

Getting focused: Lawmakers aim to aid students

Oklahoman Editorial

WHEN lawmakers spend their time debating the merits of legislation to prevent dropouts and how to pay for more college scholarships, something right is happening at the state Capitol.

Yes, they bickered over whether dropout legislation was a good idea and whether it would really work. And some still want eligibility for the scholarships widened. That's the nature of politics. But it's encouraging to hear our elected representatives focused on issues of critical importance to our children and the state's future.

We've all seen the statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau and elsewhere showing that college graduates make as much as \$1 million more in their lifetimes than those who top out at a high school diploma. In economic terms, even a high school diploma is better than none at all.

Dropout and graduation rates should be met with skepticism. The math is fuzzy at best and paints a far too rosy picture of how many students finish high school. The numbers are self-reported by schools that at the present time are ill-equipped to actually account for every student who stops showing up for class, and the rates produced out of the state Department of Education are only as good as the data from schools.

The data should improve once a statewide student information system finally hits all schools and officials can begin more systematic tracking of students. Until then, one only need look at the hard numbers to understand the depth of the problem.

More than 5,000 students ages 15 to 18 dropped out during the 2005-06 school year, according to the education department. About 500 students older than 18 and more than 700 ages 14 and younger — including 137 younger than 13 — also left the public school radar. Clearly, the state and educators have much work to do to improve the number of students finishing high school. This problem doesn't have a one-session fix and must be an issue lawmakers discuss for years to come.

At the same time, Gov. Brad Henry and the Legislature get high marks for working on a permanent funding source for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program, also known as the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program. They haven't acted quickly enough in awarding supplemental funding. But the state Senate approved a plan last week that would fund the scholarship program with a percentage of state revenues — making sure the scholarships are awarded annually as promised and largely bypassing much of the bureaucratic appropriation process that could endanger the timely delivery of scholarship funds.

Politics may be the name of the game at the Capitol. That makes it all the more refreshing to see our lawmakers overcoming their differences to do the important work of the people for the betterment of our children and our state.