

# Illinois House kills school voucher bill

## Fervent lobbying by unions sinks idea to give students \$3,700 to switch to private or parochial schools

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SPRINGFIELD — A measure to let students in Chicago's worst-performing and most-overcrowded elementary schools use taxpayer-funded vouchers to attend private schools was defeated in the Illinois House on Wednesday, giving teachers unions a major victory.

The landmark legislation would have made [Chicago Public Schools](#) the site of what experts said would be the nation's largest voucher program. Up to 30,000 of the district's 400,000 students could have left the weak schools they now attend, setting up competition for public schools.

The legislation got through the Senate in March after being championed by Sen. [James Meeks](#), D-Chicago, and suburban [Republicans](#). But by Wednesday, teachers unions had regrouped and its supporters found themselves pleading with opponents to overcome a furious lobbying effort to stop the bill.

"Think back to why you ran for office," said sponsoring Rep. Kevin Joyce, D-Chicago. "Was it for a pension? I doubt it. Was it to protect the leadership of a union? I doubt that. Actually in all cases, I believe each and every one of us here got involved to try and make a difference in the lives of our fellow man."

Joyce could muster only 48 of the 60 votes needed to pass a bill that would have allowed students to get vouchers worth about \$3,700 to switch to private or parochial schools beginning in fall 2011.

Joyce said the bill would have passed if it had not faced the union opposition. The bill got support from 26 Republicans and 22 [Democrats](#), fewer votes than Joyce had expected from his fellow Democrats.

Fighting back tears during the lengthy debate, Rep. Suzanne Bassi, R-Palatine, called on fellow lawmakers to "search your souls" to support the measure because "we have failed these kids in the inner-city schools."

"I'm pleading with you," said Rep. Ken Dunkin, D-Chicago, who represents an area with four public schools where students would have been eligible for vouchers. "I'm begging you. Help me help kids in my district."

Rep. Art Turner, D-Chicago, led the opposition with a n impassioned speech calling for the measure's defeat. He railed against the current educational system, saying improvements need to be made in the home life of children and in the city school system, which oversees 10 of the worst schools in his own legislative district.

"Chicago Board (of Education), get busy," Turner said. "Do what you're supposed to do."

Teachers unions argued the legislature should be voting for an income tax increase that would help all students, not just a few, and that vouchers could cost public school teaching jobs.

Rep. Elaine Nekritz, D-Northbrook, underscored an argument repeatedly made by the Illinois Education Association, the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Chicago Teachers Union. She contended the bill could fail to meet constitutional tests, particularly noting the use of "public money to promote sectarian purposes."

But Rep. Jim Durkin, R-Western Springs, pointed to a 2002 [U.S. Supreme Court](#) decision that upheld a voucher program in Cleveland as he threw his support behind the measure. Durkin said he was unwilling to "take a chance" in opposing a bill that could give some student a "better life."

The measure also would have needed final approval from the Senate and the signature of [Gov. Pat Quinn](#), who was noncommittal about the issue Wednesday.

Charles McBarron, a spokesman for the Illinois Education Association, contended the voucher program would divert millions of dollars to private schools, a move he said in these tough economic times is "indefensible."

But Joyce and other supporters argued the voucher would represent only \$3,700 in state money out of about \$11,500 a year that is spent on each child in the city's public schools from several sources. No local property tax dollars, for example, would be sent to the private schools.

Rep. Susana Mendoza, D-Chicago, called the measure "one of the most important" education bills lawmakers will consider. "This bill is about giving people school choice," Mendoza said.