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Voucher bill would please governor

By Kelley Shannon
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AUSTIN — Republican Gov. Rick Perry, an advocate of using taxpayer money to send some children to private schools, said Wednesday he would like to see a school voucher bill emerge from the special legislative session.

"I'm for a public school choice pilot program, always have been," Perry said. "I'd like to have seen it four sessions ago. I don't have a problem with that, never have."

Lawmakers have not explicitly said a voucher bill is in the works, but voucher opponents — who contend vouchers would take money away from public schools and divert it to private schools — have warned such legislation could be in the offing.

Perry made the remarks while answering reporters' questions about his public school finance plan. He started the meeting by firing back at Republican rival Carole Keeton Strayhorn, insisting the comptroller's criticism of his finance plan is flat wrong and that she's intent on "blowing up" the legislative session that began this week.

The governor called the 30-day special session to reduce property taxes and eliminate the share-the-wealth education funding system, known to some as Robin Hood. Perry says the plan he put forth would pump \$2.5 billion into public schools while cutting school property taxes by \$6 billion.

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Lawmakers could reject his plan and come up with their own.

Perry didn't elaborate Wednesday on how a "public school choice" pilot program would work.

In an interview last year with The Associated Press, he said he supports a pilot program to use taxpayer money to send children in failing schools to private schools.

Perry took a trip to the Bahamas in February with wealthy campaign contributor James

Leininger of San Antonio, a voucher proponent.

The Coalition for Public Schools, a group opposing private school vouchers, called Perry's latest remarks disappointing and said during the special session he should focus on finding more money for public schools, which serve 94 percent of the children in Texas.

"We just cannot afford to subsidize private schools when currently there's not enough money for the neighborhood public schools," said coalition coordinator Carolyn Boyle. "I just don't get it. It just doesn't compute with

me."

Meanwhile, Perry's school finance plan was introduced in a bill for discussion Wednesday by a House committee. The plan

would lower business and residential property taxes by 17 percent, to a maximum \$1.25 per \$100 in appraised land value. The current maximum rate is \$1.50 per \$100 appraised value.

To replace funds lost through lowering property taxes, Perry's plan calls for raising or imposing



Perry



Strayhorn

video gambling at racetracks.

Strayhorn said this week that Perry's plan could result in a \$10 billion budget deficit over five years. He responded to her Wednesday with his strongest remarks yet.

"The comptroller's analysis of my plan is based on several false

assumptions and, I might add, eye-popping miscalculations," Perry said, adding it is an "astounding fact that the top number-cruncher in this state could be so wrong on the numbers."

Strayhorn responded: "How dare the governor question the integrity of this agency. How dare he. I am telling the truth, and I will keep telling the truth."

Earlier in the day, Strayhorn took another shot at Perry's plan. She said it's not appropriate to "partner" with sexually oriented night clubs to finance public education and that she wants to put those clubs out of business by

banning alcohol sales there.

"If these clubs can stay in business selling lemonade and iced tea, at least I will feel better about the safety of the dancers," Strayhorn said. "The state of Texas does not need to be partnering with these clubs that are degrading, particularly to women, and are havens for drug use and abuse."

Perry said if Strayhorn wants to be part of the school finance solution she should offer her own plan, not make "political attacks" and "snide asides."

Strayhorn is considered a potential Republican candidate for governor in 2006.

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