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Special-Needs Vouchers Pass Utah House, Senate

By Michelle R. Davis

The school voucher proposal that helped topple the career of Utah's previous governor last year has gotten a thumbs-up from the state legislature and is expected to be signed into law by the new governor.

The Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarships legislation would provide \$1.4 million in voucher money to help parents of students with disabilities send their children to private schools, both secular and religious, that place particular emphasis on helping such students. The bill passed 21-6 in the Senate on Feb. 25, just a few days after it was passed by the House on a vote of 58-17.

Champions of school choice rejoiced over passage of the bill, though they were frustrated by the failure of a broader tuition-tax-credit bill that died Feb. 25 in the House on a vote of 40-34.

"We're overjoyed, ... but this is a very limited amount [of money]," said Elisa Clements Peterson, the executive director of the Utah's Parents for Choice in Education Political Action Committee. "There are only a few hundred children who can benefit from this. Our goal is to see that every Utah child has an equal opportunity for the best possible education."

About 50,000 students in the state would qualify for the scholarships, Ms. Peterson said, but only a few hundred would be able to receive the funding under the current amount of money allotted for the program. Students with disabilities that range from brain injury to speech or language impairments would be able to apply for the scholarships, which could pay out nearly \$5,500 per student annually.

If the bill is signed into law, Utah would become the second state with a voucher program for students with disabilities. In 2001, Florida adopted the John M. McKay Scholarships, which are similar to Utah's plan.

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A similar Utah bill passed the House and the Senate last year, but was vetoed by then-Gov. Olene S. Walker, a Republican, who said she was worried that the bill was unconstitutional.

Supporters of the legislation, who included the parents of Carson Smith, a young boy with autism for whom the bill is named, vowed to block the governor's efforts to win election to a full term. Their objections to the former governor's veto helped unhinge her election bid, which ended in May during the state's Republican caucus. Gov. Walker came in fourth in an eight-way competition for her party's nomination. Only the top two candidates are permitted to advance to the primary.

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Carson Smith, who was 5 years old when the scholarship in his name was proposed last year, attends the Carmen B. Pingree School for Children with Autism, located in Salt Lake City. The school costs \$23,000 a year.

Utah's new governor, Jon Huntsman Jr., a Republican who was elected in November, isn't making the same mistake as Ms. Walker.

During his campaign for the top political spot, he said he would sign the legislation if it came across his desk.

But others in the state, including the Utah Education Association, an affiliate of the National Education Association, said they were concerned that the program would set a precedent and lay the groundwork for other such measures to promote private school choice, such as tuition tax credits. They argue that such programs could drain funds from the public school system and its students.

The union worked to defeat the tax-credit bill that failed in the House.

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