

State's school-voucher program is under way

Carson Smith program: The governor signs a bill to provide scholarships for special-needs students

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By Ronnie Lynn

Utah launched its first school-voucher program Thursday when Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. signed a bill that will provide up to \$5,700 each for students with disabilities to attend private schools.

The measure's enactment came a year later than supporters had hoped, but that didn't stop them from celebrating at the Carmen B. Pingree School for Children with Autism, where the signing ceremony took place.

"This means a great deal to a whole lot of people in this state," Huntsman said.

"It's going to be huge," agreed Julie Moore, who now can keep one of her 9-year-old autistic twin sons at the \$23,000-a-year Pingree school. She enrolled him there this year after it became clear his social skills were not controlled enough to attend the public school where his brother thrives. "When he was in public school, I used to get phone calls every day to come pick him up. I don't get those phone calls anymore."

Cheryl Smith expressed similar relief. The measure - The Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship program - is named after her 6-year-old son, who also attends Pingree. "This allows us to keep Carson at this school and get the services he needs so we can get him ready to go to public school," Smith said.

The Legislature passed a similar bill in 2004, but then-Gov. Olene Walker vetoed it because of concerns about its constitutionality. Those concerns were eliminated this year because the measure is funded through the state's general fund, not the school fund, said Phil Jeffery, a budget and research analyst in the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget.

The scholarship program targets children with at least one of the following disabilities: mental retardation; traumatic brain injury; autism; specific learning disabilities; serious emotional disturbance; or hearing, speech, language, visual, orthopedic or other health impairment. Five- to 8-year-olds with a developmental delay also qualify.

Existing private school students may be eligible for a scholarship if they attend a school that specializes in serving students who have one of the disabilities specified in the bill.

What the Carson Smith bill does:

> It is retroactive for the current school year, but the state Office of Education still must design rules that govern private schools' eligibility to accept scholarship students, as well as student-eligibility criteria and the scholarship-application process.

> Under the new law, parents may receive scholarship money equal to what the state would pay to serve each student with disabilities.

> Based on next year's funding formula, scholarships would range from \$3,450 to \$5,700 for eligible full-time students, depending on the severity of their needs.

> The bill appropriates \$2.6 million from the general fund in 2006 and reduces the Minimum School Program - which funds public schools - by \$903,300 the same year.

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Full text of the legislation at: www.leg.state.ut.us/~2005/htmldoc/hbillhtm/HB0249.htm