

Another public hearing set on special education funding bill

By Mary Sell Montgomery Bureau | Posted: Tuesday, April 12, 2016 12:00 am

MONTGOMERY — Legislation to allow students with special needs to use public education dollars at private schools is slated for another public hearing this week.

Rep. Ken Johnson's House Bill 84 stalled last week when it failed to get enough votes to pass the budget isolation resolution, a procedural vote in each chamber which allows bills to be discussed and voted on before the Legislature has passed the General Fund and education budgets.

Now, there's a Senate version of the same bill, SB395, sponsored by Sen. Dick Brewbaker. A public hearing is Wednesday in the Senate Education Policy Committee. Brewbaker chairs that committee.

The bill creates what would be called the "Education Savings Account." To qualify, students with special needs must have an "individual education plan" within their district.

The bill cites, but is not limited to, some specific disabilities, including speech, language, visual and physical impairments and learning disabilities.

In 2014, 82,355 Alabama students had individual education plans, according to the Alabama Department of Education.

The bill caps new enrollment in the program at 1,000 new students per year.

A fiscal note said it would cost the Education Trust Fund around \$4.7 million the first year, then could grow from there, based on new enrollment.

Johnson on Monday said he wants to try to bring his bill up in the House for another vote, and clear up misinformation about the bill.

The bill had been changed in committee so it won't apply to children of active-duty military parents, the siblings of students with disabilities, or children adopted from foster care.

"I can't understand anyone not wanting to give the parents of a child with a disability a choice, but (opponents) rallied about 48 hours before the bill came up (last week)," Johnson said Monday.

Multiple education groups have expressed opposition to the bill.

"It is a gateway to vouchers," said Sally Smith, executive director of the Alabama Association of School Boards, about her group's opposition. Government-funded voucher systems let students use state funds at private schools.

Smith said she doesn't believe students with special needs will be well served under the legislation because private schools aren't required to have the individual education plans that public schools have for students. And, she said, the bill pulls resources from students who stay in public schools.

"Special education funding has always been inadequate," Smith said.

Other opponents of the legislation have said the money wouldn't be enough to help many families seeking other educational options, and only would help middle-class families, not poor ones.

"If there's no benefit to it, no one will utilize it, but let's let them make that choice and measure those results," Johnson said.

Local school systems get to keep 10 percent of state funding. State funding is about \$4,800 per student, according to the Alabama Department of Education.