

Legislative group to grapple with TOPS

Task force to tackle reform despite many failed attempts

BY WILL SENTELL

Louisiana's political landscape is littered with failed attempts to change the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students.

Require high school students to earn a higher GPA to qualify? Died in a Senate committee on June 1.

Parcel out dollars on the basis of need, not merit? Killed in a House panel on May 10.

Make TOPS recipients earn at least 30 credit hours per academic year to keep their scholarship money? Died at the Louisiana Board of Regents on Feb. 24.

"There have been dozens of bills filed every year to address some issue with TOPS," said Senate Education Committee Chairman Blade Morrish, R-Jennings. "Almost all of those bills have failed."

Now Morrish will head a 10-member legislative task force that will tackle the issue again.

The panel is set to review the history of the program and how to ensure its long-term viability.

Whether it makes sweeping recommendations to the Legislature, or just gathers information, is unclear.

"I won't say we will or we won't," Morrish said. "We may."

TOPS scholarships pay tuition and certain fees for Louisiana residents at in-state colleges and universities.

About 52,000 students get TOPS, which was enacted by the Legislature 20 years ago and took effect for college freshmen in 1998.

Students can land the assistance by earning at least a 2.50 GPA on their high school core curriculum and at least 20 out of 36 on the ACT, a test of college readiness - both modest standards.

But the once politically untouchable program has faced some turbulence in recent years.

For the first time, TOPS recipients did not get the full tuition award for the 2016-17 college year because of state budget problems.

It will be fully funded for the 2017-18 academic year - about \$290 million - but questions still swirl about its long-term funding, whether the aid should be harder to land and whether it should be more of a needs-based program than one available to all students, regardless of income.

James Caillier, executive director of the Patrick F. Taylor Foundation, which is named for the founder of the scholarship, says TOPS should be left alone. "I like it the way it is now," Caillier said.

He said the state law that will freeze TOPS awards at 2016 levels, no longer tied to tuition hikes, and the fact the assistance will be pro-rated during shortfalls puts TOPS on solid ground.

"Those two structural changes I think are significant, and it pretty well puts TOPS on an affordable scale where it is predictable," Caillier said.

Others say the program may need rethinking after two decades, especially with the state facing a \$1.2 billion budget shortfall next year.

"I hear a lot of concerns among legislators about the sustainability of TOPS and whether or not we are spending almost \$300 million in the most appropriate way," Higher Education Commissioner Joseph Rallo said.

Rallo said many high-demand jobs in the next five to 10 years will require only an associate degree, which can be earned in two years at a community college.

One idea, he said, would be to provide eligible students with enough money to cover tuition and fees at a community college - nearly \$200 million - and let them decide how to apply it, whether at a two-year or a more expensive four-year school.

"The idea is to allow students to make a choice with their moms and dads," he said. "And that would save \$100 million."

House Education Committee Chairwoman Nancy Landry, R-Lafayette, said she does not expect the task force to recommend major changes,

especially on thorny topics like whether need should supplant merit in awarding TOPS money. "But it might help inform some of the discussion," she said.

Confusion about the program is another issue.

Said Caillier, "There is so much misinformation on TOPS."

Morrish made the same point.

Comments that 1 of every 4 TOPS recipients quits college, which he hears often, are outdated, he said. About 8 percent of the students quit, he said.

All the same, Morrish said need versus merit, what other states do and affordability are all topics for discussion.

"What we want to do is talk about all the issues," he said.

The study stems from Senate Concurrent Resolution 110, which Morrish sponsored.

The panel will include Morrish and Landry; two lawmakers each whom they will pick; two named by Senate President John Alario, R-Westwego; and two chosen by House Speaker Taylor Barras, R-New Iberia.

Morrish said he hopes the task force will be named in July and begin work in August.

A report is due by Feb. 15, 2018.

Richard Lipsey, chairman of the state Board of Regents, praised TOPS but said if there is a better way to spend nearly \$300 million for higher education, the task force should pursue it. "I am not one that says anything is chiseled in stone," he said.

Caillier said the main value of TOPS is giving students an incentive to tackle the core curriculum in high school, ending the days when half of new college students had to take remedial classes.

"TOPS changed the whole high school culture," he said