

Press Release

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Legislation filed to make Arkansas 22nd school choice state

LITTLE ROCK—Parents of students in public school would be able to direct the money reserved for their kids' education to the public or private school of their choice under legislation filed today by Rep. Randy Alexander (R-88). "The Parental Choice Scholarship Program," if enacted, would make Arkansas the 22nd state to provide private school choice.

Rep. Alexander's proposal would allow public school students in grades four through eight to direct up to 100 percent of their state and local "adequate funding amount" in the form of scholarships. That amount currently is set at \$6,267 per pupil. The state will save money under this proposal when students use the scholarship at schools that charge less than the adequate funding amount.

Although Rep. Alexander's goal is to provide the scholarship program to all families, he has introduced it as a "pilot" measure, which he says other states have done to better test its impact. "School choice has proved effective in other states when it comes to raising student performance and improving public schools," Rep. Alexander said. "Our neighbors have school choice to serve families in need. Why don't we? Families in our state want it, and need it."

A recent poll done by The Tarrance Group found 74 percent of Arkansas voters agree that school choice should be available to parents.

Currently, 21 states and Washington, D.C. offer some type of private school choice program, according to "The ABCs of School Choice," a publication from the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, a national school choice group. In total, more than 255,000 students use scholarship programs. Near Arkansas, private school choice programs operate in Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, and Georgia, while Alabama and Tennessee are likely to adopt such programs this year.

“Arkansas is being left behind as other states provide high-quality learning opportunities to thousands of children,” Rep. Alexander added. “The quality of kids’ education should be not determined by their zip codes. Parents need the freedom to send their kids to a school that best fits their individual needs.” Alexander believes this bill provides the most benefit to low and middle income parents, since high income families already have a choice.

Rep. Alexander’s legislation would require participating private schools to administer end-of-year testing through either the state or a national-norm reference test, and to share the individual child’s test results with parents, as well as the schools aggregate test score so parents can compare them with those of surrounding schools. The bill also would require private schools to hold a lottery for scholarship enrollees if there are more applicants than seats available.

“We know from research and the personal stories from children, parents, principals, and teachers that school choice works,” Robert Enlow, president and CEO of the Friedman Foundation, said. “Arkansas can join the national movement to give all kids, regardless of their parents’ home addresses, access to a great education.”

“The Parental Choice Scholarship Program” will be heard first in the House Education Committee.

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