

Congressional legislation worries voucher opponents

Private schools should not get tax money, critics of vouchers say

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Students who came to Texas from hurricane-ravaged areas after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast could pay private school tuition with public dollars under newly approved federal legislation.

Congress has approved up to \$6,000 per student and up to \$7,500 per special education student for schools that take in hurricane evacuees. That money can go to public or private schools, which troubles some school-voucher opponents who say tax dollars should not pay for private schooling.

Congress approved the money just before the Christmas weekend as part of a Defense Department spending bill. Chad Colby, a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Education, said federal officials are working through the legislation to determine how to distribute the money.

"Letters to state chiefs will go out as soon as we have those processes in place," he said.

Politicians and interest groups in Texas have fought for years over proposals to create voucher programs that would allow students to use tax dollars to pay for private schools.

Opponents repeatedly have fought off efforts to establish pilot voucher experiments in Texas, even as voucher supporters have taken on key roles in the Legislature.

Richard Kouri of the Texas State Teachers Association said he worries the hurricane legislation will open the door to federal voucher programs, calling Congress' action a "classic back-door approach."

"Those children can enroll in any public school in Texas and the Texas public schools will educate them," he said. "The question becomes how you utilize public tax dollars, and we don't believe that public tax dollars should be used to fund religious private schools."

But Michael Quinn Sullivan of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a small-government group that advocates vouchers and other "school choice" options, said the usual voucher debate should not slow the effort to help displaced students.

"To ensure that these parents during this time of transition are able to find the public or private school best suited to their child is a good thing," Sullivan said. "It has less to do with the school choice issue than simply providing a level of stability. Where the winds dropped them after the hurricane does not necessarily equate to where they're going to be able to get the best education."

State officials have told public schools that they must enroll hurricane evacuees who have landed in their districts temporarily, even if the students cannot document their residency in the districts.

Texas Education Agency spokeswoman DeEtta Culbertson said about 41,000 students at last count were enrolled in Texas public schools after fleeing areas struck by Katrina, and the state has estimated that educating the students could cost more than \$200 million. She said the agency has not counted how many evacuees are in private schools.