

COMMENTARY

INSIDE REPORT

Politics makes defining merit more difficult

Gov. Bobby Jindal proposes a constitutional amendment that would divert the state's future payments of tobacco settlement money from an existing trust fund to payments in the operating budget for TOPS college awards.



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In 1999, the people voted to save the tobacco settlement as a permanent endowment for worthy purposes.

Leave aside the question of whether that's a good idea. Still, Jindal's initiative reopens the question of whether TOPS awards for college students are good investments.

A new study of TOPS is by the Louisiana Budget Project, a think tank sponsored by the Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations and affiliated with the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington.

The study points out what is common knowledge at the State Capitol about the TOPS awards: They go disproportionately to students who can afford to pay for college, and they reward students who do only high-average work in high school.

However common that knowledge is, the reality is that TOPS is a popular entitlement for the middle- and upper-class families who vote.

Politics prevents any kind of rational discussion of this program. Named in honor of the late oilman and philanthropist Patrick F. Taylor, his family foundation in New Orleans vigorously lobbies against restrictions on TOPS awards.

The best that can be said of the Legislature's performance in herding this particular sacred cow: It has avoided lowering TOPS standards, at least sometimes.

But if Jindal successfully diverts the tobacco settlement money to tuition aid, should not the state at least use the money — or half of it, even — to pay for students who really need the assistance?

The Budget Project study shows the disparities in Louisiana's approach to these "scholarships" and the approaches of other states. TOPS is a "merit-based" program that defines merit generously.

Mississippi, Georgia and Tennessee have similar programs that require at least a 3.0 grade-point average in high school. Louisiana continues its grand tradition of state largesse for the underachieving by requiring only a 2.5 grade-point average—a C-plus average.

Nor is state tuition aid directed to those who need it most.

"Compared to other Southern states and to states nationally, Louisiana spends a disproportionately large share of its financial aid resources on those who can readily afford college while providing too little to those who need financial help in order to have a chance at a college education," Budget Project analyst Tim Mathis wrote.

"Additionally, students from low-income and minority backgrounds — those who have been traditionally underrepresented in Louisiana colleges and universities — are less likely to benefit from TOPS because of the poor preparation they receive from Louisiana's public elementary and secondary education that results in their being unable to meet the qualification standards."

The Budget Project recommended that TOPS phase in higher academic standards over a period of years, and that the state fully fund its Go Grant program that is based on both student achievement and financial need.

The debate about diverting the tobacco settlement for TOPS funding should not be an election-year gimmick for Jindal and lawmakers.

Instead, the diversion of the tobacco settlement ought to provoke a serious debate about whether state money should subsidize the tuition of children of the affluent, while short-changing the children of poorer families who see in college educations the path to a brighter future.

This would honor the spirit of Pat Taylor's original and noble initiative, in which he promised to pay out of his own pocket for the college educations of a class of students in an inner-city school in New Orleans.

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