



Lubbock
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Lubbock, TX
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From Page:
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2/19/2005
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LUBBOCK AVALANCHE-JOURNAL SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2005 **A17**

270-180

Legislation would allow students in urban areas to use vouchers

AUSTIN (AP) — Students in urban areas of the state would be eligible to use taxpayer money to attend private schools under legislation filed this week.

A school voucher advocate praised the bill as an important step in understanding how to better meet the needs of students not now being served. A voucher opponent said the bill appears to be a distraction from the legislative debate on how to improve public school funding.

The bill applies to school districts in counties with 800,000 people or more, including Harris and Dallas counties. A district is eligible to participate if it is the largest in the county in which a majority of the students are educationally disadvantaged, or if at least 90 percent of the students in the district were educationally disadvantaged during the previous school year.

Students would be eligible to participate if they meet certain criteria, such as being at risk of dropping out, having been the victim of violent crime, or having limited English proficiency.

Participating students could either attend another public school or a private school.

Rep. Linda Harper-Brown, R-Irving, filed the bill Thursday. She did not immediately return a telephone call from The Associated Press.

Michael Sullivan, vice president of the pro-voucher Texas Public Policy Foundation, said other states that have had voucher programs have had good experiences.

"Experience would dictate that this is a good thing," Sullivan said. "It's a pilot program. We can see if it works. If it doesn't work, the most that has been lost is we now know it doesn't work."

Carolyn Boyle, coordinator for the Coalition for Public Schools, said taxpayers cannot afford to subsidize private schools in Texas. The coalition is made up of education, child advocacy, community and religious groups.

"We are just having enough trouble paying for our neighborhood private schools. It's really just a debate about the use of our public money," Boyle said.

Rep. Jodie Laubenberg, R-Rockwall, said if the objective is to provide a good education, "then who can argue whether it's going to a public school or the little Catholic school down the street." Laubenberg is a co-author of the bill.

School voucher advocates have tried unsuccessfully in the past to get a pilot program approved by the Texas Legislature.