

G.O.P. Agrees To College Aid For Immigrants

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Byline: By ADAM CLYMER

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Body

Republicans in Congress have abandoned a plan to deny Federal higher education aid to lawful immigrants, but still want to limit access to the Head Start program for the youngest legal aliens.

Republican welfare legislation would limit, and in some instances deny, the right of aliens lawfully in this country to receive most kinds of Federal aid, including food stamps, Medicaid and short-term child welfare.

But after protests from spokesmen for colleges and universities, who argued that education was not welfare, a House-Senate conference committee decided last week to drop the proposed ban on immigrants receiving Pell grants, which provide scholarship aid to college students and Federal student loans. The conference members did decide to require that immigrants have a citizen co-sign their student loans, a regulation not imposed on students who are citizens.

President Clinton's aides have said he will veto the welfare bill because of other aspects, particularly the reductions in spending for child nutrition and aid to the disabled and the provisions for maintaining state spending that he considers weak.

But the issue of education aid will not go away. The measure is also part of the big budget reconciliation bill. Mr. Clinton has promised to negotiate with Republican leaders, starting next week, over a long list of issues in that measure. When they start talking, the Republicans' welfare bill, with its language on education for legal immigrants, will be the starting point.

Colleges and universities in states with large numbers of immigrants, especially California, Florida and New York, put pressure on the welfare conferees to drop the limits that they feared would cost them students.

Representative Clay E. Shaw Jr., Republican of Florida, took the leading role in the House-Senate conference to eliminate the proposed ban on Pell grants for legal immigrants. He said in a statement this week that he had done so because education, "unlike welfare, is a part of the American dream." He said, "Education is a fundamental tool for being successful, and everyone should have equal access to it."

Jay Hershenson, vice chancellor for university relations at the City University of New York, where about 40,000 immigrant students receive Pell grants, said that "we were encouraged" by the change.

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But the new requirement for co-signers on loans troubled him. "The bottom line is, the torch of the Statue of Liberty is still shining," he said, "but it's beginning to dim because these students will soon find a new barrier to access that never existed before -- not as high as the other one, but certainly there." He said 7,000 legal immigrants now received Federal loans.

There was little organized pressure over the issue of Head Start, the preschool program. The Senate version of the bill had allowed legal immigrant children to be eligible, while the House version had not. The conferees agreed that these children could take part in Head Start, but that their access should be restricted by counting not only their parents' income, but also the income of whoever had sponsored them as immigrants in determining whether they were poor enough to be eligible.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the New York Democrat who has been the most constant critic of the welfare legislation, said: "We are expected to be so pleased that legal aliens are no longer to be denied what has always been their right that we won't notice that the important entitlement of Head Start has been taken away. The one consistent fact is that everything in this legislation hurts children."

Senator Bob Graham, Democrat of Florida, who had failed to delete the higher education provisions on the Senate floor, called the conference committee's actions "progress."

But he said the differentiation between elementary and higher education showed that "the level of policy analysis is paper-thin." He added, "The real purpose is how to find a pool of money that can be cut off from current beneficiaries in order to both balance the budget and finance a big tax break."

The new requirement for co-signers for legal immigrants who take Federal student loans was criticized by David Finney, vice president for enrollment, services and planning at New York University. He said, "There are certainly going to be cases where students are not going to be able to get co-signers."

The bill requires immigrants to get whoever sponsored their entry into the country to co-sign or guarantee their loans, or they may get any other American citizen, regardless of creditworthiness, to co-sign.

Terry Hartle, chief lobbyist of the American Council on Education, said the co-signing requirement could be a "bureaucratic nightmare" and might "have a chilling effect on enrollment," especially at private colleges and universities with higher fees.

But he said the Pell grant issue was more important because legal immigrants get about 10 percent of all those grants and a much smaller percentage of student loans. In general, he said, "Congress took the long-term view, and reason prevailed on this particular issue."

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