

Pressure is on N.J. tuition proposal

Backers want in-state fees for illegal immigrants this session. Unwarranted, say foes. A hearing is set today.

January 04, 2010|By Adrienne Lu, Inquirer Trenton Bureau

For some students, the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition is the difference between attending college and giving up the dream of higher education.

A bill posted for a hearing in the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee today aims to close that gap for illegal immigrants who meet certain criteria.

Proposals to allow such students to pay the lower in-state tuition have been floating around the Legislature since at least 2002.

Advocates hope to push the bill through the Legislature before the end of the session, because while Gov. Corzine supports it, Gov.-elect Christopher J. Christie opposes it.

Under the bill, illegal immigrants could qualify for in-state tuition if they attended a New Jersey high school for at least three years, graduated or received the equivalent of a high school diploma from a New Jersey high school, and submitted an affidavit to the college or university stating they had applied to legalize their immigration status.

Eleven other states allow illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition.

Advocates argue it's the right thing to do, financially and morally.

"These are children who had little or no say in their past, and we're trying to give them some say in their future," said Shai Goldstein, executive director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, which is coordinating an effort of dozens of organizations in favor of the legislation. "This bill is not about ideology, not about immigration. It's about children and hope."

Goldstein said that illegal immigrants pay property tax, sales tax, and, in many cases, even income tax, but that state colleges often charge them out-of-state tuition, which can cost twice as much as in-state.

Opponents argue that in-state tuition should be reserved for legal residents.

Christie has said only lawful taxpayers deserve a tuition break because they help subsidize in-state institutions, spokeswoman Maria Comella said.

Another opponent, State Sen. Steven V. Oroho (R., Sussex), said he worried that the bill sent the wrong message.

"I think it's important that we keep the value of going through the process of becoming a U.S. citizen as high as it should be," Oroho said.

He also said he believed the bill would add to the state's costs, although an analysis by the nonpartisan Office of Legislative Services indicated it would not affect state finances.

Federal law requires that children be provided an education through 12th grade regardless of immigration status, but it prohibits illegal immigrants from receiving federal student aid for college. New Jersey law regarding public colleges, meanwhile, is unclear about which students may pay in-state tuition, leading colleges to take a variety of stances.

Anastasia R. Mann, whose report on the issue for the left-leaning think tank New Jersey Policy Perspective was released last week, said illegal-immigrant families in New Jersey earned an average of 40 percent less than other families, which often made college tuition unaffordable.

"Students are not the only ones to come out ahead when the path to college is made more accessible to them," Mann said. "Offering them resident tuition rates also helps stimulate the overall economy. As tuition becomes more affordable, families can use their tuition savings to meet other needs, which circulates this money back into the economy."

Mann said that there were no good estimates of how many students might be affected by the legislation, but that in other states, most affected students attended community colleges rather than four-year colleges.

According to Mann, New Jersey's state colleges charge the second-highest average tuition in the nation, \$9,984 a year, in part because the state subsidizes only one-fifth of the total cost, compared with almost half in 1990.