Shore up TOPS funding, lawmakers on study panel say

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Ensuring the long-term financial stability of the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students should be the key aim of a Louisiana House and Senate panel about to tackle the issue, newly named members of the committee said.

"I am hoping we come out with several comprehensive reform measures to keep the program financially strong and make sure it survives in the future," said state Rep. Franklin Foil, R-Baton Rouge, a member of the panel.

Rep. Thomas Carmody, R-Shreveport, another member of the panel, echoed that view.

"I get concerned calls all the time from parents whose children are in high school and are trying to make sure they have a game plan for getting their children through post-secondary education, hopefully, in Louisiana, and being able to afford it," said Carmody, a former member of the House Education Committee.

The 10-member panel, which is set to work Sept. 6, TOPS has been paying tuition and other costs for students who qualify since 1998. The program was designed to make sure students take a challenging high school curriculum, have a way to pay for college and keep some of Louisiana's brightest students in the state.

But rising costs, like other services, and ongoing state budget problems have put the program's long-term finances in doubt.

The state will spend about $290 million on TOPS for the 2017-18 school year and spent $236.3 million on the program from 1999-2015. Sen. Bodi White, R-Central, another member of committee, said making TOPS solvent should be a top policy priority.

"It is probably the most popular program in my district," White said. "It is the only program where everybody gets a shot at it."

Students can earn the most popular form of the aid — TOPS Opportunity — by meeting modest academic requirements. They have to earn at least a 2.50 GPA on the high school core curriculum and a 20 on the ACT, a test of college readiness.

That curriculum includes four units each of English, math, science and social studies; two units in a foreign language; and one in fine arts.

Nearly 52,000 students get the aid now, and 61 percent are women.

Gov. John Bel Edwards' initial budget earlier this year would have not fully funded TOPS for the second consecutive year. Lawmakers insisted students get the traditional awards, and the final budget included the money, with the governor's support.

However, state financial problems are expected to continue indefinitely, which means even aid for a popular program is no guarantee. Students for the first time did not get the customary TOPS awards for the 2016-17 college year because of budget troubles.

"I hope we are going to come to some decisions on how we can sustain TOPS," said Sen. Ed Price, D-Gonzales, another member of the task force.

"The sustainability is the most important thing at this time," Price added.

How that might happen is unclear.

Foil and others favor making it harder to earn TOPS, and his bill to boost the minimum GPA requirements from 2.50 to 2.75 narrowly won House approval earlier this year before dying in the Senate Education Committee. But even that step would have a modest impact on enrollment.

The state already has frozen tuition payments at the 2016-17 level. That means regular tuition hikes — a big factor in the costs of TOPS — no longer go into a TOPS award unless lawmakers authorize such an increase.

The future of TOPS is also tied up with efforts to make it more of a needs-based program, not merit. Some black lawmakers have long complained that, even with modest academic standards, TOPS is out of reach for many of their constituents.

Only 14 percent of TOPS recipients are black students, which is less than half of their representation in colleges and universities, according to the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance. White students make up 67 percent of those on TOPS, Hispanics 5 percent and 9 percent are not reported.

Only 2.4 percent of students in the Southern University system get TOPS Opportunity scholarships, according to 2015-16 figures. LSU accounts for 27 percent, the University of Louisiana system 56.7 percent, the Louisiana Community and Technical College system 7.5 percent and private schools 5.9 percent.

Rep. Gary Carter, D-New Orleans, another newly named member of the task force, said the panel needs to find ways to get TOPS money to needy students, including those from families who have never had a college student.

"I want to make sure we give them every opportunity to go to college and be successful and not worry about paying for college," Carter said.

Earlier this year, Carter sponsored legislation — House Bill 390 — that would have re-vamped the way TOPS money is allocated during funding shortages.

Carter wanted students who scored 30 or higher on the ACT to retain 100 percent of the award, as well as those from families with annual incomes of $60,000 or so. However, the bill died in the House Education Committee amid complaints that other TOPS recipients would face drastic cuts in aid under Carter's plan.

Part of the difficulty in trying to change TOPS is the lack of a consensus on whether it should be merit or needs based, said Joshua Stockley, an associate professor of political science at the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

Stockley said the program also faces the same problem as other key state services.

"Our budgeting process is ad hoc and relies so much on one-time funds," he said. "That's the reason for TOPS being in a precarious position."

The task force will be chaired by Senate Education Committee Chairman Dan "Blade" Morrish, R-Jennings, sponsor of the resolution that set up the panel.

Others include House Education Committee Chairwoman Nancy Landry, R-Lafayette; Rep. Ted James, D-Baton Rouge; and Sens. Mike Walsworth, R-West Monroe; and Wesley Bishop, D-New Orleans.

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