Modest 'school choice' measure draws reaction

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Annapolis, MD - School choice has become one of the most controversial policies in the education reform movement, attracting supporters and critics from every part of the political spectrum.

Many conservatives want parents to receive vouchers for their children to attend religious schools, while many neo-liberals believe charter schools are the best way to reform education. Meanwhile, liberal critics say charter schools are simply not scalable, and that voucher legislation prioritizes religious schools over public schools in low-income neighborhoods.

But this spring the Maryland General Assembly passed a modest school choice program that seems to have little downside at all. As early as next fall, some low-income Maryland parents will begin receiving state-funded scholarships to enroll their kids in private schools.

"We think it is a great step," Garrett O'Day, associate director at the Maryland Catholic Conference, told the Baltimore Sun. "We applaud any effort to expand educational options for low-income kids."

School choice advocates have tried for more than a decade to push voucher legislation through the state assembly, and now the state budget will set aside $5 million for the scholarships, enough funds to help about 1,000 students.

Meanwhile this April, the Maryland General Assembly set a deadline for major decisions regarding public school funding in the state. A pair of bills created a state panel to analyze public school funding and issue a set of recommendations by October 2017, and a diverse number of organizations are already gearing up for the coming legislative battle.

"The percentage of Maryland public school students living in poverty has more than doubled since 1990 -- from 22 to 45 percent -- putting our statewide student population on the verge of becoming majority low-income," reads a recent statement from the Maryland State Education Association (MSEA), a union representing 70,000 state educators.

The MSEA is pushing for policies like universal pre-K education, particularly in low-income areas. Today, fewer than one-third of children have a full-time stay-at-home-parent, while two in three Americans believe that government and the private sector should do more to help working parents fund child care.

"Now that Gov. Hogan isn’t taking us in the wrong direction with cuts to school funding, we can focus on a new direction that invests in the evidence-based strategies for giving low-income students the same opportunity to learn and succeed as their more affluent peers -- such as smaller class sizes and universal pre-K," said MSEA President Betty Weller.