

SUBJECT: Allowing school districts to offer tuition/district-financed prekindergarten

COMMITTEE: Public Education — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Sadler, Dunnam, Grusendorf, Hochberg, Oliveira, Olivo, Smith
0 nays
2 absent — Dutton, Hardcastle

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, April 2 — 30-0

WITNESSES: For — Michele Molter, Association of Texas Professional Educators
Against — None

BACKGROUND: Education Code, sec. 29.153 requires school districts to offer a prekindergarten program if it identifies 15 or more eligible students, defined as a child who is at least four years old, or who is three years old and is:

- ! unable to speak and comprehend English,
- ! educationally disadvantaged, or
- ! homeless as defined by federal law.

DIGEST: SB 596 would amend the Education Code to provide free prekindergarten for certain children and to allow districts to offer tuition-supported and district-financed prekindergarten programs for others.

Under SB 596, school districts would not be able to charge tuition for prekindergarten for four-year-old children who were unable to speak and comprehend English or for emotionally-disadvantaged or homeless children.

School districts would be allowed to offer an additional half-day of prekindergarten for students who were currently eligible for free prekindergarten and half-day and full-day prekindergarten for students who were not eligible for free prekindergarten. A school district could charge tuition for these programs, but not more than the rate necessary to cover the

costs of providing the program. The district would have to submit the proposed tuition rate to the education commissioner for approval.

The bill also would require school districts that offered prekindergarten classes to include the following information in their Public Education Information Management (PEIM) reports:

- ! demographic information on enrolled students, including those eligible for free tuition;
- ! the number of half-day and full-day prekindergarten classes offered, and
- ! the sources of funding for prekindergarten.

SB 596 would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2001, and would apply beginning with the 2001-2002 school year.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

SB 596 is needed to provide all children with a solid foundation for a successful academic career. Most experts believe that what children learn between infancy and the time they begin kindergarten is the bedrock for all the rest of their intellectual development. Strong empirical evidence exists to show that prekindergarten programs improve language skills and reading scores. Studies show that students who participated in prekindergarten programs are less likely to drop out of school or to be involved in crime as they grow older.

In the United States, government-funded prekindergarten programs tend to be aimed at poorer children, possibly based on an assumption that their parents are unable, unwilling, or unavailable to provide them with sufficient stimuli to prepare them for kindergarten. Many children from middle-class families, however, also may spend their days in barely adequate daycare or otherwise without the stimuli needed to prepare them for kindergarten. These children also could benefit from expanded access to prekindergarten programs. Depending on the cost of tuition, prekindergarten programs may provide working parents with an educational and safe alternative to day care.

The bill would permit school districts to use local funds or to charge tuition to support additional prekindergarten programs. These additional programs

could be half-day programs for children who are eligible for free prekindergarten, or half-day or whole-day programs for children who are not eligible for free prekindergarten. Whether to offer additional prekindergarten programs would be a decision made at the school district level. The bill would be permissive and would not require any district to offer prekindergarten.

The bill would not affect existing prekindergarten programs, and it would present no additional cost to the state.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

No apparent opposition.