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## Tuition-voucher debate is today

By [Jennifer Toomer-Cook](#)

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The long-awaited House debate on a controversial bill giving a government voucher for private school tuition was put off until today.

Sponsoring Rep. Steve Urquhart, R-St. George, said HB148 didn't get on Thursday's time-certain debate calendar by a process mistake. The House voted late Thursday morning to debate it today at 11 a.m.

"We want to get this taken care of quickly, but we didn't want to catch anyone unaware," Urquhart said. "We have the votes; we're fine. People are where they are ... there's not going to be a lot of movement at this point."

But House Speaker Greg Curtis, R-Sandy, said debate was not delayed on school vouchers Thursday because of concern the votes weren't there.

"It's more a question it's an emotionally charged issue and if we debate it tomorrow at 11 and get done around noon, people can go home regardless of the outcome and be gracious winners or gracious losers and Monday we'll just move on with whatever happens."

Curtis said he felt he had 38 "commitments" on the issue, not necessarily votes. "My experience has told me that doesn't mean you are going to win the issue. ... I'm a lot more confident on other things than that. It's going to be very close."

In fact, the speaker predicted a vote that's "equally exciting" as the tie and then narrow defeat of a bill revoking the law allowing undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition at Utah colleges and universities.

Opponents have acknowledged the votes probably will be close. And now, some wonder if the measure might be defeated.

"We hope it means they don't have the votes and a lot of people are taking a hard look at this," Utah Education Association President Kim Campbell said.

"The longer it is delayed, it's like crying wolf," alleviating some of the pressure lawmakers might feel to vote one way or another, said Carol Lear, director of school law and legislation for the State Office of Education. The State Board of Education opposes the voucher concept. "We need to get on and discuss

substantive education issues; this kind of keeps that process from moving forward."

Yet the pause also gives both sides extra time to bend lawmakers' ears.

"It give us 24 more hours," Parents for Choice in Education executive director Elisa Peterson said. She wasn't too worried about the delay. "Things change all the time up here."

Lawmakers were receiving results of a study funded by Parents for Choice in Education, the Utah Taxpayers Association and the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, saying Utah school districts would retain \$2,674 per voucher student, possibly totaling \$26 million a year, under the proposed program. The taxpayers association called the move a cost-effective step in education.

Also, a group of legislators who visited Milwaukee to examine its voucher program, a trip guided by Parents for Choice, were distributing documents detailing their thoughts on the concept, Peterson said.

On the other side, the UEA and other school groups were distributing fliers, e-mail messages and talking with legislators about why they think vouchers are a bad idea for Utah schools. They say many choices including charter schools already are offered in the public system, and that tax dollars should not be diverted to private schools when the public schools get the lowest per-student funding in the country.

HB148 would give a government voucher, worth \$500 up to \$3,000, depending on family income, for private school tuition. Students switching from public to private schools who are new to the state or just entering kindergarten would be eligible, as would low-income students in private schools now.

The bill would leave leftover per-student spending within the voucher student's public school district. So a student taking the average voucher, estimated to cost \$2,000, would leave the rest of his \$3,500 in state spending, or \$1,500, with the schools. Local property tax money typically spent on the student also would remain in the school system.

The bill seeks \$9.2 million in general, not school, funds in the first year, and \$12.3 million in the second. The Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst also says it would put nearly \$4 million in the first year, and \$3.6 million the second, back into the schools' budget.

House Democrats and moderates have prevented passage of similar bills for the past seven years.

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*Contributing: Lisa Riley Roche*

E-mail: [jtcook@desnews.com](mailto:jtcook@desnews.com)

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