

## Committee Approves Scholarship Program for Poor Kids

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**TRENTON** — The battle over a plan to provide scholarships in eight New Jersey cities so parents can choose their child's school had its first public skirmish on Thursday and was approved by a legislative panel before an overflow crowd that filled three rooms.

Advocates for such a program have been blocked for years until Sen. Raymond Lesniak, D-Union, recrafted the bill to focus on its possible economic benefits, which gave it a hearing before his Senate Economic Growth Committee, which approved it 3-1.

The measure, S-1607, would give \$6,000 grants to 4,000 poor children to attend another public or private school. Business groups, which back the bill, would fund the scholarships through donations that count as tax credits. The five-year pilot program would be available to children in Camden, Elizabeth, Lakewood, Newark, Orange, Paterson, Trenton and Jersey City, which was added to the proposal Monday.

Proponents say the measure would extend a lifeline to the poor and minorities stuck in failing urban schools who can't afford private education, while saving taxpayers money by keeping children out of public schools, which are more costly.

Critics called it a voucher program that would take much-needed funds from public schools to educate a handful without guarantee of better education. The program would divert \$24 million from state coffers in its first year, \$120 million in its fifth and \$360 million combined over five years, but not necessarily from money slated for education.

"This legislation doesn't take one dollar from public education," Lesniak said.

Critics weren't convinced.

"We are facing deep budget cuts in programs and deep cuts in services, and yet this proposition would take another \$360 million out of the state's treasury over the next five years to send a handful of students in (eight) districts to private and religious schools," said Joyce Powell, president of the New Jersey Education Association.

"We don't give tax subsidies to someone who decides to shop at Barnes & Noble and not go to the public library to pick up a book," said Sean W. Hadley of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

Walter C. Farrell Jr., a professor at the University of North Carolina who has studied similar programs in Florida, Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., said they don't improve education.

"The principal effect of these scholarship voucher programs has been to preserve existing private religious schools, primarily Catholic, in the cities and the states where they had been established," Farrell said.

Lesniak said keeping private schools afloat — when many are closing — is not a bad thing.

"If we don't do this, the cost for taxpayers would be three times as much, if not more," he said. "They've been closing and will continue to close, putting a greater burden on taxpayers and also on the need for additional school construction."

Two Republicans joined Lesniak to vote for the measure.

"To not try something different is, in fact, to make a sweeping statement that everything in our urban schools is going well," Sen. Joseph Kyrillos Jr., R-Monmouth, said. "And as we know, that is not the case."

While the battle often touched upon interjecting competition into public education, supporters said it's not about hurting public education but seeks to give educational opportunity to the disadvantaged.

"This legislation is not anti-public school," said the Rev. Reginald Jackson of the Black Ministers' Council of New Jersey. "It is pro-quality education."

The lone vote against the bill was cast by Sen. Teresa Ruiz, D-Essex, a Catholic school graduate, who cited the state's financial problems and said the program targets too few pupils.

"I believe in scholarships, but businesses should be doing this on their own accord," Ruiz said. "We shouldn't do this at the expense of tax credits at a time when the state of New Jersey is counting on every dollar."

The measure heads to the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee for consideration.