

Legislators aim to shut colleges to illegal immigrants

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Body

Dalton, the "Carpet Capital of the World," is a magnet for unskilled laborers, many of them Latinos who entered the United States illegally.

More than 11,000 undocumented Hispanic residents were living in Dalton in 2000, according to Census Bureau figures. Latino children now make up the majority in Dalton city schools. Many graduate from high school and meet the requirements to enroll in a state college or university. This fall, more than 50 undocumented high school graduates enrolled at nearby Dalton State College.

If some Georgia lawmakers get their way, future graduates won't have that option. Senate Republicans said last week that they will make illegal immigration a top priority in the upcoming legislative session, supporting proposals that would bar undocumented residents from receiving taxpayer-funded services in Georgia.

The proposals would bar undocumented high school graduates from attending a state college and, some educators say, could hamper the state's efforts to create a more educated Georgia.

"If we don't educate these kids, what happens to them?" asked Dan Papp, senior vice chancellor of academic affairs for the University System of Georgia. "That's a question we have to answer."

Senate President Pro Tem Eric Johnson (R-Savannah), a co-sponsor of the legislation, said he hopes the law will discourage illegal immigrants from coming to Georgia in the first place.

"We cannot feed, clothe and educate everybody in the world," Johnson said Friday in a telephone interview. "We have limited resources. Money doesn't grow on trees. Having people here using up our limited resources is not fair."

An obligation to educate?

In 2000, the state Board of Regents agreed to allow state schools to admit illegal immigrants as long as they paid out-of-state tuition. But the regents also gave each college president the latitude to waive the higher out-of-state tuition fee for a limited number of such students, allowing them to enroll at the in-state rate.

Regents Chairman Tim Shelnut said Friday that he believes the state has an obligation to educate all of its residents, legal or not. Shelnut said he would like to see research that shows how many of the undocumented students attend college, graduate and remain in Georgia as taxpaying citizens.

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University System officials say they don't know how many of the 6,400 Hispanic students enrolled in the state's 34 **colleges** and universities are here illegally.

At Dalton State **College**, President James Burran granted the tuition waiver to about 50 students, nearly 2 percent of the school's full-time enrollment and the maximum percentage allowed by the regents. Thirty to 40 others also sought out-of-state waivers so they could afford to attend the **college**, Burran said.

Those who don't go to **college** find jobs in Dalton, working in retail sales, at carpet factories or in the smattering of Latino-owned businesses that have sprung up there in recent years, Burran said. "The downside is that if they start at these jobs at an hourly rate, in 20 years they're still going to be at an hourly rate," he said.

A raging debate

The debate over public services for **illegal immigrants** has raged in other states in recent years as Hispanic populations have continued to swell.

Since 2000, nine states have passed legislation to grant **illegal immigrants** in-state residency status to allow them to pay lower tuition. In Virginia, however, the attorney general's office prohibits students without legal residency status from attending state **colleges**, according to the American Association of State **Colleges** and Universities.

In a position paper released earlier this year, the association called on state governments to ease restrictions on undocumented students. Research in Texas, a state that allows **illegal** residents in-state status for tuition, showed that the cost of not educating the students far outpaced the cost of the education.

Georgia **college** officials say they'll continue to admit **illegal** residents until a law prohibits them from doing so.

"I'm not in favor of supporting people who come to this country illegally," said Georgia State University Associate Provost Bill Fritz. "The group we're trying to help is students who have been here all their lives. If you're going to get mad at anyone, you should get mad at their parents."

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