OLR Bill Analysis
sSB 1017 (File 332, as amended by Senate "A")*

AN ACT CONCERNING THE OPEN CHOICE PROGRAM.

SUMMARY

This bill changes the purposes for which two types of grants related to the Open Choice program must be spent. The State Department of Education (SDE) awards these grants to regional education service centers (RESCs) and public school districts from the state-appropriated funds for Open Choice. Open Choice is an interdistrict attendance program that, under existing law, allows students from large urban districts to attend suburban schools, and vice versa, on a space-available basis in order to reduce racial, ethnic, and economic isolation; improve academic achievement; and provide public school choice.

First, the bill requires a RESC to use SDE-awarded Open Choice program operating grants, in part, to provide education advocate staff and assist school districts that receive Open Choice students, rather than for providing general staff assistance to all of their participating schools. Second, it requires SDE to award the unspent funds appropriated for the Open Choice per-pupil state grant to RESCs for education advocate positions rather than for other specified uses in current law.

It also removes obsolete language from the Open Choice law.

*Senate Amendment “A” removes the requirements in the underlying bill for (1) RESCs to provide an education advocate to districts enrolling 75 or more students under the Open Choice program and (2) up to 3.5% of the state’s Open Choice program appropriation to fund education advocate positions; it also clarifies that unspent per-pupil grants for Open Choice are awarded to RESCs and makes various technical and conforming changes.
EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2019

RESC OPERATING GRANTS FOR OPEN CHOICE

By law, RESCs must help school districts in their respective regions administer the Open Choice program in exchange for an annual operating grant from SDE. This assistance includes providing staff to (1) help participating students transition to new schools and (2) act as a liaison between the students’ parents and the new school districts. The bill names this staff position an “education advocate” and requires such staff to assist districts that receive students under the Open Choice program. Additionally, it adds a third duty to this staff position: providing academic and other social support to these incoming students.

DISTRICT PER-PUPIL GRANTS FOR OPEN CHOICE

By law, SDE must generally provide, within available appropriations, an annual grant of up to $2,500 per-pupil to local or regional boards of education that receive Open Choice students in their school districts. By March 1 each year, SDE must determine whether the number of Open Choice students for the fiscal year is less than the amount for which funds were appropriated for the program. If so, then the additional funds carry forward, rather than lapse, to the next fiscal year.

Current law requires the SDE commissioner to use these excess funds for the following purposes:

1. awarding up to $500,000 for supplemental per-pupil grants on a pro-rata basis to receiving districts who host at least 10 out-of-district students under the program, not to exceed $1,000 per student;

2. awarding the next $500,000 as supplemental pro rata grants, in an amount determined by the commissioner, to districts that report by March 1 that they have more out-of-district students under the program than they had the prior school year; and

3. using any remaining funds to increase enrollment in the Open
Choice program.

The bill removes these specified uses in current law and instead requires SDE to use such unspent funds to provide grants to RESCs for education advocates to districts that accept students under the Open Choice program.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Education Committee

Joint Favorable Substitute
Yea 34 Nay 0 (03/15/2019)