



Louisiana Budget Project

PROVIDING INDEPENDENT,
NONPARTISAN research and analysis
of Louisiana fiscal issues and their
impact on low and moderate
income residents.

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TOPS A STRUGGLE FOR THOSE AT BOTTOM

Report finds the popular state scholarship program benefits most those who need it least; recommends policy changes to TOPS and full funding for needs-based Go Grants scholarships

A new report by the Louisiana Budget Project takes a close look at the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students, or TOPS, which provides tuition assistance to Louisiana residents seeking higher education at state schools.

The report concludes the popular scholarship fund, having nearly tripled in size since 1998, has outgrown its intended purpose as an aid for economically disadvantaged scholars and become a de-facto entitlement for middle and upper-income students.

An evolution of the former Louisiana Honors Scholarship, TOPS is named for Louisiana businessman Patrick F. Taylor, whose guiding inspiration in 1988 was that access to college education be “based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.” In its original form, the Tuition Assistance Plan, or TAP, was restricted to low- and moderate-income students who met academic requirements including a GPA of 2.5.

Legislative changes in 1997 removed the mandated family income cap of \$35,000, thus opening the scholarship fund to all academically qualifying students regardless of financial status. Since then, the taxpayer-funded program ballooned in cost from \$54 million to \$139 million and shifted its recipient base into the upper income brackets: Today 72 percent of all TOPS recipients come from families that make over \$50,000 annually, and nearly 40 percent of TOPS scholars come from those with income over \$100,000 a year.

According to analyst Tim Mathis of the Budget Project, which monitors state spending on behalf of Louisiana’s low- and moderate-income families: “This is a questionable allocation of scarce [public] resources in a state in which 56 percent of households make less than \$50,000, while only 16 percent make more than \$100,000.”

“It’s very discouraging,” said Budget Project Director Edward Ashworth. “What began as a helping hand to bright scholars of modest means has become more like a helping hand-out to kids who could probably pay their own way to school.”

To reduce the overall cost of TOPS and allow for greater needs-based scholarship support, the Budget Project report makes several recommendations, including a phased-in increase of academic requirements for TOPS, with a plan to funnel resulting cost savings into the under-funded Go Grants scholarship program.

For a complete list of Budget Project recommendations and more on the TOPS program in Louisiana, go to: www.labudget.org.

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