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Nixon flooded with input on student transfers

JEFFERSON CITY — To one St. Louis-area school board member, a proposal revamping Missouri's student transfer system could lead to "systemic dismantling" of public education in struggling districts. To the parent of a child who left the troubled Normandy district, it's a chance for others to escape failing schools.

Those are just a couple of the diverging opinions from hundreds of emails, letters and online messages sent in recent weeks to Democratic Gov. Jay Nixon, who is deliberating whether to sign a bill to deal with flaws in a 1993 student transfer law. Nixon's office released the correspondence at the request of The Associated Press.

"My mind is open," Nixon said after the bill was sent to him in May, "but I clearly have not decided."

A Nixon spokesman said Wednesday that the bill still is under review.

The issue has heightened tensions between backers of traditional public schools, charters and virtual schools. And the correspondence shows little agreement on what the core problems of the current system are, and even greater divide on potential solutions.

Unaccredited public schools currently must pay tuition for students who transfer to better-performing ones. That has placed a financial strain on the suburban St. Louis Normandy school system, which faces insolvency as hundreds of parents ask to send their children elsewhere.

The bill would require schools be rated by building, as well as by district. Students would first need to enroll in a better-performing center in their home district before they could transfer elsewhere, with the goal of keeping tuition dollars in the unaccredited school districts. The bill also would allow charter schools to open in more districts and give more students the option to attend virtual schools.

Supporters — including several charter schools — said expanding charter and virtual schools would address concerns that students can be stuck in poor schools with few choices for better education.

Those who wrote in favor of the proposal include the Missouri Public Charter School Association and parents.

A St. Louis resident who identified himself as Darryl Porter wrote in a May 14 letter to Nixon that he feared his youngest son, who he said transferred to nearby Francis Howell, "would be lost in the system if he stayed in Normandy."

Other parents joined school-choice advocacy groups urging Nixon to support what they described as more options.

"I have seen virtual education's strengths and when implemented positively, it can be a wonderful opportunity for students that would struggle in a traditional brick and mortar classroom," wrote an O'Fallon parent who identified herself as Stephanie Collins in a May 22 message to Nixon.

From May 5, when the bill passed, until May 27, Nixon's office received about 145 messages from supporters and roughly 180 asking for a veto.

The bill has galvanized educators at traditional public schools, who expressed frustration with chronic underfunding and anxiety that charters and virtual schools could chip away at public education by siphoning off students and tuition dollars.

"The answer is not supporting charter school expansion," Superintendent David Leone, of the Kansas City-area Center School District, wrote in a message forwarded to Nixon on May 6. "The answer is supporting public schools."

Most argued that the bill, which includes incentives for districts to charge lower tuition but no tuition caps, doesn't address financial issues facing failing schools and could cost the state money. Legislative researchers estimate the bill could cost local governments nearly \$16 million a year. The impact could be more than \$10 million on state general revenue funds next fiscal year and up to \$72 million the following two years.

University City school board Director Joanne Soudah wrote in a May 16 letter to Nixon that the bill would mean "systematic dismantling of public schooling" in poorer areas.

Nixon has until mid-July to act on the bill. If he takes no action, the bill also would become law.