

## **Senate Bill 1 Taxpayer Paid Tuition Vouchers**

Governor Tom Corbett is promoting taxpayer-funded vouchers for low income students in Pennsylvania's worst performing schools. Vouchers are subsidies given to parents for tuition at the school of their choice; public, private or parochial. In the Governor's proposal, the funding for vouchers would come out of the state funds paid to the student's home school district lowering the amount a district would have to fund their yearly budget. This is part of a broader plan to improve and reshape public education across the state. On October 26<sup>th</sup>, the state senate passed a modified version of this legislation, referred to as Senate Bill 1 (SB1). Both senators representing Council Rock, Senator Tomlinson and Senator McIlhinney, voted to approve SB1.

Corbett favors vouchers as a means to reducing high drop out rates. He noted in a recent address, Philadelphia schools have a 45% dropout rate. A Philadelphia school district representative countered that the dropout rate is closer to 31% when factors such as students moving out of the district or needing extra time to graduate are taken into consideration. Nationally, the high school dropout rate was 4.1% in 2007-2008. Pennsylvania's dropout rate that year was 2.6%.

Under Senate Bill 1, parents who qualify could use vouchers (dubbed "opportunity scholarships") to send their children to either private or religious schools or better performing public schools. The senate plan also calls for changing how charter schools are established and teachers are evaluated, and expanding Educational Improvement Tax Credits for businesses that fund scholarships.

The Senate amended the Corbett plan to allow vouchers to be available to families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level (a family of four earning between \$29,055 and \$41,248). This will increase the number of participants and the amount of taxpayer dollars shifting away from the lowest performing public schools.

Vouchers would apply to students who attend schools that are in the bottom 5% in terms of standardized test performance, or about 140 schools. Public and private schools could choose to participate in a program to accept voucher students. If a participating school receives more applications from voucher students than it has space to accept, it would hold a lottery to prevent picking the highest achieving students.

In the second year of the law, children who live in those attendance boundaries and meet the eligibility requirement, but already attend a private or parochial school, could receive tuition aid. The amount of tuition aid available to each voucher student would depend on the student's family income and how much aid the state sends to the student's school district with a 100% voucher applying to people with incomes up to 130% of federal poverty level and a 75% voucher for incomes between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level. The tuition aid is unlikely to cover the whole cost of private or parochial school tuition but would give a little extra money to a better performing public school that accepts a voucher student. ***(Note: there are no studies that indicate that student performance improves with vouchers.)***

Along with the vouchers, Governor Corbett wants to increase the \$75 million Educational Improvement Tax Credit (for scholarship donations), establish new pathways for charter schools

to open and make student achievement and classroom observation both count toward the performance rating a teacher receives.

### **Limited Support Statewide for Taxpayer Funded Vouchers**

On Thursday, October 27, the Centennial School District hosted a legislative forum to discuss the challenges facing public education. Issues ranging from charter schools to school vouchers and funding problems were discussed. At the center of the discussion was the approximately \$900 million cut in the state education budget and SB1. SB1 does not solve the problems that are at the crux of the fiscal issues facing the state, according to panel members which included Auditor General Jack Wagner, state representatives Bernie O'Neill and Paul Clymer, Susan Gobreski from Education Voters of Pennsylvania (an advocacy group) and Jack Myers, Director of Business Operations in Bensalem School District.

According to a presentation that night, a public opinion poll conducted by Terry Madonna Opinion Research from August 25 to September 24, 2010 (<http://www.psba.org/issues-advocacy/issues-research/vouchers/special-issue-publicsays.asp>) showed that 67% of Pennsylvanians do not favor giving public money to parents so they can send their children to a private school. Only 13.7% strongly favor taxpayer-paid tuition vouchers. When the data is disaggregated, a majority strongly oppose or somewhat oppose tuition vouchers regardless of age group or location in the state. Political affiliation showed similar majorities with Democratic opposition at 69%, Republican opposition at 58% and Independent opposition at 68%. Opposition to taxpayer-paid vouchers crossed racial barriers with 69% of non-whites and 66% of whites strongly or somewhat opposing vouchers. Only 10% of non-whites strongly favor vouchers.

### **Charter and Cyber Charter Schools**

Additionally, the survey showed that 66% of respondents oppose the state law requiring school districts to pay the tuition of privately operated charter/cyber schools.

In discussing the problem with charter schools, Jack Wagner explained that home school districts contribute the average cost of supporting a student in their district to the charter school. But that amount ranges from \$6,000 per student in one district to \$16,000 in another. On average, charter schools are getting much more money from taxpayers than it costs to actually educate the child. Cyber charter schools don't even need a brick and mortar building, so they require even less money to run.

Among 501 school districts in the state, there are 145 charter schools (15 of those are cyber charter schools). Assuming average funding of \$10,000 per student, taxpayers and school districts are giving about \$900 million to charter schools annually.

### **Status of SB1**

SB1, as of the date of this article, has been referred to the PA House Education Committee. Residents are encouraged to contact state legislators to express their opinions on Senate Bill 1 and to support better funding of our public schools. They can be easily contacted:

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