

CHARTER SCHOOLS CLEAR LEGISLATURE; VOUCHER PLAN PASSES SENATE, BUT COULD HAVE TROUBLE IN THE HOUSE; EDUCATION BILL CREATES NEW CHARTER SCHOOLS

Judy Fahys and Dan Harrie

The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: Feb 28, 1998. pg. A. 1

Copyright The Salt Lake Tribune Feb. 28, 1998

Two cornerstones of Gov. Mike Leavitt's education agenda for 1998, pilot charter schools and 21st Century Schools, passed the Legislature on Friday.

A more controversial bill that would give a tax break to parents who pull their children out of public schools and enroll them in private institutions cleared the Senate, but its sponsor was scrambling to find a backer in the House.

The House voted 48-24 and the Senate 15-9 to pass House Bill 145, which implements a pilot program for charter schools and an incentive program designed to reward certain other schools for meeting advanced academic goals.

"We have a lot of grass-roots support in the community -- people who really want to see this have a chance," said sponsoring Rep. Brian Allen, R-Holladay.

The initiative has been one of Leavitt's top legislative priorities for this session, and indeed Lt. Gov. Olene Walker and other deputies were in the chambers to help ensure the bill's passage.

The plan was refined by a six-month task force of legislators, educators and parents who hoped to find new ways to inspire and motivate students.

Under it, schools that volunteer to become 21st Century Schools would be given \$50,000 to \$125,000 if they meet self-created academic goals within three years. In addition, eight public charter schools would be authorized with a focus on areas of special interest to students -- fine arts or the sciences, for example.

Although Leavitt requested \$2 million for the initiative, legislators have approved only \$1.3 million. As a result, about 30 schools will be able to participate in the incentive program instead of the 60 originally proposed.

"It's a change in focus from planning and goal setting to planning and goal achieving," Allen said.

Critics of the bill said it might take the focus -- and funding -- from existing public schools. And they questioned the charter-school pilot program.

One proposed amendment would have given districts, rather than the State Board of Education, the final authority over continuing the charter schools. Another would have limited the number of special-focus charter schools to four. Both amendments failed.

The bill now goes to the governor for his signature.

Earlier Friday, the Senate voted 17-10 in favor of a limited school-voucher plan that its sponsor describes as a "growth-management tool."

Under Senate Bill 155, school boards could grant income-tax credits equal to roughly \$1,900, or about the amount of annual state funding per student.

Only students enrolled in a participating public school for at least six months at the time the legislation would take effect, and who then transferred to a private school, could qualify. That provision is designed to keep parents whose children already are in private schools from claiming the tax break.

Sponsoring Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, claims public schools would benefit in two ways: They would be less crowded and they would be able to keep some tax monies for students who left to attend private schools.

Stephenson said the public-school district would retain about \$1,900 in local property-tax revenues annually for a student who transferred out.

"This actually increases the amount of money available on a per-student basis because half of the money remains," Stephenson said.

Nonsense, countered opponents.

"I'm concerned about taking money away from our public-school system," said Sen. Millie Peterson, D-West Valley City. "When we can't afford to buy sufficient textbooks for our public-school students, can we really afford to give money away to private schools?"

"It's a bad bill," said Sen. Lorin Jones, R-Veyo. "We shouldn't divert our public dollars for private purposes."

Sen. Joe Hull, D-Hooper and a school teacher, argued that the idea of public subsidies for private schools will foster "elitism" in education, with an ever-widening "chasm" between haves and have-nots.

Despite Senate approval, the measure faces a legislative obstacle course.

Education groups from teacher unions to the Utah Association of School Boards and the PTA oppose the bill. And on Friday afternoon, Stephenson was scrambling to find a House sponsor to get it through that chamber with just three days left in the 1998 legislative session.