

After Katrina, Bush pushes school vouchers: Church-state separation groups charge political opportunism

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In Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, President Bush may be able to push through Congress a pet project that has been stymied for four years now—a wide-ranging federal school voucher program.

Just a day after Bush presented an overview of hurricane-recovery efforts for the Gulf Coast on September 15, education secretary Margaret Spellings announced that part of the money earmarked for schools would go to subsidizing private-school tuition for families evacuated from the region.

Spellings initially said that \$488 million would be allocated for the program. New details released September 19 clarified that that figure was an estimate, based on the fact that 61,000 children in the New Orleans area had attended private schools prior to the evacuation. In reality, vouchers of up to \$7,500 per student would be available to any evacuee family.

The program would essentially create the nation's first large-scale federal voucher program. Bush has repeatedly tried to create a nationwide program for vouchers that could be used by parents who want to enroll their children in private or religious schools. But other than creation of a small federally funded voucher program in the District of Columbia, the effort has been repeatedly rebuffed by Congress.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2002 that the use of government-funded vouchers in religious schools is constitutional. However, polls have shown that such programs remain unpopular in most areas, and many public-school advocates and supporters of strong church-state separation oppose the programs.

Some of those groups chastised Bush's move as political opportunism in the wake of a tragedy. "Federal funding should go to public schools in the affected areas, and to schools across the country taking in hurricane evacuees, not toward creating a controversial voucher program for students already enrolled in private schools," read a statement from Ralph Neas, president of People for the American Way. —*Associated Baptist Press*