

Bill that would provide scholarships for low-income children facing stiff opposition

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A bill that would provide scholarships for low-income children to attend private schools may be foundering after weeks of contentious debate in Trenton, the measure's sponsor said.

The Opportunities Scholarship Act — a cornerstone of the Christie administration's school choice efforts — has faced stiff opposition from those who say it is an ersatz voucher bill that would drain resources from beleaguered public schools.

Senator Ray Lesniak, D-Elizabeth, said there is an impasse over the proposed legislation that would grant dollar-for-dollar tax credits to corporations that provide private school scholarships to children in districts with failing public schools.

"It's a stalemate — it could be broken tomorrow or it could be broken never," said Lesniak. "It certainly is not faring too well at the present moment."

As introduced, the five-year program allows for scholarships for 20,000 students who live in about 30 districts in which schools are deemed to be failing because of poor passing rates on standardized tests.

The measure has been opposed by several advocacy groups including the state's largest teachers union. Its supporters argue that private money would fund the scholarships, but opponents point out that the tax credit given to participating corporations would mean the loss of public revenue — up to \$360 million in the first five years.

Many local legislators have balked at the plan, refusing to support it unless their districts are excluded, according to those familiar with the negotiations.

Lesniak said the pilot program would need to be limited to about a half dozen struggling districts if it is to make it through the legislature. Such a compromise could doom the bill, he said, since the governor has signaled that he would veto any measure that would not apply to all qualifying districts statewide.

"We can't move it out of the Senate without limiting the amount of districts that would be

covered, and the governor won't sign it unless all are included," he said.

However, Senator Tom Kean Jr., R-Westfield, said he was more optimistic that a deal could still be brokered this summer. "We need to find common ground and we need more choices for parents," said Kean, a co-sponsor of the bill.

The measure also faces opposition in the Assembly.

Christie spokesman Michael Drewniak said the administration would have to review any changes made to the bill. "The governor has said he can't support legislation where the intended effect is watered down," Drewniak said. "What seems to be happening here is that special interests are trying to hobble this and diminish it."

The issue of school choice will not disappear if the measure fails, Drewniak said. Christie and his education commissioner, Bret Schundler, have said school choice is key to providing opportunity to kids in failing schools. "This is a priority of the governor. He's made that very clear. We won't let this go away if it doesn't pass."

Opponents also realize the battle may have just begun. "There are powerful reasons not to do this. But there are powerful people who want this to happen," said Irene Sterling, president of the Paterson Education Fund, a public school advocacy group that opposed the measure.

The group and others say the measure would actually offer very little choice for the thousands of students in poorly performing schools statewide, since there are few private school seats available.

Catholic schools have been steadily closing over the past two decades. This year alone, nine were shuttered in Bergen and Passaic counties, including Paterson Catholic Regional High School. And the tuition at independent private schools, which often tops \$25,000, would be far out of reach of the scholarships, which would provide \$6,000 for elementary students and \$9,000 for high schoolers. The per-pupil cost in many of the failing public districts exceeds \$15,000.

"Very few besides religious schools will take the vouchers because they are so low," said Professor Bruce Baker, a school finance expert at Rutgers. "We're not giving kids the choice to go to Montclair Kimberly Academy or Dwight-Englewood or Saddle River Day School," he said, referring to the area's top independent private schools.

In other states, vouchers have spurred the growth of religious schools that operate on

limited budgets, often from church basements, Baker said. One analysis has found that Jewish yeshiva students in Lakewood could be among the biggest beneficiaries if the bill succeeds because it sets aside a quarter of scholarships for those already in private school.

“The voucher level won’t provide much choice and the most likely beneficiaries are not who we might think they are,” said Baker.

However, supporters say the bill will provide a fast fix for children in failing, mostly urban schools. They say existing private schools will expand and others will emerge to meet the demand.

“If the program is well received it will bring schools back on line and create incentives,” said Derrell Bradford, executive director of E3, a school choice advocacy group. “We’re disappointed that we might have to wait...but the Opportunities Scholarship Act is not going away.”