



Plan would broaden special needs program

Military, foster kids could be eligible for school vouchers.

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Military and foster children could soon be eligible for vouchers to pay for private school under legislation proposed Tuesday that would expand the reach of the existing Georgia Special Needs Scholarship program.

Senate Bill 361 changes the name of the voucher initiative to Early HOPE Scholarship Program, expands its deadline and enlarges the field of eligible students. Special needs students as well as military and foster students without disabilities would be able to access scholarships under the bill.

Students would still be required to stay in their local public schools at least one full year before applying for scholarships.

Senate Majority Leader Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock), who introduced the legislation, said it would give thousands

more Georgia families school choice.

"The Special Needs Scholarship has been studied ... even the critics would have to agree this works," Rogers said. "We are going to try to make it even better."

The improvements could, however, increase program costs as more students apply for vouchers.

There are 15,000 children in the foster care system, and Georgia has approximately 110,000 military personnel — excluding those in the National Guard and Reserves with civilian jobs who have been deployed — who have children.

"I think this program would really open doors for a lot of children with special needs, particularly in small towns," said Florine King, the exceptional family member program coordinator for Fort Stewart in Hinesville. " ... I think it would give them an opportunity to be in an environment where they are comfortable."

In the 2008-09 school year, 1,596 special needs students received more than \$9.2 million in

vouchers. The average payment was \$6,331, but they ranged from \$2,592 to \$13,586.

Research has shown that the voucher students are seeing results. A study by the Center for an Educated Georgia found that 66 percent of students showed progress in math and 67 percent showed progress in reading in one or more school years. The current voucher program is in its third year.

Cobb County mom Olivia Jenkins said her 16-year-old used to fake headaches to get out of school at Pebblebrook High but now he races to get dressed to go to Center Academy in Smyrna. Jenkins said the teen has progressed one full grade in just a few months at the school. Jenkins receives a voucher to help cover most of the \$15,000 in tuition, and she said more parents should have access to the scholarship money for their children.

"He went from a D student to an A/B student; his attitude changed," she said. "He is more attentive. He is anxious to go to school, and he wants me to be more involved."