

# Nev. bill would give state money to private schools

By Michelle Rindels, AP

Nevada lawmakers reviewed a bill Friday that would allow students to apply for the portion of state funds designated for their public education and use it to pay for tuition at private schools.

Republican Sen. Scott Hammond is sponsoring SB302, which would create education savings accounts. Parents could obtain a grant equal to 90 percent of their child's per-pupil state and local funding allotment, which varies by county, and use it for tuition, textbooks, tutoring or college savings.

The program is "for parents who feel like they're in a ZIP code where their kids have to go to a certain school and the school just isn't providing their student what they need," Hammond said. "This is something that will allow them to go where they need to go."

Hammond deflected suggestions that the program would essentially provide private school vouchers, and said parents would have the final say on where the education funding would go.

"Under this program, no dollars are pre-determined for any particular institution," he said during the hearing Friday.

The bill is similar to a measure endorsed by Gov. Brian Sandoval that would create Opportunity Scholarships, which would help lower-income students attend private schools. Businesses would receive a tax credit if they donated to a scholarship organization, and those funds would be awarded to students who fall below 300 percent of the poverty level.

That measure, AB165, has passed the Assembly and a Senate committee on split votes, and it is headed for a final vote on the Senate floor.

Sandoval mentioned the Opportunity Scholarships in his State of the State speech, but he hasn't stated a position on SB302. Hammond said the two ideas are compatible.

"The Opportunity Scholarship will really take care of needs of those who have the most need," Hammond said. "Mine is a little different and might take care of a different segment of the population."

State analysts say the program would cost about \$70 million over the next two years, based on the assumption that 25 percent of the state's private school students would use it.

The conservative think tank Nevada Policy Research Institute strongly supports the measure, saying it will force underperforming schools to improve in order to keep funding.

"Schools would have a powerful incentive to provide a high-quality education, because their failure to do so would lead to parents taking their tuition dollars elsewhere," institute President Andy Matthews said.

Representatives from the education advocacy group StudentsFirst Nevada said they oppose the measure in its current form. They want to see the policy targeted toward low-income students or those in bad schools, and they want to ensure there's accountability for the private schools where the money is sent.

"SB302, as written, is essentially universal vouchers for students, which StudentsFirst cannot support," said Andrew Diss, the organization's director.

Washoe County School District lobbyist Scott Baez testified against the bill and said that while the district supports

school choice, diverting money away from public school systems could present a problem.

“We feel that limited state resources should be kept with public schools,” he said.

Hammond acknowledged that the idea, which is law in Arizona and Florida, is likely to face opposition. School districts and teacher groups have spoken out in the past against measures that divert state dollars to private schools.

“I’m sure it will be challenged. Everywhere it goes it is challenged,” he said.

*Associated Press writer Riley Snyder contributed to this report.*