

# Senate approves bipartisan choice bill

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Schools in the choice program would have to begin doing background checks on prospective employees, but no longer face other administrative requirements under legislation the Senate approved 28-5.

The legislation also would strengthen financial accountability measures — a priority for Dems — while expanding eligibility requirements — something sought by voucher advocates.

But the bill opened the door to a debate on the merits of the choice program, not just the proposed changes.

Sen. Lena Taylor, D-Milwaukee, urged her colleagues not to get bogged down in the past battles, noting the bill was negotiated by both choice advocates and the Department of Public Instruction.

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“There were things left on the table by both sides,” Taylor said.

The bill, which includes a number of non-fiscal policy items originally in Gov. Scott Walker’s K-12 education budget but removed by the Joint Finance Committee, also would change how students enrolled in the Special Needs Scholarship Program are counted in calculating a school district’s revenue limits, which DPI said would smooth relations between choice and public schools.

Currently, the average state revenue limit is around \$10,100. But under the program, around \$12,000 is deducted per student from a school’s aid, meaning sometimes the deductions are greater than the amount a school is able to generate for a student enrolled in the program. The bill would provide a voucher equal to that

amount.