

State agencies prepare to roll out first school-choice program

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school supplies

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COLUMBIA — South Carolina Department of Revenue and education leaders told a Senate panel Wednesday that they are working on a smooth transition into the state's first K-12 private-school choice program.

But with twelve private schools currently cleared to participate, the S.C. Education Oversight Committee is working on a way to approve more schools more quickly before Jan. 1, when the program launches.

Through the program, taxpayers can claim tax credits on their 2014 tax returns for donations made starting Jan. 1 to nonprofit organizations that provide private-school grants to students with disabilities. The credits are available only for donations made through June 30, 2014, unless lawmakers extend the program.

Three organizations plan on receiving donations and offering grants. Currently, twelve schools are eligible to enroll students who receive the grants when the program takes effect. More are taking steps to participate, Melanie Barton, Oversight Committee director, told the Senate panel.

Barton said she is drafting an agreement that private-school associations can sign indicating that their member schools meet requirements to participate. Religious schools worried about government oversight likely will use that method for seeking approval, she said.

The panel, chaired by Sen. Wes Hayes, R-York, was tasked with reviewing the impact of a more expansive school-choice bill proposed by Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Berkeley. That bill has been sidelined temporarily as lawmakers move forward with the smaller-in-scope private-school choice program passed as part of state's July 1 budget.

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