

Opportunity Scholarship Act May Leave Out One District Where It All Began

Longtime civil-rights advocate and voucher champion angered that Orange schools falling off list

By **John Mooney**, NJ Spotlight

The jockeying continues over who's in and who's out of the proposed Opportunity Scholarship Act (OSA), and one likely casualty may be a district and its high-profile supporter who has been at the center of the drive to bring private school vouchers to New Jersey.

Sponsors from both political parties said in the last week that the number of districts that would be included in the bill continues to shrink, some saying to as few as five districts, as part of the political horse-trading to try to win key Democratic votes.

And at last count, they confirmed one district almost sure not to be on the list is the City of Orange, one of the original districts in the plan and home to Rev. Reginald Jackson, head of the state's black clergy council.

Jackson, arguably the state's preeminent civil rights leader, has provided a consistent and critical voice to the 20-year campaign to enact a voucher system in New Jersey.

"Disappointment is an understatement, disappointment is a major understatement," Jackson said last night of the apparent exclusion. "I would say anger is closer to it."

While the new list of pilot districts is not written into any bill as yet, Jackson said he has heard the same news from a number of sources. He said he intends to speak to his legislators, namely state Sen. Richard Codey and Assembly members John McKeon and Mila Jasey, all Democrats from Essex County.

Jackson stopped short of saying he would withdraw his support for the bill without Orange as one of the pilot districts. He said he is cognizant of the political bartering required in the passage of any bill.

"I understand why, but I need to talk to them," he said of his district's legislators and other Democratic leaders. "I don't intend to say it's over until I at least have a conversation."

Passage of the bill got a new boost this week when Gov. Chris Christie singled it out in his state budget address, calling it critical to his education reform agenda.

The bill would create a system in which scholarships of up to \$11,000 would be provided to low-income students in select low-performing districts to use toward tuition in outside schools, public or private. It would be funded through corporate donations that, in turn, would receive matching state tax credits.

Christie's state budget did not appear to include any additional accounting for the lost tax revenues, although that could not be confirmed with state officials yesterday.

The latest bill included 13 districts and would serve up to 40,000 students, ranging from large urban districts like Newark and Elizabeth to smaller ones such as Plainfield and Passaic. Versions of that bill have passed two committees in the Senate and one in the Assembly.

But that list has always been a bone of contention, and some Democratic leaders especially have said it would need to be whittled down for the bill to have any chance for final passage.

Last night, the head of the organization that has led the voucher campaign said the downsizing of the pilot and especially Orange's exclusion is troubling.

"It's unfortunate that to offer this opportunity to kids in Newark, kids in Orange don't get one," said Derrell Bradford, director of Excellent Education for Everyone. "These legislators will have to explain to their constituents why they are not included."