

School choice bills promoted in Pennsylvania, New York; Va. bill dead

PHILADELPHIA - Pennsylvania state Sen. Anthony H. Williams invokes the language of the civil rights movement and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. when arguing for school choice.

Williams, a Democrat who represents Philadelphia, called the bill that would give low-income parents tuition vouchers to transfer their children from failing public schools to schools that succeed a “moral imperative.”

The bill passed by a vote of 8-2 in the Senate Education Committee March 1.

“For too long we have trapped and failed thousands of children and their families and failed the taxpayers who have paid for this expensive failure,” he said.

Nearly 70 years after the U.S. Supreme Court banned segregated schools, declaring that “separate is not equal,” Williams has adapted the famous ruling to describe his own crusade for choice: “Failing schools are not equal,” he said.

Williams is lead co-sponsor of S.B. 1 - the Opportunity Scholarship Act - along with state Sen. Jeffrey Piccola from the Harrisburg area and 15 other legislators.

Under terms of the legislation, a family of four earning less than \$28,688 could use vouchers to send their children to the school of their choice - public, private, Catholic or charter.

The money would come from the per-pupil subsidy the commonwealth pays to local school districts. The vouchers would cover tuition up to the current cost of the base subsidy: \$8,950. According to the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, average Catholic school tuition across the state is \$3,500 in K-8 and \$6,500 in high school. The money saved - the difference between tuition and the state’s per-pupil subsidy - would revert to a fund for future opportunity scholarships.

The legislation also increases money available for tuition tax credits to \$100 million from the current \$75 million for middle income families earning up to \$60,000.

Williams said his bill is not an attack on public education but on failing schools.

“Those that oppose school choice argue that they need more time and more money to fix failing schools,” he told a recent rally in Harrisburg in support of the bill. “I say 50 years and \$25 billion is enough! They say school choice will take more money from failing schools. I say close the failing schools.”

The state Department of Education has identified 144 “failing” public schools in the lowest performing 5 percent as measured by state standardized tests. Ninety-one of those schools are in Philadelphia.

The Pennsylvania Catholic Conference has endorsed the bill, saying, “All parents should be able to choose schools that best suit their children. Financial realities often preclude parents from having that choice. The Opportunity Scholarship Act is a step in the right direction toward expanding those opportunities to more parents.”

The Pennsylvania Education Association and the Pennsylvania School Boards Association oppose the plan.

Meanwhile, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York testified Feb. 15 at a joint legislative budget hearing on elementary and secondary education in Albany, N.Y., speaking out against proposed cuts in reimbursements to religious and independent schools and in favor of school choice.

“It is in the area of parental choice that we see the gravest injustice perpetrated on families, no matter whether it’s a family with children in public school or a family with children in a Catholic school, yeshiva, or some other independent school,” he told the panel.

He disputed the claim that school choice programs harm public schools.

Noting that thousands of New York children were “trapped in chronically low-performing government schools,” Archbishop Dolan said that in his former post as archbishop of Milwaukee, “where we have the oldest and broadest parental choice

programs in the country,” experience showed that “broad-based parental choice programs benefit all children in all schools.”

He also said religious and independent schools in New York state were “saving New York taxpayers at least \$8 billion each and every year.”

“Where is their reward?” he asked. “They don’t even get a thank you. All they get are higher taxes and higher tuition.”

In Virginia, the Senate Finance Committee recently defeated legislation that would have given businesses tax credits for their donations to fund nonpublic school tuition for low-income students.

Among those testifying in favor of the Virginia legislation was Florida state Rep. Terry Fields, who spoke of “the great success and wide bipartisan support the program receives in Florida.”

Virginia Gov. Robert McDonnell, who supported the bill, said after the committee vote, “Helping disadvantaged children access greater educational opportunities is the right thing to do, and we will continue to work to increase that access in the years ahead.”