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House approves ban on legislative scholarships

Quinn vows to sign bill, end problem-plagued tuition-waiver program

By Ray Long and Alissa Groeninger, Chicago Tribune reporters

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SPRINGFIELD —

The Illinois House sounded the death knell yesterday for a century-old legislative scholarship program long abused by politicians who passed out tuition waivers to children of relatives, political cronies and campaign contributors.

The 79-32 vote followed a tumultuous debate as opponents vigorously tried to hang on to the popular perk. They argued the tuition waivers give breaks to children who could not otherwise afford the rising costs of a state university education.

Only moments before the vote, Gov. **Pat Quinn** told reporters in his Capitol office that he wanted the ban sent to him quickly so he could sign it and kill off what he ridiculed as "political scholarships."

Afterward, Quinn issued a statement that House passage represented a "good day for deserving students in financial need and a good day for the taxpayers of Illinois."

"Scholarships, paid for by Illinois taxpayers, should be awarded only to those with merit who are in true financial need," Quinn said. "Abolishing this program is the right thing to do."

But the governor's sentiment was far from universal. Rep. Ken Dunkin, D-Chicago, railed against the proposal and questioned whether sponsoring Rep. Fred Crespo, D-Hoffman Estates, was merely trying to gin up some positive headlines for himself.

"Stop right there," Crespo said. "Don't make it personal."

But Dunkin immediately shot back that the ban is "personal" because losing scholarship opportunities will hurt students in his district, which winds from the Near West Side to the **Near South Side**. Dunkin maintained the tuition waivers cost nothing to give out, but Crespo argued they are worth up to \$14 million a year, and other students end up footing the bill.

For years, scholarship bans passed the House, only to run into a stumbling block in the Senate under both Democratic and Republican leaders. But a few weeks ago, Democratic Senate President **John Cullerton** announced he supported a ban. The scholarship program had drawn renewed federal scrutiny,

and it's an election year that sees all 177 lawmakers on the ballot in November.

The scholarship vote came as legislators returned to the Capitol for what's scheduled to be the final 10 days before a May 31 adjournment. Quinn called on the Legislature to make it an "epic" moment by restructuring public pensions and health care for the poor.

The governor offered little hope to supporters of casino gambling that he's willing to back away from his opposition to any expansion that includes slot machines at horse tracks.

Quinn warned that lawmakers should not get distracted by "shiny" legislative initiatives as the clock ticks down toward adjournment. But pro-gambling lawmakers have said they are preparing to vote on a bill that would bring casinos to Chicago and several other sites, as well as put slots at tracks.

Quinn's comments came as Rep. **Sara Feigenholtz**, D-Chicago, introduced a **Medicaid** overhaul that would trim costs by cutting back health care and ratcheting up scrutiny of applicants to ensure they are eligible. For example, the state seeks to save \$49 million by making it tougher to meet income requirements for admission into the FamilyCare program.

But the Medicaid plan still hinges on a \$1-a-pack cigarette tax hike to fill a \$2.7 billion funding gap. Quinn backs the cigarette tax increase, but it's unclear whether enough lawmakers will go along.

In the Senate, **Cook County Board** President **Toni Preckwinkle** pressed for provisions that would generate more money for county government through Medicaid changes.

Senate **Democrats** also advanced pieces of an overall budget, an approach that would leave open the super-maximum security prison in the far southern Illinois community of Tamms.

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