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Voucher bills unfair to Austin, group says

Schools stand to lose millions, coalition contends.

By Laura Heinauer
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The Austin school district could lose as much as $302 million in the next two years under one of three school voucher proposals being tossed around in the Legislature, according to a group that opposes vouchers.

The cost estimates, which were calculated to show the monetary effect of each pilot program if all eligible students participate, were released on the eve of a House Committee on Public Education debate.

"Texas lawmakers need to solve school finance problems, not create new ones," Carolyn Boyle, coordinator of the Coalition for Public Schools, said Monday at a Capitol news conference.

Voucher supporters practiced reciting their talking points. They argue that schools won't need as much money if there aren't as many students to serve.

"It gives us a chance to help kids in our system that are in failing schools, nonperforming schools," said House Speaker Tom Craddick,R-Midland. "I believe that we need to try anything that we can do that gives them a better chance at a better education."

The coalition found that House Bill 12, a bill they said could cost Austin schools $151 million per year, could add up to as much as $1.1 billion per year if it were adopted in six urban school districts as proposed.

The budget for the Austin district in the 2004-05 school year is $732 million.

The bill would allow students to apply for private school vouchers if they qualify for free or reduced-price lunches or if they fail all sections of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

House Bill 1263, which will be discussed in committee today, could cost Austin schools as much as $74 million in its first two years, the group said. The money lost by all eight school districts in that program could amount to nearly $600 million during that time, the group said.

A third bill that would provide vouchers to all Texas students who attended a public or charter school the preceding semester could cost several billion dollars a year, the group said.

Boyle called the numbers conservative, saying her projections did not reflect the students currently enrolled in private schools or those who are home-schooled, who would also qualify for money under the proposed legislation.

"The private school voucher bills also propose a huge unfunded mandate by the state. For example, in Austin the vouchers proposed under HB 12 would be funded 96 percent by local taxpayers," Boyle said.

At the Capitol, she stood alongside more than a dozen supporters representing several agencies, including the Texas Federation of Teachers

and the Parent Teacher Association.

Staley Gray, a PTA member at O. Henry Middle School, said 29 percent of the 800 students at the West Austin school would be eligible for the programs proposed in two of the bills.

"You wouldn't think it in West Austin, but this affects schools everywhere," she said.

John O'Sullivan, secretary-treasurer of the Texas Federation of Teachers, said private schools don't always provide the same special needs and bilingual programs that public schools offer.

"There's the potential that a vast minority could be underserved when they go to these schools and find out there's nothing there for them," he said.

Texas Public Policy Foundation Vice President Michael Sullivan, who supports vouchers, called the Coalition for Public Schools a "front group for the education bureaucracy" more concerned about money than education quality.

"The truth is, when we talk about giving parents more choice, we're talking about the best kind of accountability there is," he said.

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