

House backs school voucher program

WASHINGTON (AP) - Congress took a step Friday toward turning the nation's capital city into the home of the first federally supported school voucher plan, an idea with implications across the country.

The House narrowly endorsed private-school vouchers for poor District of Columbia students Friday, a plan likely to win final approval when the city's budget comes to a vote next week. The Senate, too, will soon consider a plan to let district students attend private school at public expense.

The last time proponents got this far, in 1997, the voucher proposal stalled in the Senate after a veto threat from then-President Clinton. This time, proponents say the idea may have enough support in the Senate, and the White House isn't an obstacle: President Bush backs school choice.

If Congress adopts vouchers for one of the nation's most troubled districts, it could influence the choices of state leaders and further energize those on both sides of the issue. Six states offer some form of vouchers, but voters in other states have soundly rejected them.

"Sometimes vouchers don't get traction because they're not in places anyone pays attention to. But for Washington, D.C., to house a program of choices, that could have tremendous traction," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform. "We're closer than we've ever been."

But to opponents, who say vouchers strip money from public schools, the fight isn't close to over. House Democrats say they believe the voucher vote could be overturned when the budget bill comes up for a vote next Tuesday. Democrats also say the close vote - 205 to 203 - signals the plan faces big trouble in the Senate.

Meanwhile, the lobbying among parents, teachers, unions and education groups is intensifying.

"When you've got the White House and the leadership of both houses of Congress pushing for it, it's definitely in play," said Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers. "And we are fighting it."

Since the Supreme Court deemed a Cleveland voucher case constitutional last year, only one state, Colorado, has added a voucher plan. With states in their worst financial shape in decades, now is not a time when their leaders are inclined to earmark money for private school choice, said Todd Ziebarth, policy analyst for the nonprofit Education Commission of the States.

Still, he said, to see the federal government put in place a voucher program for the D.C. public schools "would push the momentum toward the proponents."

Bush and other Republicans dropped vouchers from consideration as part of a compromise version of the 2001 law that overhauled public education. The law does allow students in consistently underperforming school to transfer to another public school.

The current \$10 million House measure would let at least 1,300 students switch to private schools, and the number would grow - assuming some students receive less than the maximum \$7,500 a year. Vouchers would not guarantee students admission to the schools of their choice.

Supporters said students shouldn't be forced to stay in a city system notorious for academic struggles. Priority would go to students at schools publicly labeled as needing improvement.

"Wealthy people in America have school choice, but poor people don't, and many of those families in poor neighborhoods cannot afford a private option," said Rep. Dave Weldon, R-Fla. "And unfortunately, many of those types of situations are in the District of Columbia."

Surveys of 60 private schools in the district found that 38 charge tuition of \$7,500 or less, said Nina Rees, a deputy undersecretary at the Education Department.

Four Democrats joined 201 Republicans to pass the amendment.

Critics said vouchers amount to an abandonment of public schools, and that the money would be better used to improve teachers and fix crumbling buildings. Eleanor Holmes Norton, the city's nonvoting delegate in Congress, said residents there don't want to be the subject of a national experiment.

Caucus

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at the CBC, the leadership chose to go with FOX News Channel."

BET is now part of the Viacom empire, which also includes CBS. Its majority owner until recently was Robert L. Johnson. Now, Johnson and another African-American, Debra Lee, are BET's top executive officers.

"We go to 75 million homes and would have been prime time. Just by design, we would have had a high penetration of African-American viewers in particular. BET reaches approximately 95 percent of all Black cable homes in the country," Lewellen says.

Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.), chairman of the CBC's 13-member Political Education and Leadership Institute, which sponsored the debate, confirms that BET was the first network that offered to televise the debate but said the network's proposal would have put the CBC in a hole.

"The one charge we had from the board is whatever entity can help us pull this off with the least amount of expenses to us, we go with. It was a business decision. We didn't look at the philosophy of any entity. But, BET, obviously because of who we are, was the entity that we dealt with first," Thompson says.

"My understanding is that [BET] indicated they could do so much and that was it. That was not enough... My understanding is that the costs of production and other costs associated with it, for the most part, FOX was willing to step forward and do," Thompson explains.

Neither Thompson, Cummings, nor BET spokesman Michael Lewellen would say specifically how much money was involved.

At least BET got to bid on it.

That wasn't the case with MBC, which reaches 25 million homes. Its owners include well-known attorney and company CEO Willie E. Gary, boxer Evander Holyfield and former Jackson Five singer Marlon Jackson.

"When they made a decision to go with FOX, we were never even given a chance to come to the table with a proposal," says Greg Morrison, MBC news director. "We wanted to at least see what they were looking for and we never got that opportunity and it's an opportunity we would like to have had."

The first debate was held Tuesday night on the campus of historically Black Morgan State University in Baltimore.



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The next one is scheduled for Sunday, Oct. 26, in Detroit.

FOX News is headed by media mogul Rupert Murdoch, is a 24-hour general news service available in more than 82 million homes. "Fox could potentially represent a valuable contribution to the journalistic mix if it admitted it had a conservative point of view," states a 15-page Fair.org report on FOX, written two years ago by Seth Ackerman, a contributing writer for Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, a media-watch group.

CBC spokesman Doug Thornell says talks between Cummings and Ailes began late last spring when Cummings was an invited guest of FOX News at the annual Radio and Television Correspondents dinner.

"Mr. Cummings brought up the fact that the caucus intended on hosting a couple of debates and asked Mr. Ailes if he would be interested in airing them. Mr. Ailes thought about it and got back with the caucus and Mr. Cummings and then at that point they began to try to work out that agreement," Thornell says.

The seven-year-old FOX News Channel, owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch, is a 24-hour general news service available in more than 82 million homes. "Fox could potentially represent a valuable contribution to the journalistic mix if it admitted it had a conservative point of view," states a 15-page Fair.org report on FOX, written two years ago by Seth Ackerman, a contributing writer for Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, a media-watch group.

Max Hilaire, chairman of the political science department at Morgan State, is holding out hopes that the partnership with the CBC may bring about changes.

"I believe FOX news may have realized the importance of the African-American participation in the process and that for so long that aspect or that segment of the Ameri-

can electorate has been kept outside of the loop more or less," he says.

Cummings knows that the conservative network's motto, "We report, you decide," should more accurately proclaim, "We report, we decide."

The Baltimore congressman says, "I'm not going to defend what FOX has done in the past. But, the fact is that FOX is the only network that provided the caucus an opportunity to air our debate from a historically Black College, Morgan State University, live to the entire country, every nook and cranny of it. So, we're taking advantage of an opportunity."

Some observers feel FOX is taking advantage of the CBC. "FOX doesn't often reflect the kinds of positions that members of the CBC sometimes take... Why should the CBC go to the best bidder that may be politically in conflict with some of their views outside of the business decision?" asks Dianne Pinderhughes, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "You make that decision in a narrow context. But it may be that in a broader context, it may be more problematic."

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Self Breast Exam	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
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