

TOPS again a target in budget talks

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BATON ROUGE - Louisiana lawmakers, struggling with persistent budget shortfalls, are again looking to restructure the TOPS college tuition program to lessen state costs.

Proposals include boosting the grade point average required to get the award or steering more of the money to needy students. Another measure would require students who receive TOPS to work in Louisiana after college or repay some money spent on their tuition. This year, for the first time, lawmakers didn't fully fund TOPS, instead covering only 70 percent of tuition costs for eligible students. Next year's budget proposal starts off with the same financing plan, proposing \$209 million for TOPS and giving students across the board less than their full tuition coverage. Gov. John Bel Edwards wants to add money to TOPS and is proposing tax increases to fill the \$82 million gap in the program for the 2017-18 school year. But the tax package faces high hurdles for passage, amid significant opposition.

Rep. Franklin Foil, a Baton Rouge Republican, is targeting a portion of riverboat gambling money, seeking to earmark it to TOPS to help fully fund the program. He's also proposing to raise the minimum GPA for high school students to be eligible for the basic tuition award from a 2.5 to 3.0, starting with students who graduate from high school in the 2020-21 school year. The Taylor Opportunity Program for Students pays college tuition for students who met certain high school GPA, curriculum and college entrance test requirements. They have to maintain a certain number of course hours and GPA requirements to continue receiving the payments once in college. More than 51,000 students are in the program this year. TOPS is much beloved among Louisiana families, but its price tag grew as colleges boosted tuition costs to compensate for state budget cuts. Lawmakers last year restricted the program's growth by refusing to let payments automatically rise with tuition increases. They also only partially funded it. Several lawmakers, however, didn't like the proportional cuts and would rather find ways to fully pay for some students' tuition. Rep. Gary Carter, a New Orleans Democrat, is proposing that full tuition costs be covered for poorer students and higher-performing students. Pro rata cuts would be made to award amounts for all other students if TOPS isn't fully funded.

Sen. Jay Luneau, an Alexandria Democrat, has a heavier rewrite in mind.

His bill would require students graduating from high school in the 2017-18 school year and thereafter to live in Louisiana within one year after their college graduation and stay in the state for a time equal to the years they received TOPS awards. Students that don't stay and work in the state would have to repay 50 percent of the tuition money.

Sen. Blade Morrish, a Jennings Republican and chairman of the Senate Education Committee, thinks TOPS should be restructured into a flat stipend, not tied to tuition. He's looking for legislation to which he can tack on that idea.