

NJSTARS Scholarship Plan Would Cap Income, Awards

By Diane D'Amico
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TRENTON - There may be an income cap for the NJSTARS program, but it's pretty generous.

At the request of Gov. Jon S. Corzine, the state Assembly Higher Education Committee on Thursday approved adding a \$250,000 family income limit, but only for NJSTARSII students transferring to four-year state colleges in their junior year. It would not apply to the county college scholarships.

NJSTARSII awards also would be capped at \$7,000 per student per year, based on grade-point average, and would apply only to tuition, not fees, at the four-year colleges.

"There would have to be some shared family responsibility," said Jane Oates, executive director of the Commission on Higher Education.

Rowan University President Donald Farish said the NJSTARSII scholarships are costing the college \$1.5 million this year, up from \$200,000 just two years ago, and state colleges cannot afford to fully subsidize the program at its current rate of growth.

The committee, by a 7-2 vote with two abstentions, reluctantly approved revisions to the popular college scholarship program, reducing the number of eligible students from the top 20 percent of high school graduates to the top 15 percent.

"It pains me to vote yes, but we have to make prudent, regretful and painful decisions," committee Chairman Patrick J. Diegnan Jr., D-Middlesex, said amid concerns that the program could be cut even more next year because of the state's financial situation. "Maybe this can take it off the radar screen for future budget cuts."

The reductions in the program are expected to save about \$3 million to \$5 million. The bill still must be approved by the full Legislature.

Two Republicans who voted against the revisions, Assemblymen Brian Rumpf, R-Atlantic, Burlington, Ocean and Michael Patrick Carroll, R-Morris, questioned the cuts and how eligibility was determined. Carroll said basing eligibility on class rank eliminates some highly qualified students at very competitive high schools while rewarding less qualified students from less competitive high schools.

"I just think we can do better," he said.

Jane Oates, executive director of the Commission on Higher Education said the changes recommended by a state task force were designed to make sure all eligible students were ready for college.

The revisions call for students to take a rigorous high school curriculum. If they need remedial courses in college, they must take them on their own before getting the NJSTARSII funds.

Local school officials said they already have made changes to better prepare students for college.

Atlantic Cape Community College's Jump Start program lets all high school seniors take the Accuplacer placement test. Dean of Students Carmen Royal said they may begin offering it in the junior year.

Bridgeton Schools Superintendent Victor Gilson said the high school already requires the more rigorous curriculum and offers a program called Bridges to provide remedial assistance. He said he is disappointed in the program cuts, but understands the reasons for them.

Rowan's Farish said the proposed revisions may not go far enough, especially if four-year colleges continue to get their state aid cut. He proposed giving all students the same amount of aid and letting them decide whether to attend a community college or state four-year school. He said NJSTARSI is not keeping the best students in state, because the very top students get offers from many colleges and can choose where they want to go.

Limited data was available, but it appears that many NJSTARSI students at community colleges are in the second 10 percent of their high school class. Oates said that at Ocean County College, about 36 percent of the NJSTARSI students were between the 15 and 20 percent ranking at their high school.

While the cutback in eligibility is expected to save money, legislators and educators said that in a tough economy, parents may be more likely to opt for the free community college program, even if their child wants to attend a four-year college.

Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt, D-Camden, said with about 21,000 high school seniors statewide eligible for NJSTARSI scholarships, the program might still need a cap to stay afloat.

Currently, 3,200 NJSTARSI students are in the community college program, and a big increase could create a financial problem for the state.

“Parents may not have the money for another college,” ACCC's Royal said. “We may be their only choice.”