tough issues," Dotson said after the vote.

The state Republican Party platform states: "Every opportunity for every family to enroll each child in the school of its choice should be secured by government and offered to Arkansas families. Parents must have the ability to make informed choices regarding the education of

their children and should not be reined in by lines on a map or the cost of tuition. As such, we support state government creating ways where families can make the best choice for their children's education and be able to afford it."

Asked about the conflicts over the issue, state Republican Party Chairman Doyle Webb said the issue will remain a focus.

"We always encourage support of our platform," Webb said in a statement. "Educational choice will continue to be brought forward to allow parents to make the best choices for their children's educational future, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances."

Bragg said that polling suggests broad support for programs like the one outlined in SB539. He said he'd be willing to tweak the accountability structure included in the bills, which was the primary concern voiced by superintendents. But he added that parents provided the best accountability to such a program.

"I don't think we'll ever give up on the chance to try and help students," Bragg said. "I'm not sure what it will look like, but we'll entertain any other modifications. I'd like to see some progress next session."

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