

advocate for SCHOOLS



TO SEE A LIST OF BILLS TRACKED BY AASB
DURING THE 2023 REGULAR SESSION,
CLICK ON BILL TRACKER BELOW:



S.202 **H.295**

Too EXPENSIVE. Too RECKLESS.

School Choice Bills on the Move, PRICE Act Out of Committee

Several school choice bills are making their way through the legislative process. The House passed the Students with Unique Needs (SUN) Act Thursday, a school voucher bill (**H.334**) sponsored by Rep. Danny Garrett that would establish an Education Savings Account (ESA) in the amount of \$5,600/per student with unique needs, including children of military parents, students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 accommodation, foster children or homeless children.

The **bill was amended** on the House floor to remove compliance with the same financial and academic requirements of public schools. Now, private schools and educational service providers only need to affirm the annual administration of a **nationally standardized test** - such as the Personalized Achievement Summary System (PASS), specifically designed for homeschoolers - and communicate results to parents.

The bill's amendment leaves a **gaping hole in accountability**. The state can no longer track the progress of students in publicly-funded private schools, effectively giving private education providers a free pass to operate on public education funds without state regulation.

While this bill may seem "sunny" for private education providers, a storm appears to loom for public schools. **H.334 now goes to Senate committee**

PRICE Act

The Senate Finance and Taxation Education (SFTE) Committee gave approval to the Parental Rights in Children's Education (PRICE) Act Wednesday. The committee voted 12 to 3 along party lines for (**S.202**), sponsored by **Sen. Larry Stutts**, which would provide parents of private school and homeschool students Education Savings Ac-

counts (ESA) of \$6,900 per child/per year to pay for a broad range of "educational" expenses. Such expenses could include athletic and band uniforms and equipment, extravagant field trips, dance classes, computer hardware and software, etc.

The bill was **amended in committee** to cap the **initial three-year** annual cost to \$50 million from the Education Trust Fund (ETF) to fund these vouchers. **Make no mistake, a three-year cap on the diversion of public education dollars does not make the PRICE Act a better bill.** It still leaves the ETF vulnerable to having unknown millions of dollars siphoned off for private school vouchers.

Now that the PRICE Act is out of committee, **Senator Stutts** is pushing for the full Senate to have a floor vote which could happen as early as Tuesday. It is disappointing that the majority of senators seem only to be listening to school choice advocates. **School board members must turn up the volume by contacting lawmakers today! Urge them to Vote NO on the Price Act!**

Universal Vouchers?

This week, **Rep. Danny Garrett** introduced the second of two school choice bills he is sponsoring. **H.442**, the **Alabama Fits All Scholarship Program**, is modeled after a **Utah school choice scholarship**.

Beginning in 2024-25, the Alabama Fits All Program would provide a \$6,900 scholarship per recipient for tuition and approved educational expenses for non-public school students including those in private, parochial, church and home school programs. In its initial year, \$45 million would be directed from the ETF to subsidize private school tuition and expenses.

The Alabama Fits All Program:

- Extends eligibility to all non-public school

SFTE Committee Votes on PRICE Act

- Arthur Orr - YES
- Gerald Allen - YES
- Rodger Smitherman - NO
- Greg Albritton - YES
- Tom Butler - YES
- Donnie Chesteen - YES
- Vivian Figures - NO
- Garlan Gudger - YES
- Kirk Hatcher - ABSTAIN
- Jay Hovey - YES
- Tim Melson - YES
- Dan Roberts - YES
- Clay Scofield - YES
- David Sessions - YES
- Bobby Singleton - NO
- Jabo Waggoner - YES

Upcoming Legislative Schedule

- May 16: Three-day week
- May 23: Three-day week
- May 29: Memorial Day
- May 30: TBD

2023 Regular Legislative Session

10 Days Remain

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students in K-12

- Requires the State Board of Education (SBOE) to contract with a program manager to administer the program
- Requires SBOE to provide limited oversight
- Requires random financial audits

In this ESA, the program manager who is funded through the program will largely determine eligible expenses.

AASB has called public hearing on this bill

AAA Expansion Approved

After a public hearing held Wednesday, the **Senate Finance and Taxation Education Committee** approved **S.263**, sponsored by **Sen. Donnie Chesteen**, that would expand Alabama Accountability Act (AAA) scholarship eligibility to students with unique needs and make other modifications to the current law. During the public hearing, **AASB** voiced concerns that any expansion to the AAA would lead to a reduction in resources for public schools. **AASB President and Macon County Board member Mary Hooks** urged committee members not to further dismantle public schools.

Chesteen's bill, as amended in committee, would make several changes to the AAA, including a rebranding of "failing schools" to "priority schools". However, other modifications to the law would have adverse effects on the ETF and include:

- Identifying priority schools as those scoring a "D" or "F" on the state report card which would increase "priority schools" from 70 to approximately 200 schools
- Extending eligibility to unique needs students - those with IEPs and 504 accommodations, which will increase the number of scholarships granted
- Increasing the AAA tax credit from \$30 million to \$40 million annually, with an eventual \$60 million cap based on participation. Increasing the cap lowers available funding for school systems
- Raising the income eligibility for scholarships from 185% to 250% of the federal poverty level, making scholarships available for more families

S.263 will head to Senate for floor vote

Charter School Bill Clears House

The House passed **H.363**, a bill designed to bolster charter school governance and revamp the Charter School Commission. During Thursday's House floor debate, the bill's sponsor, **Rep. Terri Collins**, told members she was not advocating for extra local funding for charter schools. She said the purpose of her bill was to elevate accountability and transparency in the governance of the charter schools. **H.363 now goes to Senate committee**

Earlier this week, the **Senate Education Policy Committee** approved companion bill, **S.297**, sponsored by **Sen. Will Barfoot** and adopted a **committee amendment** to match the **House floor amendment**.

Student Discipline Bill Moves Forward

The **Senate Education Policy Committee** approved **Sen. Roger Smitherman's** modified student discipline bill, **S.181**. The bill proposes a standard statewide procedural due process system for students at risk of suspension or expulsion for violating the student code of conduct or state law. A public hearing held last week on the bill drew concerns from **AASB** and others about cross examining student witnesses during disciplinary hearings. **AASB** strongly opposed this provision, emphasizing schools are not courtrooms. **Sen. Smitherman** responded by proposing an **amendment** to restrict cross exami-

nations to students age 15 and older, which the committee adopted. Despite this, **AASB maintains its stance against any student cross-examination, irrespective of age**. While AASB is willing to continue collaborating with the Senator on the bill, student cross-examination is non-negotiable. The House companion, **H.269**, sponsored by **Rep. Terri Collins**, will be before the **House Education Policy Committee** Wednesday. **AASB has called a public hearing on this bill.**

Public Records Requests

The Senate approved **S.196** Thursday, a public records bill sponsored by **Sen. Arthur Orr**. The bill mandates public officers in custody of a public record disclose requested information. **AASB worried** that school systems with numerous employees and locations could receive requests that would not be directed in a timely manner to personnel responsible for responding. **We thank Senators Vivian Figures and Arthur Orr for collaborating with AASB on an amendment** directing all requests to educational institutions be made to the main office. **S.196 now goes to the House committee**

Principal Leadership and Mentoring

In quick turnaround, **Sen. Arthur Orr** Tuesday introduced **S.300**, a bill seeking to enhance principal leadership and the **Senate Finance and Taxation Education Committee** gave its approval the following morning.

The legislation would bolster principal leadership and proposes stipends to deter administrators from switching back to teaching positions for similar pay and fewer contract days. The bill also proposes implementation of a principal mentorship program and professional development for school leaders, granting a stipend upon completion similar to what is provided for teachers completing National Board Certification. The Senate version of the FY24 ETF budget has earmarked **\$850,000** for initial implementation. Full implementation would cost approximately **\$21.5 million**.

FY24 ETF Budget - Work in Progress

Senate Finance and Taxation Education Committee Chair Sen. Arthur Orr told lawmakers the proposed FY24 ETF Budget still needs further language and adjustments to be made in the House.

Support Personnel - The budget the Senate passed allocates **\$15 million** for school systems to bolster support personnel wages. One plan is to require systems to raise the minimum wage to **\$15 per hour**. However, the details are yet to be finalized. **AASB expects** further clarification to come when the budget goes before the **House Ways and Means Education Committee**.

School Nurses - The Senate-passed budget has a **\$65 million** allocation for school nurses, with corresponding language requiring one nurse per school and expansion of the salary matrix up to 35 years of experience and highest degree earned. **AASB has learned there is a gap between the budget requirement and the current allocation. AASB supports full funding for a nurse in every school.**

AASB is committed to working with the House and Senate budget chairs, the Legislative Fiscal Office and others in the education community to help clarify budget language and allocations.