

Russ Pulliam: Real deal about vouchers

Written by Russ Pulliam

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From one side, real people were pleading for better education for their children.

From the other side came talk of an abstract problem of school funding formulas.

Those contrasting styles stacked the deck in favor of private school scholarships at last week's House Education Committee hearing. The Republican proposal, House Bill 1003, would allow low-income parents to choose private schools with a government subsidy that would help pay the tuition.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett and Gov. Mitch Daniels favor the proposal, so some version of it has been expected to pass the General Assembly. But now, with House Democrats holed up in an out-of-state hotel to avoid voting on issues they disagree with, the fate of the voucher bill and other education reform legislation is uncertain.

Opponents seemed trapped in bureaucratic language, worrying that public school funding will decline if low-income parents use these scholarships for private schools.

Yet, families with the means to pay private school tuition already have that choice.

The logical conclusion of opponents' argument against vouchers is to require all families to enroll their children in public schools. That's been tried in totalitarian societies, but a monopoly on children doesn't necessarily yield excellence in education.

In last week's hearing, the side that favors giving families more choices was framed by parents such as Penitra Graves, who has two daughters at St. Joan of Arc parochial school. She tried to

enroll her older daughter early, at age 4, in the public school. "I was told she would not be socially ready," Graves told the committee. "The parochial school was the only school willing to test her."

Graves has scholarships through the CHOICE Charitable Trust, which has provided about 20,000 private scholarships to low-income families in the Indianapolis Public Schools district over the past 20 years.

Businessman Fred Klipsch, a choice advocate, thinks the public scholarship option is only one tool in education reform. "There's about 20,000 private school seats that might be available for this voucher program," he said. "Does that fix the public education problem? No. But it does help 20,000 students. I want to take a step where we can."

During last year's election, a group called Hoosiers for Economic Growth supported candidates for education reform, spending about the same \$1 million that the Indiana State Teachers Association raised for its side.

"For decades it has been a one-sided fight, with the teachers union spending more than \$1 million," says former state Rep. Luke Messer, executive director of Hoosiers for Economic Growth. "The other side had great ideas but very little clout. They almost refused to participate in the political process."

The reformers who want competition have the edge this year, thanks to their engagement in the election cycle. But they also have done the better job of offering human stories to make their point.