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Vouchers unlikely, but other reforms loom

LOS ANGELES TIMES

WASHINGTON — Congress this week expects to give a ritual burial to an idea championed by conservatives and endorsed by President Bush: government vouchers for private school tuition. But little-noticed developments on two other fronts show that the movement to give more parents more choices beyond the public school system is moving ahead.

Legislation that would permit the use of federal school money for private tutoring almost certainly will be enacted. In another significant precedent, parents will be allowed to sock away \$2,000 a year, earning tax-free interest, for private school tuition.

"It's all a step in the right direction," said Christina Culver of Children First America, a group that promotes school vouchers.

This year's school reform debate shows again that big causes — in this case, offering private alternatives to struggling public schools — often advance in small steps. The question is whether those increments over time add up to something more.

Opponents of vouchers insist they will hold the line. On Tuesday, the Senate is ex-

pected to reject a proposal by Sen. Judd Gregg, R-N.H., to spend \$50 million to launch a voucher program for students from low-income families in as many as three states and 10 local school systems.

Last month, the House rejected similar proposals advanced by the GOP leadership. Even Gregg acknowledged that he lacks the votes to win. Rejection of the Gregg proposal should close the current congressional debate concerning vouchers, which Bush conceded weeks ago, and clear the way soon after for Senate passage of a bill authorizing federal aid to elementary and secondary schools.

But on this issue, both sides know there always is another fight around the corner. Backers claim vouchers are a matter of justice and sound policy — justice, they say, because poor children should not be trapped in failing schools; policy, they say, because public schools will benefit from private competition.

Opponents argue, just as fervently, that vouchers drain scarce funds away from public schools, do nothing to solve inequities in the education system and are im-

practical on a large scale.

Twice in the last eight years, Californians have voted on voucher initiatives.

Michigan voters also defeated a voucher proposal in November.

Despite such defeats, voucher proponents can point to some progress in recent years as publicly funded programs have begun in Cleveland, Milwaukee and communities in Florida, and dozens of privately funded efforts have sprouted nationwide.

And this year, proponents claim they have wrung a couple of significant concessions from Congress.

First, the education savings accounts were part of the massive tax cut bill that Bush signed into law Thursday.

The provision raises to \$2,000, from \$500, the amount of money a family can set aside each year in special accounts that earn interest tax-free. And it expands the uses of such funds. Previously, they were limited mainly to higher education expenses. Now they may be used for tuition in elementary and secondary schools, private or parochial.