

Florida House passes sweeping schools and voucher bill

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Following a sharply worded partisan debate, the Republican-controlled Florida House on Thursday passed a sweeping education bill that would add yet another private-school voucher program in the state while also making a vast array of changes on everything from school testing to how much money charter schools can receive.

It's the second year in a row that House Speaker Richard Corcoran and GOP leaders have pushed to overhaul Florida's schools, which have been constantly altered and reshaped during the nearly 20 years that Republicans have controlled state government. It's not clear the entire measure will pass, although Senate Republicans say they support many key provisions.

The fierce debate echoed previous ones in which Republicans asserted they were creating more choices for parents, while Democrats said the sweeping scope of the bill was designed to divert money from traditional public schools to schools run or controlled privately.

"We are placing our trust in parents and opening up choices for them," said Rep. Michael Bileca, a Miami Republican and chairman of the House Education Committee.

Florida already spends nearly \$1 billion on scholarship programs that offer vouchers to disabled students and students who come primarily from low-income families. The latest proposal would allow students who are victims of bullying, harassment and other types of violence to either transfer to another public school or receive a private-school voucher. Supporters point to statistics that show nearly 50,000 incidents of fighting, bullying and assault happen each year in Florida schools.

But Democrats criticized the new scholarship offering, saying it would "empower" bullies to target students if they knew it would result in a student moving to another school. Rep. Janet Cruz, a Tampa Democrat, recalled how her own daughter was bullied while growing up and that she got help from the school principal.

"I would never want to see a child be bullied," said Cruz. "But I didn't teach my daughter because someone bullied her that we should run away."

Another part of the bill would create a new program for students who performed poorly on the standardized reading test given to third-grade students. Under the measure, parents would be reimbursed after paying for tutors and other services. The legislation also calls for changes being sought by charter school operators, including giving them more time to prepare to open a charter school.

The bill also creates a new process that could guarantee that charter schools receive a certain amount of money each year for construction projects. Charter schools are public schools, but they are run by private organizations.

In an effort to increase pressure to pass the 200-page bill, House Republicans have tied \$8.3 billion in public-school funding to its passage. Senate President Joe Negron, however, said that while he and other Republicans support much of the bill, they do not support tying it to the state budget.

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