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Ohio to implement nation's largest voucher program

SARAH ANDERSON

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Ohio will more than triple the size of its school voucher program, making it the nation's largest project and the first successful implementation since the practice of using public money for private school tuition was found constitutional three years ago.

The tuition aid, which has been available only in Cleveland since 1996, will open private school doors to 14,000 additional students at struggling schools statewide beginning next year.

"This is a commitment that needed to be made, providing Ohio parents and children with more choices in education," said Karen Tabor, spokeswoman for House Speaker Jon Husted.

Supporters of school choice have worked to set up and expand programs since 2002, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Cleveland's program - which includes religious schools - does not violate the separation of church and state.

Measures in seven states failed this year.

In Indiana, Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada and Texas, lawmakers defeated start-up voucher programs or left sessions with the bills stalled. An expansion in Wisconsin and a new program in Arizona were vetoed.

In Ohio, however, Gov. Bob Taft's proposal to provide vouchers to 2,600 students was not expansive enough for the Republican-controlled House or Senate. The state's \$51 billion budget that Taft signed Thursday includes the funding for 14,000 children. The state will pay \$4,250 for students in kindergarten through eighth grade and \$5,000 for high schoolers.

Cleveland's program will continue, bringing the total of possible voucher students to nearly 20,000.

Only Florida and Wisconsin offer voucher programs similar to Ohio's. Both were founded under Republican governors.

The Milwaukee School Choice Program, which serves more than 14,000 students, began 15 years ago. Democrat Jim Doyle, now Wisconsin's governor, has vetoed three attempts to lift or raise its enrollment cap.

Sheila Haygood said her two youngest daughters, 8 and 10, were in public school classrooms in Milwaukee with as many as 30 other students before they moved to Eastbrook Academy four years ago. Now they have classes half that size and tutors available before and after school, Haygood said.

"The difference is that these are dedicated teachers that are spending the time to help these kids see their weaknesses and help them grow," she said.

The issue of using taxpayer money to pay for private school tuition, particularly at religious institutions, is a contentious one. Research is just as divided over whether voucher students get a better education.

Backers say vouchers offer options to students at poorly performing schools. Opponents say the practice diverts funding from schools that need it most.

Attorney John West, who has argued against voucher programs in Ohio, Colorado and Florida, suggests other educational alternatives, such as reduced class sizes and after-school programs, for improving student performance.

"This is not the way to fix public schools," he said of vouchers, adding that many proponents are using tuition for disadvantaged students as a "foot in the door" for universal voucher programs.

Maine and Vermont fund private education at nonreligious schools for students living in districts that don't have public schools. A few other states provide tax incentives to corporations or individuals who fund students' private educations.

Despite the Supreme Court ruling, there has been no shortage of legal snarls for school vouchers in other states.

Colorado set up a program in 2003 that eventually could have served as many as 30,000 students and would have been the first of its kind enacted since the Cleveland ruling, said Denise Mund, a senior consultant for the Colorado Schools of Choice Unit. The state Supreme Court invalidated the program before it began, finding it usurped local school boards' authority.

The Florida Supreme Court is considering whether the state's Opportunity Scholarship Program, which started in 1999 and was the nation's first statewide voucher program, is constitutional.

The challenge originally included claims that the program violated the federal separation of church and state. Since the Cleveland ruling, the case has focused Florida's narrower restriction on mixing church and state and how the program fit with lawmakers' duties to provide children with an adequate education, said attorney Barry Richard, who represented the state.