

Texas Considers Special-Needs Vouchers

By Corrina Jennings

Special-needs students in Texas may get some school choice if the legislature passes two bills currently pending in the Senate.

Senate Bill 183, sponsored by state Sen. Tommy Williams (R-The Woodlands), would create a voucher program for special-needs students with disabilities to attend the public or private school of their choice in any district. Senate Bill 2204, sponsored by state Sen. Florence Shapiro (R-Plano), would serve autistic students and their teachers. At press time, both bills were pending in committee.

Shapiro said an April 7 Senate education committee hearing was encouraging.

"At the end of the day, there were people expressing a willingness to work with us who were not supportive before this session," Shapiro said. "Parents care most about the needs of their own children, and they are immensely attuned to the individual needs of that child. Because parents will be empowered to make choices they feel are best, elements of competition are introduced into the system."

"Under SB183, students in K-12 would be eligible for scholarships if

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**BROOKE TERRY
EDUCATION POLICY ANALYST
TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION**

they participate in a school district's special-education program and have an individualized education program established," Williams said. Federal and local tax funds would remain at the student's home school, with state funding following the student to their school of choice.

According to Texas Education Agency statistics for 2007-08, roughly 10 percent of the 4.6 million Texas Public School students are classified as special-needs students. Special-education teachers are in critically short supply—the agency estimates more than 12,000 public school teachers statewide were required to teach

special education without any training in that area during the 2007-08 school year.

"Each student deserves to have their needs met, but unfortunately this is not the case for many students with special needs in public schools," said Brooke Terry, an education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation in Austin.

Great Results Elsewhere

Special-needs students in some other states do get such help. Citing a 2008 Manhattan Institute study of Florida's McKay scholarship program for special-needs students, Terry said researchers "found extraordinarily high parental satisfaction, reduction in student behavior problems and harassment, and improvement in academic performance."

Teacher unions opposing school choice in Texas say the programs will drain valuable dollars out of public schools, but several studies show the opposite to be true. These include one released earlier this year by the Georgia Public Policy Foundation (GPPF) when a universal voucher bill was introduced in the Peach Tree State.

According to an explanation on the group's Web site by Executive Vice President Kelly McCutchen, when children use vouchers, "local tax revenues, which account for more than 40 percent of school funding on average, are not affected. As a result, funds available for the students still in that school system are increased because the funding that would have been spent on the students who are no longer there can be spread out among the students who remain."

"In short, local school systems will still get paid for students they do not teach," McCutchen noted.

Proven Improvements

Terry also refuted critics' claims there is no evidence voucher programs work.

"There are many reports that talk about the positive outcomes from vouchers. For example, a 2008 study published by the Texas Public Policy Foundation on the Horizon program, a 10-year [private] voucher program in San Antonio, showed school choice among parents and students in the Edgewood school district led to improved student performance, fewer dropouts, higher teacher salaries, and increased economic development," Terry said.

According to Terry, "The education establishment fears change and prefers the status quo even if that means some students don't get their needs met."

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**FLORENCE SHAPIRO
STATE SENATOR
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INTERNET INFO

Texas Senate Bill 183: <http://www.legis.state.tx.us/BillLookup/Text.aspx?LegSess=81R&Bill=SB183>

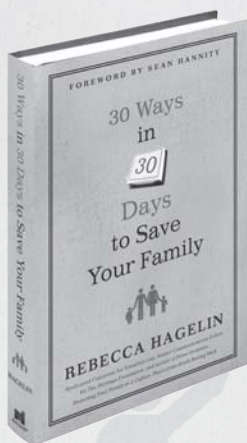
Texas Senate Bill 2204: <http://www.legis.state.tx.us/BillLookup/history.aspx?LegSess=81R&Bill=SB2204>

"The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence From Florida's McKay Scholarship Program," by Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, Civic Report #52, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, April 2008: http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_52.htm

"The Horizon Program: A Model for Education Reform," by Robert B. Aguirre et al., Texas Public Policy Foundation, September 2008: <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2008-09-RR08-Horizon-vouchers.pdf>

"Time for Change: School Choice Will Have a Positive Fiscal Impact," by Kelly McCutchen, Georgia Public Policy Foundation, February 6, 2009: <http://www.gppf.org/article.asp?RT=&p=pub/Education/Choice/schoolchoice090206.htm>

It Takes Just 30 Days to Transform Your Teenager



As a parent or grandparent, you know the challenges of raising healthy, happy teenagers can seem overwhelming. Every time you turn around, pop culture derails your efforts and hard work. So how can busy moms and dads protect their children from today's toxic culture?

One step at a time.

In *30 Ways in 30 Days to Save Your Family*, Rebecca Hagelin—mother, syndicated columnist, and family specialist—lays out 30 simple and concrete actions that you can implement—one day at a time—to reconnect with your children and restore peace in your home.

Featuring a foreword by Sean Hannity and personal stories from Rebecca and other parents, *30 Ways in 30 Days to*

Save Your Family offers common sense advice to help parents tackle everyday dilemmas.

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