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Express-News
San Antonio, TX
Circ 252359

MAR 13 2003

Voucher bill includes the SASD

Program would let students in low-income districts go to private facilities.



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By **LUCY HOOD AND BRIDGET GUTIERREZ**
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITERS

A bipartisan school voucher bill filed Wednesday would allow students in 11 of the state's largest school districts — including the San Antonio School District — to use public money to attend private schools.

The bill, backed by two Republican and two Democratic legislators, would create a pilot program in school districts with an enrollment of more than 40,000 and a majority of economically disadvantaged students.

SASD Superintendent Rubén Olivárez

said he hadn't seen the bill, but was opposed in principle to a program that takes money from public schools and puts it into private schools, especially given the current state budget crunch.

"It doesn't square," he said, "that this kind of legislation would be introduced at the very same time when we're fighting for every penny that we can keep without losing the quality of educational services we're providing to students."

Republican leaders, however, applauded the legislation in a statement released by Rep. Kent Grusendorf, R-Arlington, chairman of the House Public Education Committee and one of the bill's sponsors.

The other sponsors are Reps. Mike Krusee, R-Round Rock; Ron Wilson, D-

See BILL/5A

Bill would create voucher program

Texas voucher proposal



Under the plan, students in school districts that serve more than 40,000 kids, where a majority are low-income, would be eligible for state vouchers to pay for private school tuition. Eleven districts would be affected.

DISTRICT	ENROLLMENT
Aldine	55,367
Allief	44,661
Austin	78,608
Brownsville	44,340
Dallas	163,347
El Paso	63,185
Fort Worth	81,081
Houston	212,099
Pasadena	44,836
San Antonio	57,120
Ysleta	46,745

Sources: State Rep. Kent Grusendorf's office, Texas Education Agency

ROBERT ZAVALA/STAFF

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Houston; and Glenn Lewis, D-Fort Worth.

Observers say the pilot voucher program, proposed several times in the past, has its best chance of passing at a time when Republicans dominate the state's top elected offices.

Under the bill, students considered low-income would be allowed to apply for a voucher to attend a private school of their choice; the private school must be accredited by an entity approved by the Texas Education Agency.

The measure would allow the public school to keep 10 percent of the amount of the voucher. The private school would get either 90 percent of the voucher amount or the private school's average annual cost per student, whichever is less.

Private schools accepting vouchers would be required to administer an education assessment test — not necessarily the

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RUBÉN OLIVÁREZ

superintendent of San Antonio School District

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills — and to make the overall results public.

"I'm glad to know there are Republicans and Democrats willing to take this step," Gov. Rick Perry said in the statement. "They know what I know: When you give parents a choice — you give children a chance."

Grusendorf said the legislation "allows us to find out how public schools and the private sector ... will respond to maximum freedom to provide for the educational needs of the children of this state."

The bill, however, met with

vocal opposition.

"Until I see how we could fit vouchers into the mix in a budget crisis, I can't support it," said Rep. Rene Oliveira, D-Brownsville, whose Brownsville School District is among the 11 targeted by the bill.

In Bexar County, North East and Northside school districts both have more than 40,000 students but are not included because less than half are considered low-income.

The Texas Freedom Network and the Coalition for Public Schools, which represents some 35 organizations, including the

state's leading teacher organizations, also voiced opposition.

"Most Texans want legislators to focus on their public schools," Freedom Network Director Samantha Smoot said, "not on diverting money out and subsidizing private schools."

The San Antonio-based Texas Public Policy Foundation reiterated its support for vouchers.

"It is good to see our legislators seriously looking at making more educational opportunities available to more people," TPPF spokesman Michael Sullivan said. "As the foundation has said for a long time, educational choice shouldn't reside solely in the purview of rich whites."

And Dale Hoyt, superintendent of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of San Antonio, sees vouchers as a lifesaver for his struggling inner-city campuses as well as for poor families who want a religious education but cannot afford one.

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