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Panel OKs school voucher bill

By April Castro

Associated Press

AUSTIN — During an impromptu meeting Thursday, the House Public Education Committee hastily approved legislation that would allocate government money to low-income parents in certain school districts to transfer their children from public to private schools.

The bipartisan committee voted 4-3 to refer the bill favorably to the House Calendar Committee, which sets a date for a full vote on the measure.

Rep. Kent Grusendorf, R-Arlington, author of the bill, said he expected a full vote on the House floor within the next few weeks.

"It's a good thing for Texans," said Michael Sullivan, director of government relations for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an influential group of conserva-



Grusendorf

tive policy wonks. "Children benefit when children have more opportunity and more choices. Obviously, our public schools are doing a fantastic job in educating just about every kid in just about every circumstance. But there are kids who need different circumstances."

A "school voucher" program, which has previously been unsuccessful in the Texas Legislature, has drawn criticism from teachers' groups, which say a lack of state accountability in private schools can be detrimental to students.

"To give tax dollars to private school operators is to transfer money from a system which is highly accountable to taxpayers into a system that has no accountability at

all," said John Cole, president of the Texas Federation of Teachers. Cole noted private schools are not subject to requirements for open records and open meetings.

Sullivan argued that accountability in private schools is more efficient.

"Private schools have the greatest accountability possible — Mom and Dad can say we're leaving," Sullivan said. "What accountability does Harvard have, does Baylor have? We believe that parents really do care about their children's education and there's an arrogance in thinking that Mom and Dad can't make good educational choices for their children."

Other opponents say the measure would be fiscally irresponsible.

"This voucher bill is so fiscally irresponsible that it drew bipartisan opposition," said Samantha Smoot, executive director of the Texas Freedom Network.