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Pilot voucher program praised

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AUSTIN — Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman told legislators Tuesday that private school vouchers would improve public education in Texas by forcing the system to compete with other schools and would give parents more choice in their child's education.

"The most important thing we can do is find something to give parents control. It's their children, it's their problem and the question is how can we arrange to have control," Friedman said.

Poor education is the result of no competition in the nation's education system, said Friedman, 90, who won the Nobel Prize for Economic Science in 1976.

The House Committee on Public Education Tuesday considered two bills that would create state-paid private school voucher pilot programs in Texas.

House Bill 668 by Rep. Ron Wilson, D-Houston, would create a

Nobel-winning economist says it would help public education

pilot program for poor students in the state's six largest school districts. Committee Chairman Rep. Kent Grusendorf, R-Arlington, recently filed House Bill 2465 that would provide a pilot voucher program in school districts with more than 40,000 students and a majority of poor students.

A voucher program would allow parents to take the average state aid their student would bring to a public school — estimated to be \$4,700 to \$5,700 depending on the district — and use it to pay tuition at an accredited private school.

Friedman said while he supports the legislation, it is broad and needs to be available to all Texas students, free of charge, with no restrictions.

Public schools would be forced to compete and improve if students were using vouchers to attend private schools, he said.

"We have been spending more and more on education over the years, but we have not been getting any better product," Friedman said.

Friedman has been a Senior Research Fellow at Stanford University since 1977. The Milton and Ross D. Friedman Foundation promotes improvements in public education.

Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, a member of the committee, said vouchers will hurt public schools, not help them.

Dutton said there is no plan to help public schools recover losses from students who use vouchers.

The Houston Independent School District has more than 200,000 students who could be affected by voucher legislation, Dutton said.

"Even if we let 2,000 of them go someplace else, we would still

have 198,000 students that we have to fix the schools for," Dutton said.

Chris Patterson, director of education research at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which supports vouchers, said Texas needs them.

"The great myth is that vouchers are some kind of experiment," Patterson said. "When Texas established the public schools in 1876, it did so using a voucher system."

Samantha Smoot, executive director of the Texas Freedom Network, a group that opposes vouchers and other priorities of social conservatives, said the state's schools would lose money from a loss of students using vouchers.

"We believe first and foremost that public funds should stay in public schools, and that vouchers would drain money out of our neighborhood public schools," Smoot said.

Gov. Rick Perry and House Speaker Tom Craddick support vouchers.