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Voucher study: Growth, choice -  
while saving money

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**BROOKE BARKER** - Daily Herald

A study released Tuesday by the Utah Taxpayers Association, the Milton and Rose D. Freidman Foundation and Parents for Choice in Education says vouchers for private schools would accommodate growth and provide parents with the choice they want -- while saving tax dollars.

The savings -- more than \$35 million per year -- would help low-income and qualifying students receive \$3,000 vouchers to attend private schools. The study says that in its first year, it could remove as many as 9,662 students from the public school system. And schools would be able to keep part of the funding for students who leave for private schools.

Critics of the voucher program say it would require the state to set up two separate school systems, and not allow the state to be accountable for money or results, said Mark Peterson, a spokesman for the Utah State Office of Education.

"Others in the board of education worry that money is going out of the district, or that they're supporting subsidizing the private industry," Peterson said.

A bill, proposed by Rep. Stephen Urquhart, R- St. George, recently passed a House committee, but has yet to be voted on by the House. The bill would create a program to award scholarships, or vouchers, for students to attend private schools.

"Parents know their children better than any administrator or board member ever will," said Nancy Pomeray, a spokeswoman for Parents for Choice in Education.

If approved by the Legislature, vouchers could help reduce the need for more teachers and classroom space in public schools, as well as help the state lower student-teacher ratios.

"The evidence we've looked at shows vouchers don't hurt public education but rather help it," Pomeray said.

She said that in other places where vouchers have been used, such as Milwaukee, Wis., graduation rates climbed and test scores improved.

Mike Jerman, the vice president of the Utah Taxpayer's Association, said they've been analyzing expenditures for years, and that while parent choice supporters acknowledge that public schools generally do a good job, there's always room for improvement.

"Not every school or school district can be expected to educate all types of students as efficiently as possible," Jerman said.

He said education receives the largest amount of funding every year from state and local governments. Utah public schools receive \$6,325 in revenue per student -- \$3,508 from the state, \$2,220 from local sources, and \$597 from federal sources.

"During the past several decades, the emphasis has been on simply increasing funding, but we have yet to see massive changes in student performance," Jerman said. "Many developed countries outperform us in math and science, so obviously what the U.S. and Utah have been doing is mainly increasing per student spending."

Parents for Choice in Education say the voucher program would allow parents to use some of their state education funding to place their children in the schools they choose, public or private. Meanwhile, public schools would retain some funding for the students who leave for private schools -- \$2,674 per student using a voucher. This money is granted to the schools regardless of enrollment.

Although Leah Barker, the executive director for Children First Utah, didn't want to voice her opinion on the bill, she said a model similar to the proposed voucher program is working for her, and hundreds of families.

Children First Utah is a nonprofit organization providing scholarships to low-income families to send their children to private schools. In its sixth year, Barker said the demand keeps growing for parents wanting options.

"We get phone calls every day from parents wanting to tell us their story," Barker said. "Parents want to focus on their kids. They want them to improve academically."

Last year, Barker received 2,000 applications for the scholarships and was only able to grant 375 -- something she says shows low-income parents are willing to pay for their children's education, if they have some help.

"Logically, the numbers are there for vouchers," she said. "We're turning away 10 kids for every one that we are able to help."

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