

Scholarship bill gains assembly sponsor

Senate legislation that would create a five-year pilot program to help students in failing New Jersey schools has gained an Assembly Sponsor.



Assemblyman
Angel Fuentes

Assemblyman Angel Fuentes (D-5), who served on Camden's city council from 1994-2010, with ten years as council president, has agreed to sponsor an Assembly version (A-2810) of Senate Bill 1872, "The

Opportunity Scholarship Act."

The program, which is modeled on successful programs in other states, would provide tax credits to organizations that contribute toward scholarships that would enable students in failing schools to attend another in-district or out-of-district public schools or in-district or out-of-district non-public schools.

Districts containing the failing schools would be eligible to apply for Educational Innovation funds to improve their public schools.

The Senate bill, which is sponsored by Senator Raymond Lesniak (D-Union) is now before the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. The Senate Economic Growth Committee on May 13, 2010 unanimously approved S-1872 in a 6-0 vote.

"We have many great school dis-

tricts in New Jersey. Yet, we have to be honest about the students that we have failed," Assemblyman Fuentes told the Star Herald. "Thousands of students drop out by age 14. In some districts, there has been a pattern of failure that has occurred over years, even decades. It's our responsibility to be creative, to think outside the box, to assist parents and children who are crying out for help."

Bill sponsors estimate that the scholarships will assist between 2,500 and 3,800 children in the program's first year and 5,000 to 7,600 in year two, 7,500 to 11,400 in year three, 10,000 to 15,200 in year four and 12,500 to 19,000 in year five, representing about 1-2 percent of the nearly 1.4 million public school students in the state.

The Cherry Hill-based Courier Post said in an editorial earlier this week, "The priority for lawmakers should be saving kids, not saving chronically failing institutions... This is nothing less than an issue of civil rights. It is patently unfair and cruel to entrap poor students in schools that, by every standard, do not provide a quality education. The only immediate relief to that is to let families use the tax dollars we allot them to get their children into quality schools. It is, quite simply, the right thing to do..."

The New Jersey Bishops issued a joint letter earlier this month. "Through no fault of their own, some of the poorest children in New Jersey are trapped in schools that are failing

to meet their needs. Like all children, these students are deserving of a quality education that will provide them with the skills to succeed in life. We, the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, are strongly committed to providing a quality education for all New Jersey's children as a matter of basic justice and as a means of promoting their God-given dignity and well-being.

"The Opportunity Scholarship Act will help ensure the continued viability

of nonpublic schools in New Jersey. It will help strengthen public schools. It will empower parents and, for students who might otherwise face futures of economic despair, diminished expectations and unrealized dreams, it offers real hope. With these things in mind, we call on all citizens of New Jersey to join with us in promoting the passage of S-1872 by asking you, our elected leaders, to support the Opportunity Scholarship Act," they said.

Opportunity Scholarship Act Highlights

Funding Mechanism

Under the pilot program, the Department of Treasury will provide tax credits to entities that contribute to scholarships for low-income children. The total aggregate tax contribution of the participating corporations cannot exceed \$360 million over the five year period: \$24 million in the first fiscal year of the program, \$48 million in year two, \$72 million in year three, \$96 million in year four and \$120 million in year five.

Scholarship Organizations

An Opportunity Scholarship Board will select one qualified, tax-exempt Scholarship Organization in each of the north, central and southern regions of the state to administer the scholarship funds, one of which will be designated as the Lead Scholarship Organization.

No more than 25 percent of a scholarship organization's scholarship allocation in any school year can be used to provide scholarships to low-income students who are enrolled in non-public schools, unless unallocated scholarship funds remain unused by the scholarship organization in the given school year.

Scholarship Awards

The scholarship organizations will distribute individual scholarships for grades K-8 that are the greater of \$6,000 or 40 percent of the prior school year's actual average comparable cost per pupil; or, for grades 9-12, the greater of \$9,000 or 59 percent of the prior school year's actual average comparable cost per pupil.

Designation of failing schools

A "chronically failing" school means one in which more than 40 percent of students failed to reach proficiency in both language arts and mathematics in each of the prior two school years as measured by the administration of the state assessment test; or, one in which more than 65 percent of students failed to reach proficiency in either language arts or mathematics in each of the prior two school years. The chronically failing schools are found in 12 New Jersey counties, and include 33 high schools, 94 middle schools and 78 elementary schools. The municipalities with double digit chronically failing schools are Newark (42), Paterson (25), Camden (24) and Trenton (18).

Eligibility of students and families

Students from households with an income that does not exceed 2.5 times the official federal poverty level based on family size for the school year preceding the school year for which the scholarship is to be awarded. For a family of four, this would be \$55,125.

Innovation Fund to help chronically failing schools

The bill provides that the amount of the per-pupil state-aid that would have been paid to the school district for students who participate in the program, less the amount of the actual scholarships awarded to students, will be dedicated to an Educational Innovation fund. Under the direction of the state Commissioner of Education, the Innovation Fund will award competitive grants to chronically failing schools to help them adopt innovative educational practices with the objective of improving student performance in the failing schools. Applications for the grants will be made by the superintendent of the district in which the failing school is located.

Editor's note: To contact legislators to express support for the Opportunity Scholarship Act, see www.WeCanDoBetter-nj.org. To join the New Jersey Catholic Conference's Action Network see www.njcathconf.com. Click on "Faith in Action" and "Join our Action Network."

We can do **BETTER**

www.WeCanDoBetter-nj.org



New Jersey has one of the highest tax burdens of any state in the nation. And it spends more per student in school costs than almost any other state. Yet, many schools in the state get failing grades. We can do better.

The Opportunity Scholarship Act (S-1872) will help public school districts in New Jersey improve failing schools. It will empower the parents of children in failing schools to choose public or non-public schools that will best serve the needs of their children.

And, unlike vouchers, the program is funded by corporate tax credits. No payments are made from the government to non-public schools or directly to parents. Also, there's no added burden to taxpayers. The Scholarship Act will benefit all New Jerseyans, but most of all, our children. To find out more, see:

www.WeCanDoBetter-nj.org

ACT NOW!

SUPPORT S-1872

- KEEP CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AFFORDABLE & ACCESSIBLE
- HELP IMPROVE PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW JERSEY
- ENSURE A FUTURE OF HOPE AND OPPORTUNITY FOR OUR CHILDREN

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