TOPS
Continued from page 1A

basic TOPS award, called
"Opportunity."
"The purpose of TOPS is to keep the best and brightest
here," Foil said Monday. "To fulfill the intent of the pro-
gram, raising the GPA from
2.5 to 3.0 is a good measure."
Reynolds, who said he plans to work with Foil,
made a similar point. "If we are
going to spend the mon-
ey we are spending, I want
excellence," said Reynolds,
a former educator who is
chairman of the state House
Democratic Caucus.
The eligibility criteria for
other forms of TOPS would
remain unchanged.

James Caillier, executive
director of the Patrick F.
Taylor Founda-
tion, said one of the
benefits of TOPS is that
it encourages high school
students to take
more rigorous classes to earn the
assistance.

"If we change that, we will
change the whole culture of
high school," Caillier said.
"We will create an environ-
ment where students will
take the easy route out and
thereby be less prepared to
go to college."

He said minority and low-
income students would be
heavily affected.

TOPS bills regularly spark
arguments, and previous
bids to toughen eligibility
rules have failed. However,
new funding problems for
TOPS could change the de-
bate this time.

TOPS is supposed to pay
for tuition and some other
costs, depending on the level
awarded.
The new rules would ap-
ply to students who graduate
from high school during and
after the 2020-21 school year.
About 50,000 students get
the assistance, including
about 14,000 at LSU.

However, they are receiv-
ing about 70 percent of the
normal amount for the cur-
rent semester because of
state financial problems.
The state faces a projected
shortfall of about $440 mil-
lion for the financial year that
begins July 1, which means
TOPS may be underfunded
again this year.
The Legislature appropri-
at ed $209 million for TOPS
for 2016-17. Fully funding
TOPS would have required
a $296 million appropriation.
Backers of tougher stan-
dards contend Louisiana has
set the academic bar too low
for a merit award.
Others have argued that
current rules are overly re-
strictive and unsustainable for
some students, especially those
from low-income families.

Foil said his legislation espe-
cially makes sense because of
state problems financing TOPS
and would ensure aid for the
most deserving students.
"I am trying to tighten up the
solvency of the program," he
said.

Reynolds said that, when
the bill is revised, he would favor
offering students ways other
than a 3.0 GPA to earn TOPS,
such as rewarding students for
meeting a certain ACT score.

The ACT is a test of college
readiness.

Reynolds' bill also would al-
low students who are in good
academic standing to leave col-
lege for a year or two, such as
for a job, and return to school
with TOPS assistance resum-
ing.

He said that provision stems
from evidence students be-
tween the ages of 23 and 26 are
the fastest growing part of the
student body.

Foil said Caillier asked him if
he would be willing to study the
issue more. "I told him I would
like to move forward with a bill,
but I would work with them to
take care of their concerns," he
said.

Caillier noted that last year,
the Legislature approved a bill
that increases GPA rules for
the two of the other forms of
TOPS — "Performance" and
"Honors" — that have higher
awards.

"We felt that 'Opportunity'
should remain where it is," he
said. "We discussed that at
length."

Caillier added, "If we make
the requirements too high, we
will create a bridge too far. The
students won't even try."

Earlier this year, another bid
to increase TOPS eligibility
rules failed.

In February, the state Board
of Regents shelved a staff
study recommendation that
would have required recipients
to earn at least 30 credit hours
per year, up from 24 now.

Foil said problems with fund-
ing could change the legisla-
tive landscape.

"In the past, when TOPS was
fully funded, no one wanted to
make any changes," he said.

TOPS was authorized in 1997.
The state spent $2.6 billion
for the program from 1999-2016,
according to a report by
the state Board of Regents.

TOPS has helped 291,000 stu-
dents.