

# COMMENTARY

# TOPS a bottomless money pit

An interesting study, released late last week, detailed how TOPS, the popular college tuition program, evolved over the past decade into a taxpayer-funded entitlement program for the well-to-do.

"What began as a helping hand to bright scholars of modest means has become more like a helping handout to kids who could probably pay their own way to school," said Edward Ashworth, director of the Louisiana Budget Project, in a statement accompanying the release of his office's study.

The Budget Project is the fiscal research arm of the Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations, a group funded by grants from foundations and corporations. The Baton Rouge-based LANO is headed by a former Jindal cabinet member, Ann Silverberg Williamson.

Nearly 40 percent of the TOPS recipients come from families whose income is more than \$100,000 a year, even though those households represent only 16 percent of the state, according to the study. Fifty-six percent of Louisiana households make less than \$50,000 per year, but 72 percent of the TOPS recipients come from families making more than that amount.

Better known by its acronym, the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students began in 1988 as way to help good students from mostly low-income families pay for college.



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Political Horizons

The plan was then known as the Tuition Assistance Program, or TAP.

In 1997, the Louisiana Legislature removed the \$35,000 family income cap, making it available for all. There are several levels of the award, but generally, students need a 2.5 grade-point average

—a high "C" on a 4.0 scale — credit for completing a set number of academic classes, and a score of at least 20 on the ACT, a college-readiness test. The ACT's highest possible score is 36. The lowest is 15.

In other words, many average students qualify.

TOPS cost Louisiana taxpayers \$54 million in 1998. Its projected cost this year is about \$135 million. And those costs are likely to skyrocket.

TOPS pays tuition and some fees. When public universities raise tuition — and they have raised it about 15 percent over the

past two years and most expect to go up another 10 percent this fall — the taxpayers get the bill, not the students receiving TOPS.

In terms of dollars spent, Louisiana's TOPS is the fifth-most expensive "merit" program in country, ranking behind larger states such as Florida and Georgia, even though colleges are cheaper here and priced significantly below the Southern average, the study showed.

Gov. Bobby Jindal last month announced a convoluted plan to lock in \$40 million more for TOPS. Louisiana's portion of the nationwide tobacco settlement — about \$58 million annually — goes into the Millennium Trust Fund. Jindal wants a constitutional amendment mandating that whenever the trust fund exceeds \$1.38 billion, the additional money would go to TOPS. Jindal says dedicating more dollars to TOPS will protect the program.

But simply designating more money will not address the complex issues necessary to protect the merit-based scholarships, said state Sen. Lydia Jackson, who is second-in-command of the Senate Finance Committee.

"It's a budgetary magic act," the Shreveport Democrat said last week, "that doesn't address the real problems."

Jackson said she plans to file legislation in the upcoming session aimed at unlinking TOPS from tuition, and raising the minimum scholastic standards.

She holds little hope for success, but said she still plans to give it a go. "The homestead exemption would be easier to change than TOPS," Jackson said, citing another sacred cow in Louisiana politics.

The reason is that many of the same well-to-do people who rail against government over-spending are the ones who whine the loudest about efforts to make TOPS more efficient, economical and fair, said state Sen. Butch Gautreaux.

The Morgan City Democrat's quixotic efforts to shore up TOPS last year were pummeled in committee by a tide of indignant speeches about protecting our children.

"That's the problem. These poor people, these middle-income working folk, if they'd just hire lobbyists and send \$5,000 contributions, then we'd pay attention to them," Gautreaux said sarcastically. "We don't represent the people, we represent the influential people."

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