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Scholarship plan will pay dividends

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The dividends might not become apparent for a few years, but an increasingly popular state program that covers college tuition for qualified students from low- and moderate-income families is working as planned, maybe better.

Participation is growing rapidly. Students involved are out-performing their fellow students, both at the high school and college level. And they are sticking through to college graduation. That benefits the participants, obviously, but also a state that historically trails the national average in percentage of population with a four-year college degree.

The program is bound to become more expensive, as participation grows and college tuitions increase.

The Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program, usually called OHLAP or Oklahoma's Promise, was established 15 years ago, in legislation authored by former Sen. Maxine Horner of Tulsa.

Students who are Oklahoma residents and whose parents earn \$50,000 or less a year may enroll in OHLAP when they are in the 8th, 9th or 10th grade. To qualify for a scholarship, students must graduate from an accredited Oklahoma high school with a 2.5 grade average or better in a college preparatory program that is heavy with English, lab science, math, history and foreign language units. They also must attend school regularly, avoid alcohol and drugs and stay out of trouble at school and with the law.

OHLAP scholarships cover full tuition, but not books or room and board, at an in-state two-year or four-year college or university, or a Career Tech school.

State four-year regional universities are most popular with OHLAP scholars (41 percent). Thirty percent attend state two-year colleges, 24 percent attend one of the state research universities, 5 percent go to private or independent colleges and 1 percent attend Career Tech.

According to statistics compiled by the State Regents for Higher Education, OHLAP participants while in high school record higher grade point averages and higher ACT scores than the general student population. More of them go to college, by a significant rate. Some 82 percent of OHLAP participants who graduated high school in 2004 went to college, compared with 59 percent of all Oklahoma graduates.

In college, they require fewer remediation classes. More of them attend school full-time and more make a successful transition from the freshman to sophomore year -- the crucial time when many college students drop out. In fact, in 2003, the most recent year for which comparative numbers are available, 90 percent of OHLAP scholars moved successfully from freshman to sophomore, compared with 77 percent of all students.

Most important, a higher percentage of OHLAP scholars complete their graduation requirements.

Since the program began in 1992 more than 57,000 students from 550 high schools in all 77 counties have enrolled. The number of scholarships awarded grew from 1,245 in 1999, when the program began to take off, to 15,000 this year. It's projected that 17,800 scholarships will be given next year.

Meanwhile, the cost of scholarships grew from about \$1 million in the first year to \$37 million this year. That figure could go as high as \$58.3 million in 2009, depending on how much tuition increases.

It's important that the state keep up with funding needs in the OHLAP program. After all, the state made a promise to these students that if they kept their end of the bargain they would be rewarded with a full-tuition scholarship.

Gov. Brad Henry proposed that the first 1.25 percent of state income tax revenues each year be earmarked for OHLAP. The measure passed a Senate committee last week, amended to earmark a small portion of the general revenue fund. Legislators ought to lay aside any partisan differences and pass the earmark legislation.

It is also important that lawmakers periodically review the family income threshold for eligibility. The estimated percentage of Oklahoma families with incomes under \$50,000 declined from 61.2 percent in 2000 to 54.3 percent in 2005, quite possibly because of inflation. If the income threshold is kept at \$50,000, fewer students each year will qualify for the program.

OHLAP -- Oklahoma's Promise -- truly is an investment in the state's future. Every dollar spent is an investment in a better educated citizenry, one that is better prepared to succeed in the 21st century workplace.

Correction

In last Sunday's column on the Tulsa's trash-to-energy plant I reversed the local-national description of the city's two largest commercial trash haulers. Waste Management Inc. is the largest company of its kind in the nation. American Waste Control, the largest commercial trash hauler in Tulsa, is locally owned.

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