

TOPS merits commitment

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Louisiana's TOPS scholarship program isn't perfect, but it does push the state in the direction of several important goals: increasing the number of college graduates, stemming the loss of young people leaving the state and pushing high school students to focus on required core classes.

To those ends, we support a constitutional amendment dedicating more of the state's tobacco settlement to the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students. Senate Bills 52 and 53, which won committee approval last week, would cap the Millennium Trust at \$1.38 billion. Interest from the trust supports health and education programs, including TOPS. Legislation would direct new revenue, estimated at \$40 million annually and \$92 million the first year, toward TOPS. State Rep. Jane Smith, R-Bossier City, is handling a House version.

The goal is to guarantee a revenue stream for TOPS while allowing lawmakers to redirect budget dollars elsewhere. The cost of tuition for qualifying students is expected to reach \$174.5 million in the coming year. And as colleges and universities are granted more authority to raise tuition to offset state cuts, the cost of TOPS will only increase.

But with this endorsement comes a call for a re-examination of our approach to TOPS and higher education funding.

Need-based assistance:

Critics such as the Louisiana Budget Project say the merit-based TOPS program disproportionately serves students from higher-income homes: "... 72 percent of all TOPS recipients come from families that make over \$50,000 annually, and nearly 40 percent ... come from those with income over \$100,000 ...," states a 2010 analysis. So it is lamentable that an amendment narrowly failed in Senate committee that would have put 30 percent of tobacco revenue into need-based scholarships.

Shreveport Sen. Lydia Jackson argued that our high-poverty state spends less than other states on students who can't afford college. The \$26.4 million budget for need-based Go Grants is less than one-sixth of the budget for TOPS. LSU-

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Shreveport Chancellor Vince Marsala also argues for expansion of need-based assistance, including the Board of Regents' First Generation program that now limits four-year schools to one scholarship annually.

Toughen standards:

Educator and blogger Jeffrey Sadow is one who notes that TOPS has evolved into an entitlement program rather than a recognition of excellence. The goal is not to keep out students who truly want a college education but to direct marginal students into less-expensive, two-year schools to prepare them for the final push toward four-year degrees. Writes Sadow, "Making it based genuinely and only on merit will produce more prepared and committed students for fewer dollars that will generate more productivity out of higher education expenditures."

Make higher education a priority:

Louisiana Treasurer John Kennedy said the state's comparatively low tuition is a good thing. If the goal is to increase the number of college-educated Louisianans, he adds, "we're not going to catch up by raising the price of the product." Rather than turn to funding gimmicks, make higher education a funding priority.

Says Barry Erwin of Council for A Better Louisiana, "It makes little sense to reward our best students with a full scholarship ...

if the institutions we are sending them to don't have the resources ... to offer the highest-quality education to go along with it."

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