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Private-school kids may get state aid to take college classes

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The state would pay for private-school students to take college courses while they're in high school under a legislative proposal that advocates say would expand opportunities for earning college credit.

But the legislative provision has sparked controversy, with critics contending that private-school and home-school students shouldn't be able to access public money to participate in the state's dual-enrollment program.

Doug Pratt, spokesman for the Michigan Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, says it's a bad move, considering that state funding cuts already have forced many schools to make painful cuts. "Now we're going to put in a program that takes money away from neighborhood schools and provides it to help fund the college tuition of private-school and home-school students? It doesn't make sense."

All students should have the opportunity to earn college credit, said Sen. Judy Emmons, R-Sheridan, the main sponsor of the legislation.

"They are students in the state of Michigan. They live here. I would hazard to guess that their families pay taxes in Michigan," she said.

Bill to extend dual enrollment raises fairness issues

Julie Anderson was one of thousands of Michigan teens who were part of the state's dual enrollment program -- taking both high school and college classes last year. But unlike her peers in public schools, who have much of their tuition covered by the local school district, Julie's parents dug deep to pay for her classes.

That would change for private school students such as Julie under a controversial piece of proposed legislation that would use state money to pay for private-school and home-schooled students to take part more easily in dual enrollment.

Under the bill, students in nonpublic schools no longer would have to enroll first in a course in a public school in order to qualify. That rule has been "an unnecessary hurdle" that kept many students from trying to qualify and left others deciding to cover the cost of the college classes on their own, said David Maluchnik, spokesman for the Michigan Catholic Conference, which supports the legislation.

The bill also decreases the age of eligibility, also allowing high school freshmen and sophomores into the program.

Rep. Judy Emmons, R-Sheridan, the main sponsor of the proposal, said the idea is to provide "more opportunities for students to reach their potential, to get a leg up on their college instruction."

Julie, 17, who took classes last year at Bishop Foley High in Madison Heights and Oakland Community College, said the proposed changes "would have made a huge difference" had they been in place for her.

"I would have maybe taken more classes," said the Huntington Woods student.

First, the proposal -- part of a far-reaching package of Senate legislation designed to provide more education options for students and parents -- must get through the Legislature. Many in the K-12 community have raised concerns, primarily about the appropriateness of using public money for nonpublic students.

And some say that instead of providing more options for students whose parents have chosen to keep them out of public schools, the Legislature should look at making sure that more rural and urban students have access to dual enrollment.

Money to pay for the courses taken by private school students would flow from the state Department of Treasury to the colleges, Emmons said.

Don Wotruba, deputy director at the Michigan Association of School Boards, said that is no guarantee public school funding won't be affected.

"There's nothing that will prevent (Treasury) from saying, 'We're going to take it out of the School Aid Fund.' For us, that would be a significant problem."

Doug Pratt, spokesman for the Michigan Education Association, calls it a back-door attempt to provide vouchers for private-school students.

"That certainly runs counter to the opinions voters had 11 years ago, when they soundly said they don't want public funds going to support private- and home-schooled kids," Pratt said, referring to a failed 2000 ballot initiative that would have allowed state-funded vouchers for students to attend private school.

Emmons said she is puzzled by the continued voucher argument, saying the bill only extends an existing opportunity for nonpublic school students.

"I don't even see the resemblance to vouchers," Emmons said.

The Michigan Association of Community Colleges supports the legislation, but Mike Hansen, president of the group, said it has concerns because the legislation would limit the amount of tuition colleges can charge and the number of courses students could take.

Community colleges would be able to charge only their in-district rate to dual-enrolled students, whether they live in or outside the district. Hansen said that raises fairness issues because the in-district rates are for residents who pay local property taxes in the district.

"It's not fair to charge the people not paying a property tax the same rate as the people who are paying a property tax," Hansen said.

Students would be limited to taking 10 college courses over the course of four years of high school -- two each in their first through third years and four during their fourth year of high school. Hansen said that rule would fly in the face of the intent to provide expanded opportunities.

Allowing freshmen to participate benefits gifted students, said Jean Becker, president of the Michigan Association for Gifted Children.

Often, those students aren't challenged by their school curriculum.

"If you don't give them something to challenge them, they won't be learning anything and they'll be bored out of their mind," Becker said.

Although gifted students might benefit, some students have mixed feelings about whether that benefit would be global.

"I think it's a good idea. But I don't know if I would have done it," said Jennifer Bird, 16, a senior at Canton High School who is dual-enrolled this year, taking a course in abnormal psychology at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

Freshman year is overwhelming enough without taking college classes, some say.

"It would be overbearing," said Brooke Neveux, 17, a senior from Troy who will be taking classes at Oakland Community College next semester along with her high school classes at Niles Community High School in Troy.

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