

Henry wants to earmark part of tax for program

By The Associated Press

Wendell Graham and Holli Hagan Giudice came from different backgrounds but have a common link - a brighter future because of Oklahoma's college scholarship program.

Graham, 25, got into the program on the advice of his foster parents while in junior high school. He now is a graduate of the University of Langston and a management analyst at Tinker Air Force Base.

Giudice, 24, is pursuing a masters degree at the University of Oklahoma. She said she knew nothing about the cost of a college education when her mother, a single parent, enrolled her in the Oklahoma Higher Education Learning Access Program as an eight-grader.

"It was the answer to our prayers," she said of OHLAP, which pays college tuition for students from families with incomes of less than \$50,000 who take college preparatory courses in high school, make good grades and stay out of trouble.

"Without this program, a lot of people in my situation would not have the money to be able to go to college," Graham said.

Graham and Giudice were among several OHLAP students who attended Wednesday's news conference by Gov. Brad Henry, who announced a plan to earmark a percentage of state income taxes to OHLAP, which has been renamed "Oklahoma's Promise."

"The program has attracted more and more students each year, but it has never had a permanent, dedicated revenue source large enough to accommodate its growth," Henry said. "We need to keep the promise we made to students and designate a large funding source for the scholarship program."

Under his plan, 1.25 percent of the state income tax would be dedicated to the program, producing about \$36 million for scholarships next year. With other funding sources, the program would get a total of \$48.5 million.

Scott Meacham, state treasurer, said leaders made a promise when they initiated the program in 1992, but concrete funding was not provided.

"I think it's time that the state put its money where its mouth is and fulfills its part of the promise we made to families across the state," Meacham said.

He said the state income tax is the most stable revenue source available to fulfill that promise.

Glen Johnson, the state's new chancellor of education, announced his backing for the program, saying it was opening doors and changing lives of many Oklahomans.

Henry said it was vital to increase the number of college graduates to improve Oklahoma's economic future.

Over the last four years, students enrolled in the program have increased from 2,000 to 12,000.

"Given the importance of a college degree in today's global economy, the growth of OHLAP is really a good problem to have," the governor said.

Democrats in the state House announced their support of the Henry plan. "Like the governor, I believe the income tax is the most stable source of income to permanently fund this important program," said Rep. Danny Morgan, D-Prague, House minority leader.

There was no immediate comment from the House Republican majority.

Senate President Pro Tem Mike Morgan, D-Stillwater, called the idea intriguing, but said he wanted to study it further.

Morgan said he wants the governor to consider his plan of a year ago to expand eligibility for the program to families who earn less than \$75,000. Henry said he would consider that proposal if he could be convinced the state could afford it.