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## Plan would tap tax for scholars

By BARBARA HOBEROCK World Capitol Bureau  
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OKLAHOMA CITY -- Gov. Brad Henry said Wednesday that he would ask lawmakers to earmark 1.25 percent of the state's income tax revenue to fund a statewide scholarship program.

The Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program needs more money because it is becoming more popular, he said.

"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," he said. "We need to keep the promise we made to students and designate a large funding source for the scholarship program."

The program provides scholarships for students who maintain a 2.5 grade point average, pass specific courses and stay out of trouble. Families that make up to \$50,000 a year are eligible.

Wendell Graham, who graduated from Jenks High School in 2000 and Langston University in 2005, said that without the program, he would have been \$15,000 in debt when he graduated, as opposed to \$5,000. Graham, who came from the foster-care system, said that when he first heard about the program, he had no concept of the impact it would have on his life.

It was one of the best things that happened to him, said Graham, 24. He is a management analyst at Tinker Air Force Base and is pursuing graduate studies.

Graham was among several OHLAP students at a news conference where Henry announced his funding plan for the program, which was created in 1992.

The 1.25 percent earmark is expected to generate \$36 million for college scholarships in the next fiscal year. With other funding included, the program would receive \$48.5 million, which is enough to cover projected scholarship costs.

Henry said he believed that the earmark will provide enough funding, despite a phased-in reduction of the income tax passed last session.

State Treasurer Scott Meacham said the gross production tax was too unstable to use as a dedicated funding source.

Earmarking income tax revenues will mean that funding for the program will exceed projections some years and fall short of them other years. However, officials can carry a balance forward, Meacham said.

Henry said he would first support finding a dedicated revenue source before he considers an increase in income eligibility, as proposed last year by Senate Pro Tem Mike Morgan, D-Stillwater.

Morgan called Henry's proposal "intriguing."

"I still believe we should strongly consider expanding the income eligibility as I proposed last year," he said. "I believe that can be done if we find a way to dedicate revenue to Oklahoma's Promise that will automatically grow with the program." The program is also known as Oklahoma's Promise.

Senate Co-President Pro Tem Glenn Coffee, R-Oklahoma City, said he was very concerned about supporting additional spending without reviewing the full budget.

Rep. Ken Miller, R-Edmond, the vice chairman of the House Appropriations and Budget Committee, said, "This announcement today demonstrates a fundamental difference between House Republicans and the governor.

"House Republicans will continue to ratchet down the income tax to boost economic growth and opportunity, while the governor proposes to tie spending to this harmful tax.

"We all want to find ways to make college more affordable. While OHLAP is a good program, it's never a good idea to tie spending to the income tax.

"Earmarking the tax that hurts job creation the most is not the way to build Oklahoma's future."

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## What's OHLAP?

The Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program, also called Oklahoma's Promise, is a college scholarship program.

**Applicants must:** be Oklahoma residents; apply during eighth, ninth or 10th grades; and be from households whose annual incomes do not exceed \$50,000 at the time of application.

**Requirements include:** graduating from an Oklahoma high school; taking 17 units of high school courses and achieving a 2.5 grade point average; maintaining a cumulative GPA of at least a 2.5 for all courses in grades 9-12; attending school regularly; staying away from drugs and alcohol; and not committing criminal or delinquent acts.

**To apply:** Go online to [www.okpromise.org](http://www.okpromise.org) or call (800) 858-1840.

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