

Illegal immigrant college tuition bill faces funding test

New version limited to California students

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High school junior Lupita Bonilla earns all A's and dreams of being an engineer. But the San Jose student is an illegal immigrant, and if a bill now pending before the state Legislature does not pass, she may end up working at a minimum-wage job instead of going to college.

The bill, which would give illegal immigrants the right to state financial aid and allow them to pay in-state tuition — instead of a rate three to four times the resident price tag — faces a key state Senate hearing today.

The Senate Appropriations Committee will consider whether to kill the bill or keep it alive by putting it aside for funding consideration next week.

"I really want to go to college," said Bonilla, whose family has lived in California for 11 years. "It will be hard to get the money. My cousin is struggling right now. She got loans and scholarships and is working full-time."

A similar bill was vetoed last year by Gov. Gray Davis because the federal Immigration Act of 1996 requires the state to give any benefits extended to illegal immigrants to every other student in the United States. But this year's bill has been amended to limit the benefits to any student who attended a California high school for at least three years and who graduated from a state high school.

Davis spokesman Roger Salazar said the governor has not seen the final version of the bill, but will reconsider it if it passes the Legislature with amendments that make it legal and limits the benefits to California residents.

The bill's sponsor, Assemblyman Marco Firebaugh, D-East Los Angeles, said estimates show that it would cost California \$6 million at the most to extend the benefit to illegal immigrants.

"The reality is that these young people are Californians, regardless if they get an education or not," Firebaugh said. "The real question for us is, Do we give them the opportunity to become the most productive members of society or do we not? Do we allow them to lead the hardroom or to become hamburger flippers?"

Critics say subsidizing a college education will encourage more illegal immigrants to come to California.

"Any time you grant financial resources to one person, you are denying it to somebody else," said Ira Meiman, spokesman for

College costs

California residents pay far less per unit at the state's public colleges and universities than do out-of-state students. Undocumented immigrants pay the nonresident tuition rate. A full load is usually 13 to 15 units.

■ **Community college** — in-state, \$11 per unit; nonresident about \$135 per unit.

■ **University of California** — in-state, about \$3,964 a year with campus fees; nonresident about \$15,038 with campus fees.

■ **California State University** — in-state, about \$1,900 a year with campus fees; nonresident about \$1,900 plus \$246 per unit with campus fees.

FAIR, Federation for American Immigration Reform. "It is perfectly reasonable to look at whether somebody is legally in the United States before we decide to give them thousands of dollars in financial aid."

California's move follows that of Texas, which recently approved a law allowing in-state tuition for longtime illegal immigrants. The federal government is considering legislation to give states authority over who can be classified as a state resident and allow students who have lived in the country at least five years the opportunity to become legal.

Many of the estimated 5,800 to 7,450 students who would benefit from the proposed law have worked hard and excelled in California's elementary and secondary schools and come from families where some relatives are legal immigrants or even U.S. citizens paying taxes into state coffers, according to Firebaugh.

In addition, according to his office, the expenditure would be offset by lower spending for public welfare, health and law enforcement programs for the students.

While UC has not yet taken a position on the bill because of the legal issues, officials in the 23-campus California State University and the 108-campus California Community College systems have come out in support of it.

"It is kind of a waste of talent if they are not able to go on to college after completing high school here and can't go on to college because of financial considerations," said CSU spokeswoman Colleen Bentley-Adler.

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