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EDUCATION: Opponents rally to block private school tax credit bill

By Veena Trehan
Capital News Service

WASHINGTON — Opponents of a bill to grant tax credits to businesses that give scholarships to private schools are scrambling after being taken by surprise by its scheduling.

The bill passed the Senate, 30-17, last week after failing twice in previous sessions, and Maryland's House Ways and Means Committee will conduct an abbreviated hearing today. Several Maryland organizations are rallying members and legislators to oppose it.

"They've caught us with our pants down," said Sean Dobson, executive director of Progressive Maryland. "In the last 10 days (of the session), we will be scrambling to try to block this bill any way we can."

The Maryland General Assembly was scheduled to adjourn Monday, but was extended 10 days to deal with the budget.

The bill increases tax incentives for businesses donating to private school scholarship funds or "innovative educational organizations" from 13 cents to 75 cents per dollar donated, up to \$200,000.

Opponents say the bill is a school voucher program in disguise.

Voucher programs typically provide families with a set amount of state money to use for education in any setting, including private schools.

"The sponsors have registered their annoyance with our categorizing this program as a voucher program," said Diana Saquella, government relations manager for the Maryland State Teachers Association. "Our association's definition of a voucher program is any program that diverts public money from public schools and provides access through scholarships or vouchers to private or sectarian schools."

↳ Saquella is notifying MSTTA's members and contacting legislators to mount opposition to the proposal.

Opponents also charge that the program fails to consider the specific measures -- like enrollment, the number of special education students, poverty and performance -- that The Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act (a.k.a. Thornton) outlines for school funding.

↳

Maryland's ACLU is concerned that, because the bill was pushed through a financial committee rather than the education panel, it does not have the same accountability.

"It's a dramatic shift in education policy without being reviewed by the substantive education committee on the Senate side," said Cindy Boersma, state ACLU legislative director.

Catholic and Jewish organizations, meanwhile, are pushing hard for the bill's passage.

Over the past five years, Catholic schools in Maryland have seen an enrollment decline of 6 percent overall with a drop in elementary school enrollment of 10 percent in this time period, according to the Maryland Catholic Conference. Tuition in the last 10 years increased 25 to 50 percent in many schools, as employees shifted from religious personnel to lay staff.

"The issue with drop of enrollment doesn't reflect a lack of demand for our schools," said Mary Ellen Russell, deputy director for Maryland Catholic Conference. "What they affect is the decreased ability for families to be able to afford school tuition."

Maryland's public schools also are in a budget bind, and full funding of Thornton is in jeopardy.

The program will benefit both types of schools, said Russell.

"It's an important first step in building up the partnership between the business and education community in Maryland," she said.

A similar program in Pennsylvania has been touted by bill proponents, but decried by opponents who point to its spending growth from \$30 million to \$75 million per year over 7 years.

Groups also criticize the expanded diversion of state funds to religious organizations, including Boersma, who said, "You now have state money becoming deeply entangled in religion."

