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## Limited space at La. Catholic schools for vouchers

By MELINDA DESLATTE

The Associated Press

**BATON ROUGE, La.** — Louisiana's Catholic schools could take in only a sliver of students who would be eligible under Gov. Bobby Jindal's voucher proposal, a reality that would limit how much choice parents could get as the governor pitches the idea as an answer for improving the state's troubled education system.

As many as 380,000 students would meet the eligibility requirements under Jindal's plans to use state tax dollars to send children to private schools. But under an informal tally, the state's Catholic schools — which make up two-thirds of state private and parochial schools — estimate they could fit about 1,000 of those voucher students.

That limited capacity raises questions about why the Republican governor is pushing so hard for the legislation, whether it could make a difference and whether opponents are overreacting when predicting a voucher program could destroy public school funding.

Danny Loar, executive director of the Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops, said Tuesday that the numbers are based on his conversations with superintendents of the Catholic schools around the state.

"It's up to each school, each principal, each pastor of the school whether they want to participate and to what level," Loar said.

Jindal has described his push for the voucher program as a way to give parents of students in mediocre or failing public schools a choice for a better education. The program, as described by the governor, would offer families up to a certain income level the ability to get a voucher for private school tuition if their children attend schools graded at a C, D or F level in the state's accountability system.

Lawmakers will consider the voucher proposal, part of a package of Jindal education bills, in the legislative session that begins March 12.

Jindal spokesman Frank Collins said the governor's proposals to improve education involve more than the voucher program, such as ways to reward good teachers, remove failing ones from the classroom and give education leaders more flexibility.

"Giving parents more choices is critical to creating competition and improving education in Louisiana, but it is just one part of a comprehensive approach the governor has outlined to reform education in Louisiana," Collins said in an emailed statement.

Collins didn't explain whether the governor had concerns about the number of slots that would be available to take children in the voucher program or whether that would limit the ability for the program to perform as Jindal hoped.

The Jindal administration estimates about 380,000 of the 690,000 students in Louisiana public schools, or 54 percent, could be eligible under the criteria. The legislation hasn't been filed to offer the full details of the proposal, but the governor said the statewide program would expand an existing \$9 million voucher program in New Orleans that has more than 1,800 students.

The Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops supports the voucher proposal.

Opponents, including teacher unions, say it could siphon millions from Louisiana's public schools and leave them with fewer dollars to educate the neediest and most at-risk children.

Brigette Nieland, an education lobbyist for the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, which supports vouchers, said it will be difficult to determine the true capacity that will be available for students in private and parochial schools until the proposal is passed and existing schools decide whether they want to participate. Also, she said some communities that don't have private schools might decide they want to start one.

"You have a lot of factors at play. This has never been, from our standpoint, any desire to decimate the public school system. Traditional public schools will continue to educate the vast majority of students," Nieland said. "As far as 380,000 kids fleeing the schools overnight, that's not going to happen. That's union scare tactics."

New opposition to the voucher proposal emerged Tuesday from the Louisiana Budget Project, which looks at how government spending affects low- to moderate-income families. The organization issued a report saying Jindal's proposal wouldn't provide enough accountability on how the dollars are spent and whether voucher students are getting an adequate education.

"While a private education may be the best choice for some low-income parents whose children attend failing schools, a truly informed decision is only possible when all the facts are on the table," the organization's report says. "Private schools accepting public funds must face the same level of oversight and controls applied to public schools."

Students in the New Orleans voucher program take the state's standardized tests for comparison, but the schools themselves aren't graded and scored in the same manner as public schools. The other non-voucher students don't take the same standardized tests. So, a parent knows how an individual student is performing, but not how the private school compares to those in the public school system.

Jindal spokesman Kyle Plotkin said parents are the "best accountability system" and should be trusted to make choices about what's best for their children.

Loar said the Catholic schools would be open to more discussion about testing, but he said the schools use different types of tests than the public schools, so it makes them difficult to compare in the state accountability system.

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