

GOP PERSEVERES ON BILL TO DENY FREE SCHOOLS TO ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

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Body

Defying a promised veto from President Clinton, House Republican leaders vowed Tuesday to champion an election-year immigration bill that would let states deny free public education to illegal-immigrant children.

"Let's take it to the floor of the House. I think we'll get a huge vote for it," House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., said after meeting with California Gov. Pete Wilson. "Let's take it to the floor of the Senate. I do not believe even the liberal Democrats are going to filibuster against illegal-immigration reform, and I do not believe that Bill Clinton is going to veto it."

But Clinton last month pledged to veto the measure. The entrenched positions of the two sides make clear that the landmark immigration bill has become a battleground, in which the Republicans will try to force Clinton to veto a bill that has widespread support, particularly in voter-rich California.

The immigration bill would roughly double the size of the border patrol to 10,000 agents in four years, establish test programs to electronically check the immigration status of potential employees, and restrict many public benefits for legal immigrants.

Educational snag

But the 300-page measure - easily approved by the House in March and by the Senate in May - has been hamstrung by House-backed language that would restrict public education.

Sponsored by Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Oxnard, the education provision originally would have given states blanket authority to block public schoolhouse doors to illegal-immigrant children. Under terms of a compromise, many illegal-immigrant children now enrolled in public schools could stay, as long as they do not switch school districts. If they do, they would be expelled unless they pay tuition.

"This has now been modified so it only relates to future illegal immigrants," Gingrich said. "Why would even liberal Democrats want to filibuster a bill like that?"

And while Republicans promised action on the bill, now headed for a conference committee and a floor vote perhaps by next week, immigration-rights advocates and Democrats are charging that the GOP is more interested in political points than the most sweeping revisions in U.S. immigration laws in decades.

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The Republican leaders appear poised for what amounts to a game of political "chicken." They will dare Clinton to veto the bill and then use that veto against him during the fall campaign, particularly in California, where Clinton is running far ahead of **GOP** challenger Bob Dole. Dole supports the bill.

There are about 700,000 undocumented children in U.S. public **schools**, costing the educational system about \$4 billion. Roughly 355,000 of those children are in California, and Wilson has estimated they cost state taxpayers \$1.8 billion a year.

"Without (the Gallegly amendment) California will continue to not only spend money that should not be asked of state taxpayers, but is, in effect, taking away a level of service to legal residents that they deserve," Wilson said. "That is simply inexcusable."

Wilson met later Tuesday with Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., and aides said Lott is ready to promote the education provision. What remains unclear is whether the **GOP** can stop a threatened Senate filibuster.

Opponents say they have the 41 votes needed to keep the bill from coming to a vote. Fifty-one senators, including eight Republicans, have said they oppose the bill's education language.

In a letter Monday to Lott and Gingrich, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., called Gallegly's "poison pill" the only obstacle to meaningful immigration reform.

"Although no one agrees with every aspect of this bill, only one - the Gallegly amendment - will actually prevent its passage," Feinstein wrote.

Feinstein said Tuesday that Republicans risk more than a filibuster if they cling to the education language. She said the Senate could defeat the measure outright.

"We've got members who are for no change," she said. "We've got members who are for lots of change. I think the bill is imperiled. This was a difficult bill in the Senate, even without Gallegly."

Wilson used his Capitol Hill forum Tuesday to follow through on his vow last month to seek reconsideration from the federal court that struck down major portions of Proposition 187, the voter-approved constitutional amendment to limit state aid to **illegal immigrants**.

Welfare reform

The **GOP** governor cited the new federal welfare-overhaul bill, which also requires states to **deny** public assistance to **illegal immigrants**.

"The federal welfare law makes it perfectly clear that states are required both to report and to **deny** benefits to **illegal aliens** - the same objectives of Proposition 187 which have been enjoined by the court," Wilson said.

The governor and state Attorney General Dan Lungren ordered state attorneys to request permission to file a motion seeking reconsideration of the court's November 1995 decision that struck down major portions of Proposition 187.

"The basis for (the judge's) invalidation no longer exists," Wilson said.

Proposition 187 was approved in 1994 by nearly 60 percent of California voters. It would have **denied** education and welfare benefits to **illegal immigrants**. It has not been put into effect because federal courts said it clashed with federal laws.

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