

Millionaire to continue support of candidates favoring vouchers

APRIL CASTRO
Associated Press

AUSTIN - An influential San Antonio millionaire who asserts political clout with election-year campaign contributions said Tuesday that he will continue to throw his financial support behind legislative candidates who favor a private school voucher program.

Using taxpayer dollars to pay for private-school tuition has been a perennially contentious issue for public school advocates, but it is gaining momentum among Republican leaders, including Gov. Rick Perry.

"I think if more people are elected that believe in giving low-income kids an option to go to a school that's safe and not failing, that may be ... productive for them, then I think it has a better chance of getting passed (during the next legislative session)," said James Leininger, who has given private school scholarships to thousands of low-income San Antonio students.

Leininger said he would focus his campaign support on candidates in the dozens of open seats this year rather than trying to oust incumbents who oppose vouchers.

Students in unsafe school environments should be given the option of finding a safer campus, even if they can't afford private schooling, he said. He blames unsafe schools and gang activity for the high teen pregnancy rate in San Antonio and the rest of the state.

"If you look at the individual student, they need a way out if they're scared to death they're going to get bullied or raped or forced into a gang. We need to give them an escape route," Leininger said Tuesday, speaking at a gathering of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think-tank that he founded.

Opponents argue that a school choice program would take money away from already ailing Texas schools at a time when Texas teachers are underpaid and lawmakers are struggling to fund such staples as textbooks.

Brock Gregg, a lobbyist for the 105,000-member Association of Texas Professional Educators, argued that giving state money to religious schools would open those schools to state mandates and requirements.

"That's one regulation that I don't think should be," Gregg said.

A plan to allow private school vouchers failed during the final days of the 2005 legislative session, but Perry predicted then that the issue would re-emerge. The most recent proposal would have used taxpayer money for private school tuition for some economically disadvantaged students in Austin, Fort Worth, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio.

The talks come at a rocky time for public school funding in Texas. The Texas Supreme Court last year ruled the state's method of paying for schools unconstitutional and ordered lawmakers to fix it by June 1. The next regular legislative session doesn't convene until January 2007, but Perry is expected to call lawmakers back for a 30-day special session on education this spring.

Leininger is one of Perry's major campaign contributors and was among those who went on an exclusive trip with the governor and some of his aides to the Bahamas in 2004.