

House Rejects Illegal Student Reporting Bill

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Body

The **House** yesterday became embroiled in another emotional discussion of immigration policy as it defeated an amendment that would have required school districts to **report** the number of **students** who are illegally in the United States.

The amendment, sponsored by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.), was defeated, 329 to 78, after a highly charged debate that highlighted issues of ethnicity, discrimination and the cost of providing government services to **illegal** immigrants. Opponents invoked images of Nazi Germany and the prospect of turning children into "spies" against their **illegal** parents. Proponents cited mountains of statistics in an effort to show **illegal** immigrants were draining billions of dollars from the economy.

"We've got to take the welcome sign that says: If you can get across this border, we're going to give you all kinds of benefits, the same benefit package that any American has," Rohrabacher said. "We have to care about our own people first."

Rep. Jose E. Serrano (D-N.Y.), chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, called Rohrabacher's amendment "mean-spirited, misguided and foolish." He said it was emblematic of a "cheap political style" practiced by some lawmakers to pit permanent residents against **illegal** residents.

The amendment, attached to the **bill** reauthorizing federal elementary and secondary education programs for the next five years, also would have required school districts to determine the number of **students** who are legal residents but who do not have at least one parent or legal guardian who is lawfully in the United States. School districts that failed to comply with the **reporting** requirements would have lost their federal Title I education funds.

The volatility of the debate yesterday underscored how politically sensitive the **illegal** immigration issue has become. Rohrabacher's amendment is the latest illustration of how immigration policy questions are being thrown into **House** floor debates with increasing frequency.

Over the past year, the **House** has debated whether flood relief and earthquake aid should be given to undocumented workers and whether the national service program should apply to **illegal** immigrants. Another emotional debate about immigration was conducted over extension of unemployment insurance.

House Majority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) implored colleagues to quit using such forums to debate **illegal** immigration. "Let's please not burden every piece of legislation that comes through here with an added responsibility to enforce the immigration laws of our country," he said. "Let's get the immigration laws enforced by the Immigration [and Naturalization] Service."

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Gephardt and others argued that school systems did not have expertise or resources to find out the number of illegal students enrolled or those enrolled with illegal parents. Rep. David R. Obey (D-Wis.) argued the amendment would "simply impose data-gathering burdens for no good purpose," diverting funds needed for schooling.

Rohrabacher maintained he was trying to gather statistics, not names, and that the information would benefit those in favor and against providing federal benefits for illegal immigrants.

But Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) said the amendment would make even legal immigrants susceptible to discrimination because they do not look like "average Americans."

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