



Legislators caution TEA about vouchers

Web Posted: 06/25/2008 10:50 PM CDT

By Gary Scharrer
Express-News

AUSTIN — The Texas Education Agency, which wants to give private groups tax dollars to educate high school dropouts, shouldn't pick a fight with the Legislature over school vouchers, a couple of lawmakers warned Wednesday.

"It is very divisive, and it will overshadow the job that needs to be done to deal with the dropout issue in the state of Texas," Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, told TEA officials.

Lawmakers last year approved an experimental project aimed at returning dropouts 25 and younger to school for their high school diploma or to help prepare them for college. The legislation did not contemplate using private schools for it, which the education agency lists among school districts and colleges as eligible for funding.

The Legislature has consistently rejected school vouchers during the past decade.

"Given the climate and the Texas Education Agency knowing that the legislative body was against the use of vouchers, why would it now say that vouchers could be used?" West asked. "I would caution the agency to listen very attentively to the legislative body."

Agency officials plan to launch the dropout recovery program this fall.

Education Commissioner Robert Scott did not attend the public hearing or appear to be rethinking his decision allowing nonprofit groups to draw state funding.

The dropout program, which is not budgeted from the state's main education funding source, "is performance-based, and we do not know who will apply," Scott said later. "But it is open to all public schools, charter schools and nonprofits."

Rep. Diane Patrick, R-Arlington, a former State Board of Education member, also reminded agency officials of legislative opposition to vouchers, adding that state general revenue is funding the project.

Patrick expressed concern that some parents could take their children out of public schools, allow them to be classified as dropouts and then enroll them in a private school for a taxpayer-paid education.

Most other speakers at the public hearing opposed the proposed use of tax dollars for private groups.

But Brooke Terry of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an Austin-based group that favors less government and school vouchers, said the state should explore new solutions to help dropouts.

"Many people will fight this proposal and want to continue the status quo in our public schools," she said. "We hope that the needs of students be preferred over politics."

About one-third of Texas high school students drop out of high school and up to 50 percent in urban school districts, according to various research reports.

"We are miserably failing a very vulnerable student population. Public schools have had their opportunity to educate these students," said Peggy Venable, director for Americans for Prosperity-Texas, which favors allowing private schools to educate school dropouts with public money.

A lawsuit might be filed if education agency leaders push the plan into action, said Richard Kouri of the Texas State Teachers Association.

"Our preference would be to fix this legislatively, but that may not be an option," he said.

Online at: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA.062608.1B.vouchers.3f109a3.html>