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OHLAP

By World's Editorial Writers
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Ensuring funds for a valuable program

Senate Democratic leaders on Wednesday listed among their goals for the upcoming legislative session plans to expand an increasingly popular college scholarship program and finding a dedicated source of revenue to pay for it.

The Democrats' legislative agenda was outlined by Senate President Pro Tem Mike Morgan of Stillwater and Sens. Charles Laster of Shawnee and Johnnie Crutchfield of Ardmore.

The scholarship program in question is the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program, or OHLAP, which provides tuition to state colleges and universities for students who enroll while they are in high school, who maintain a 2.5 grade point average while passing specific required courses and who stay out of trouble. It is open to children of families with annual incomes of \$50,000 or less.

Morgan and the rest of the Senate Democratic leadership want to raise the income threshold -- although they haven't yet said to what level -- to make more students eligible for the program.

Gov. Brad Henry earlier proposed dedicating the first 1.25 percent of the state income tax to pay for OHLAP scholarships. That would provide \$36 million for the next fiscal year, Henry said. Including other funding sources would bring that total to \$48.5 million, enough to pay for next year's scholarships.

Whether lawmakers go along with Henry's plan or find another dedicated revenue source, it is important that they do something.

OHLAP has grown rapidly since it was created in 1992. In just the past four years OHLAP scholarship recipients have grown from 2,000 to 12,000 and word about the program is spreading among high school students.

The more the state spends on OHLAP the better. There are few things the state can do for its long-term betterment than increase the number of Oklahoma residents who have college degrees. College graduates have more earning power than others and help make the state more attractive to businesses that seek an educated work force.

Oklahoma's average per-capita annual income is about 80 percent of the national average and it is no coincidence that the number of college graduates per capita trails the national average about the same.

Every dollar spent on OHLAP is an investment in a brighter future for Oklahoma. Expanding the program and ensuring that there will always be money to pay for it should be a focus of every member of the Legislature, Democrat or Republican.

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