

## **N.J. bill on in-state tuition for illegal immigrants advances**

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### **Body**

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TRENTON - A **bill** to allow **illegal immigrants** to pay **in-state tuition** at **state** colleges and universities cleared committees **in** both houses of the Legislature yesterday after several hours of impassioned debate.

"It is a matter of simple fairness that students who have grown up **in New Jersey**, graduated from high school **in New Jersey**, and are the future of **New Jersey**, be given the simple dignity of being able to go to college here as well," said Assemblywoman Nilsa Cruz-Perez (D., Camden), a sponsor.

Eleven **states** allow **illegal immigrants** to pay **in-state tuition**, which **in New Jersey** can be half the cost of out-of-**state** rates. Advocates **in New Jersey** have been working to **advance** legislation on the issue since at least 2002.

The **bill** would allow **illegal immigrants** to qualify for **in-state tuition** if they attended a **New Jersey** high school for at least three years, graduated or received the equivalent of a high school diploma from a **New Jersey** high school, and submitted an affidavit to the college or university **stating** they had applied to legalize their immigration status.

The **bill** was released by the Assembly Appropriations Committee, voting 7-4, and the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee by a vote of 8-6 later yesterday.

Gov. Corzine has said he would sign the **bill** if it was approved by the Senate and Assembly. Proponents are pushing for the measure to be approved during the legislative session because Gov.-elect Christopher **J.** Christie, who takes office Jan. 19, has said he opposes the **bill**.

Among those who testified on the **bill** yesterday were several high school and college students.

One student, who declined to reveal his name, said he came to the United **States** from Colombia with his parents at the age of 8, a decade ago. He said he hoped to study biomedical engineering to help soldiers returning from wars missing limbs, or children born without limbs. He graduated from high school last year, he said, and while he has been accepted into several colleges, he cannot afford to pay for college at out-of-**state** rates.

"I am a living testimony for how hard we are willing to work," he said. "I want to make a difference **in** this world, not just work a low-wage job every day. Some of my friends gave up **in** school because they thought there was no point."

A 16-year-old who identified himself as "Christian" said that when he realized how large an impact his immigration status would have on his future - on his ability to get a good job and education and even to drive - he started acting out.

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"I can't have a dream anymore," Christian said. "I will have to do what my dad does, make minimum wage. It's really hard for us."

Opponents of the **bill** argued the **state** should not condone **illegal** immigration and cannot afford to extend **in-state tuition** to **illegal immigrants**.

"My colleagues need to realize that **New Jersey** is broke before voting at the last minute to grant another giveaway that legal and hardworking families cannot afford to provide," said Assemblyman Richard Merkt (R., Morris). "This proposal is disrespectful to those families who play by the rules, but just squeak by sending their children to college with hopes of a better future. We should be focused on helping these families, not adding to their burden."

Former **State** Sen. Richard **J.** LaRossa also opposes the **bill**. He said *undocumented* was a euphemism for **illegal**.

"Do we really want to do anything else to encourage more **illegal** immigration into New Jersey?" he asked. "**In-state tuition** would only encourage more illegals to remain outside the law."

Some proponents argued it was wrong to punish students for decisions made by their parents. "This is not about remittances, this is not about lawbreaking," said Cid Wilson, vice chairman of the board of trustees to Bergen Community College, which for years has taken a "don't ask-don't tell" policy with regard to immigration status. "They came here because their parents brought them here."

Proponents also emphasized an analysis by the nonpartisan Office of Legislative Services that found that offering **in-state tuition** to **illegal immigrants** would not have an impact on the **state** budget, while opponents questioned the analysis.

"This country is based on **immigrants** and the American dream," said Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle (D., Bergen), who voted **in** favor of the **bill**. "We are not giving anything away. We are just making it equal for students to be able to achieve education."

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