Private school breaks may face budget ax

Lawmakers eye giveaways in crisis

BY MARK BALLARD
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Louisiana taxpayers give $103 million annually in tax breaks and outright grants to private schools and the parents who send their kids to them.

For years, legislative attempts to redirect some of that public money from private and parochial schools was a political nonstarter. But facing a dramatic budget crisis, lawmakers are eyeing cuts in the private school giveaways.

“We are entering the sessions being as vigilant as possible and protective of credits and rebates,” Robert M. Tasman

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said. “We are operating as if every tax credit or rebate is up for consideration.”

Tasman is executive director of both the Citizens for Educational Choice, which represents the state’s Catholic schools, and the Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops. The state’s 474 private schools — most of which are Catholic — educate about 133,000 students.

Apart from the $42 million in controversial vouchers to pay private school tuition for low-income students in poor-performing public schools, state taxpayers are covering some of the costs in the cafeteria, on the buses and for textbooks in private schools.

Parents who pay tuition can write off a portion of their income taxes, which will cost the state $21.1 million for the fiscal year that ends June 30.

“It’s a no-brainer. There has to be a look at this issue,” said Steve Monaghan, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, a labor organization.

“It’s the dance that’s going to play itself out over the next six months. There will be legislators, definitely, bringing this up.”

A special session on the budget starts Feb. 14. It’ll be followed by the regularly scheduled legislative session opening March 14 and running until June 6.

But it won’t be an easy fight, contends Rep. Kirk Talbot, R-River Ridge.

“We’re not in the business of giving public schools money. We’re in the business of educating our kids. Last time I checked, our public schools are terrible,” he said.

Talbot sponsored legislation that created one of the publicly funded private school programs. He said would fight, “to his last breath,” any attempts to rollback a program that helps pay for some low-income parents to send their kids to a private school that is not part of the state’s voucher program.

On the public side, leaders are expressing concern that public schools could face their first budget cut since the 1980s because of Louisiana’s fiscal crisis. The state’s 1.4 million public schools educate about 711,000 students.

Scott Richard, executive director of the Louisiana School Boards Association, told The Advocate last week that state aid, which would not cover inflation and increased expenses, is the best-case scenario. An outright reduction is possible. That could spell teacher layoffs, crowded classrooms and fewer resources for public school students.

“The situation is very serious,” Richard said after attending a budget briefing at the Governor’s Mansion.

The key source of state aid is the $3.27 billion Minimum Foundation Program.

State services face a revenue shortfall of up to $750 million between now and June 30 and $1.9 billion for the financial year that begins on July 1.

Much of the private school spending, however, is the result of constitutional interpretations of various laws, as well as requirements set by the federal government. “These are things set in law long ago,” Scott said.

Louisiana private schools must be registered and approved by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. BESE requires private schools to comply with a number of state requirements, such as attendance and academic standards.

Additionally, the schools must adhere to federal rules that support healthy eating and can be reimbursed based on the number of meals served.

Tasman argues that private schools allow parents a choice, which creates competition that improves the quality of all the schools. Opting to pay to send children to a private school doesn’t mean that the parents are freed from paying taxes that support the public school system.

“It’s an issue of equity and fairness for individuals who are paying the state coffers. They should be able to benefit directly for their children from some of that hard-earned money they paid in,” he said.

Monaghan counters that the marketplace notion is twisted logic. Private schools don’t have to adhere to the same rules and testing standards as do public schools. And in most cases, the private schools don’t have to accept every child. Minority enrollment is 21 percent at private schools but makes up 44 percent of the public school population.

“What we have right now is a refusal of those who take advantage of private schools that don’t have to adhere to the same standards, yet they still have a claim on the money. It really chaps me,” he said.

Regardless of the philosophical debate, Tasman is preparing to defend the private school dollars.

“You are unwise and unrealistic to believe that if you’re benefiting from any funding or tax break from the state that you’re not susceptible,” Tasman said.

“It seems just an unbelievable task to come up with about $2 billion.”

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**By the numbers**

Louisiana taxpayers give $103 million annually in tax breaks and outright grants to private schools and the parents who send their kids to them.

Fiscal year 2015-16 state funding for private and parochial school scholarships:

- $21,100,000 — tuition tax deduction
- $2,400,000 — textbooks, computers and audio/visuals
- $772,000 — school nutrition programs
- $61,108 — scholarship tuition organizations

Total: $103,684,522

Value of state tax exemptions:

- $2,180,574 — tuition tax deduction
- $2,911,843 — textbooks, computers and audio/visuals
- $6,882,236 — early childhood development
- $2,911,843 — education
- $1,087,415 — (8(g) program
- $818,969 — scholarships for students with exceptionalities
- $171,865 — textbook administration

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