



The Right to Choose

School choice debate in Iowa heats up with Students First Act

By Todd Weber

An Iowa Senate panel advanced Gov. Kim Reynolds' school choice bill, called the Students First Act, out of subcommittee on January 12. This is the third legislative session in a row that the governor has introduced a bill of this type. Under the bill, eligible students can apply for education savings accounts (ESAs) in the amount of \$7,598 to attend an accredited private school rather than a public school. The money would be put into individual saving accounts—much like a 529 plan. For the first year of the plan, all Iowa public school students—more than 481,000 kids, according to state data—are eligible. Also eligible in year one are private school students with a household income at or below 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL)—\$83,250 for a family of four. In year two, private school students with a household income at or below 400% FPL—\$111,000 for a family of four—are eligible. In year three, all K-12 students in Iowa are eligible, regardless of income. The current bill also includes provisions aimed at lessening the impact on public schools. One is a measure that would send around \$1,205 back to local districts for every student in their footprint who receives an ESA, even if they never

went to the public school. Another would allow them to use unspent money from funds earmarked for staff and teacher development to supplement teacher salaries. The governor's office estimates around 40,000 students would be part of the program by the third year. Once ESAs are fully phased in, the cost would reach \$341 million. 'School choice' has been a contentious topic around the country for some time, and it has certainly created controversy in this state, as well, with people queuing up along political lines to either oppose or support the bill. The governor has framed her bill as non-political—simply focusing on what's best for the education of Iowa children. The political left argues that the bill is aimed at benefiting the 'haves' at the expense of the 'have nots' and doesn't really provide much of a choice for the majority of Iowa students. Important issues

- Students opting out of public school may not find a private school to go to. There are 175 private schools in Iowa, but 41 of Iowa's 99 counties do not

have any and 23 have just one, according to state data. Most of the private schools are centered around bigger cities like Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Cedar Falls/Waterloo, Sioux City, and the Quad Cities.

- The \$7,598 may not cover the total tuition cost

at many private schools. For example, annual tuition for a student at Des Moines Christian High School is \$12,360. Either through grants, scholarships, loans, or cash, students will have to come up with that shortfall somewhere.

- Private schools can be selective—some students won't be accepted.
- Parents of private school students are taxpayers, too—they pay into the same 'public money pot'

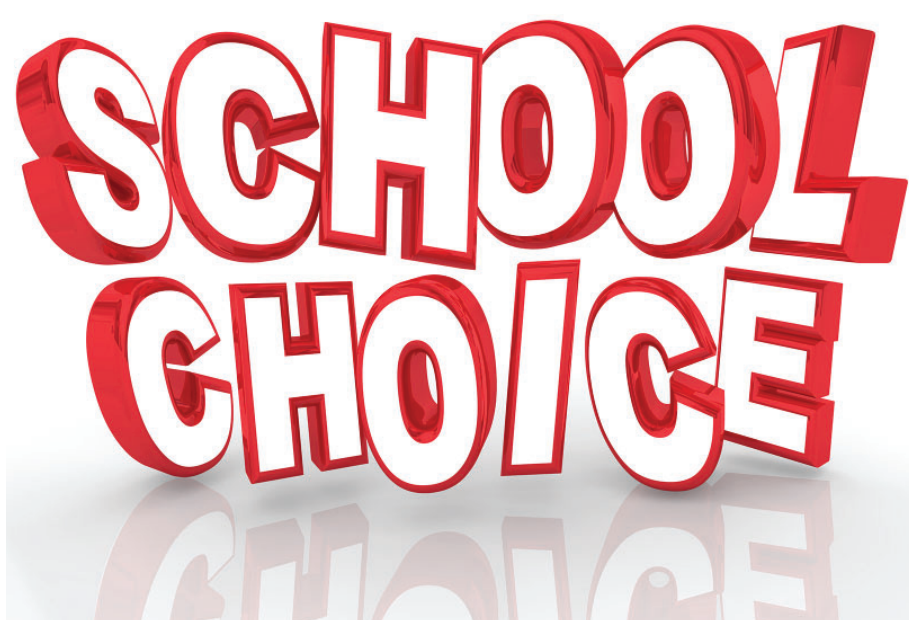
that will be made available to them in this plan.

- 'Public money' going to private education would not be a new phenomenon. For example, college students who get Pell grants are free to spend that money at private universities.

With a divisive issue like school choice, it's easy—and a little lazy—to look at it merely through a political lens. Earlham Community Schools District Superintendent Steve Kaster is not doing that. "It's not about politics for me," he said. "That's not why I'm in education to begin with. For me it's about providing education to kids." While not opposed to

the idea of school choice in theory, Kaster has a few questions about the current plan that's on the table, including how the money will be issued, tracked, and reported. "For me, I have an education hat and I also have a taxpayer hat," he said. "And there are some things here from a taxpayer standpoint—there seem to be less checks and balances with taxpayer dollars in this sense than anything else that we have right now. (ECSD) is accountable through the department of management and through the department of education for every dollar that we spend through the school. We have to put that all into reporting. Those private schools do not. Which is part of the reason I think they are going with a savings account as compared to a direct billing to the school district, because the saving account would go to the parent, and the parent would then distribute to the school." Kaster is also concerned that not everyone that wants to, will, be able to take advantage of the plan, either due to geography or other reasons.

"I think it needs to be an opportunity for all kids," he said. "And that's the part I think I struggle with more than anything. Because right now those private schools don't have to take students with special needs; they don't have to take kids that are gifted. They want the middle of the road general education students, and I'm not sure that's what public education was based on." If the Students First Act comes to fruition, the bottom line of some school districts will certainly be adversely affected. The number of districts and by how much is unknown. For Earlham, a mass exodus of students seems unlikely. "I don't know that I have a good handle on what that impact would be for us as a district," said Kaster. "My gut says we have kids here because the families want them to be here, because of the support that is here for kids both academically and for their social well-being while they are here in the building. There could certainly potentially be those that are out there thinking, 'If this were available, we would consider sending our kids to Dowling Catholic or Des Moines Christian.' I would say, financially for Earlham, we are going to see a minimal impact when it comes to what we do on a day-to-day basis."



Flying free again!



The Dallas County Conservation Board released a rehabilitated eagle back into the wild last Saturday at Kuehn Conservation Area. About 75 people were present for the informative and moving ceremony on a cold, hazy afternoon. Chris Adkins, DCCB Environmental Education Program Coordinator, kicked the event off with the story of how the bird was rescued. His wife called him one morning a few weeks ago and said she saw an eagle by a fence near Kuehn that looked injured. Adkins and DCCB Naturalist Mike Havlik investigated and determined that the bird was in distress. They were able to capture the bird without harming it by throwing a jacket over its head to keep it calm. They transferred the bird to an organization called SOAR (Saving Our Avian Resources). SOAR was established in 1999, dedicated to saving avian resources through raptor rehabilitation, education, and research. Executive Director Kay Neumann spoke briefly about the mission of the organization and how the eagle was rehabilitated. The eagle had puncture wounds on its legs and under its wings from the barbed wire fence. Once the wounds healed, the bird started flying again within an enclosure, and when it was flying without any apparent ill effects, they knew she was ready to be released. Neumann also mentioned that 40% of the eagles that

(Continued on Page 2.)

Sports Short



Malachi Hale rises above the defense to complete an alley-oop play. The Cards drubbed Woodward Academy at home last week. Story on Page 6. (Photo by Todd Weber.)

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