



MICHIGAN REPORT

SCHOOL CHOICE

The pro, the con and the uncommitted points of view sparked debate at a Tuesday afternoon session on alternatives to public school education at the K-12 level, centered on whether vouchers or tax credits for private school costs were more effective and more accountable.

Joseph Lehman, vice president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland which is a long-time advocate of a full spectrum of education choice including private schools, found it remarkable that the NCSL forum was not on whether nonpublic choice should exist but which is the better option.

On the other side was Marshall Ogeltree of the Florida Education Association, an opponent of that state's variety of choice options that include statewide vouchers targeted to students in failing schools, scholarships for alternatives for students with disabilities and corporate tax credits. He said all fall short of accountability, and some instances of fraud and unethical practices have marked the programs.

Clive Belfeld, of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Columbia University which studies but does not take a position on the issue, said politically credits are harder to regulate because there is less demand for regulation and that they cover a wider range of education activities, such as music or after school programs, as opposed to the education structures supported by vouchers.

And while vouchers are typically regulated by education agencies which moni-

tor whether the money is used to fulfill an education mandate, he said tuition tax credits are overseen by tax agencies that only monitor whether the funds were used as permitted under the tax code.

But Mr. Lehman said the strongest accountability occurs when parents have choices rather than when government sets standards.

Mr. Ogletree, pointing to such things as scam artists taking advantage of voucher funds and voucher-supported students attending an Islamic school that was a base for terrorism, said the Florida experience is not a good model for expanding school choice in that fashion.

Mr. Lehman's contention that universal tax credits or vouchers, phased in over time could actually reduce public education costs for a state as long as the benefit was less than the amount a state spends per student in its system, was challenged on two fronts. One member said public schools still retain the responsibility for high-cost assessments of special education students, another said costs would be more because they would be used by students not now in the public system, and a third said costs of running a school do not necessarily go down in proportion to the number of students lost.

But Mr. Lehman said full choice programs would give public schools the opportunity to fill slots with new students from outside their districts, noting costs do not go up in proportion to the addition of students at the margins of enrollments.