

Vouchers threatened by EITC

By Brad Bumsted TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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It's been clear from the beginning of the 2011-12 session that House Republican leadership had a whole lot less enthusiasm for tuition vouchers than GOP Gov. Tom Corbett and the Republican-controlled state Senate.

As the Senate readies for a possible vote this week on vouchers -- taxpayer-funded tuition documents kids can use to attend private and parochial schools -- the House is set to make its own statement on school choice.

It will consider, and likely approve, a bill to expand a 10-year-old program for businesses to get tax credits when they pay for scholarships that may also be used to help defray the cost of private and Catholic school educations. The scholarships are awarded by nonprofit foundations. It goes by a bureaucratic-sounding acronym, the EITC (Educational Improvement Tax Credit), and it is the political salvation for lawmakers who want to avoid a vote on the far more contentious voucher issue. Voucher supporters have included an EITC expansion in Senate Bill 1 as a complement to vouchers.

But while the Senate bill offers both, the House bill is focused solely on tax credit expansion. The tax credits were called "vouchers lite" when first implemented in 2001. The program grew out of former Republican Gov. Tom Ridge's twice-failed effort to win approval for vouchers in the 1990s. At least, the reasoning went then, Ridge walked away with something. Critics say the tax credits need more accountability and transparency. Some lawmakers are steadfastly opposed to both.

But to get an idea of how the education establishment views it, listen to David Broderic, spokesman for the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), the state's largest teachers union.

On expanding EITC, he says, "We're concerned about it."

On vouchers, he says the union "very, very strongly" opposes them.

Broderic wouldn't say it but it's obvious some voucher opponents view the tax credit program as the lesser of two evils.

School choice is not a partisan issue. You'll find Republicans and Democrats on both sides of the issue. Republicans tend to be more supportive and are more likely to back it on ideological grounds. But a few Philadelphia Democrats led the way in the 1990s, taking a stand for school choice.

What many describe as abysmal conditions in Philadelphia public schools continue to be the impetus. Sen. Anthony Williams, D-Philadelphia, is a co-sponsor of SB 1.

If the Senate approves SB 1, it will put pressure on the House to take up the voucher bill. Voucher supporters will turn up the heat and they are well-funded.

Why tax credits in lieu of vouchers? In the eyes of House members leaning that way (not necessarily my view):

- The tax credits are a proven program, they say. Studies are conflicting on voucher programs.
- EITC has been established for a decade, while final approval of a voucher bill would surely bring a constitutional challenge and, at best, be tied up in court for years.
- With the state facing a multibillion-dollar deficit, it's easier to shift existing money to cover the expanded tax credits than it is to appropriate money for vouchers.
- Businesses like it. They get a tax credit and good PR.

All of this, plus there's the potential political advantage of voting on a bill that is a lot less risky and one many constituents are likely to accept.

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