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The Salt Lake Tribune

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New plan broadens Regents' Scholarship Program for 'B' students in college-prep classes

Scholarship legislation would give good students up to \$9,000 for tuition

By Brian Maffly
The Salt Lake Tribune

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A proposed scholarship program for college-bound high school graduates has been dramatically broadened under a bill with apparent widespread legislative support.

The Regents' Scholarship Program still would reserve \$1,000 for every Utah high school graduate who maintains a "B" average while completing a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum. But SB180, sponsored by Logan Republican Lyle Hillyard along with 20 other senators, now would include incentives potentially worth \$9,000.

"It will be one of the most important pieces of legislation to encourage excellence in education, to encourage students to use their high school time wisely and take advantage of what's offered," said Dave Buhler, acting commissioner of higher education. "Even if they don't go to college, they'll at least be better prepared for life."

Educators laud the proposal as a way to reverse Utah's slide in college preparation, enrollment and success.

"This rewards kids who want to take on a rigorous course of study with a specific dollar reward. It begins the conversation at eighth grade," said Al Church, principal of the Academy for Math, Engineering & Science, a Murray charter school.

The \$1,000 scholarship would be good at any of Utah's public colleges and available starting this spring. About 7,000 high school graduates would academically qualify every year, but the exclusion of those who attend college out of state or Brigham Young University will reduce the number who actually receive the scholarship.

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The program, advanced this week by a Senate committee, gives an additional \$1,000 to first-generation college students and matches students' contributions to the Utah Educational Savings Plan up to \$400.

The most generous incentive is reserved to those who maintain a 3.5 grade point average and score 26 or better on the ACT test. These students can expect a merit scholarship equal to 75 percent of tuition for two years of college. At current prices, this would equal a \$7,500 gift for a University of Utah student.

The program seeks a \$50 million up-front appropriation and will distribute approximately \$7.5 million a year.

"We would put that [up-front] money in a segregated account and that would provide some funding stability if we hit an economic downturn," Buhler said. "It's insurance to make sure we have money for the program in the future."

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SB180 notably excludes undocumented immigrants, who have enjoyed in-state tuition under a controversial 2002 law facing repeal this session.

That exclusion disappoints Church, who said it sends a contradictory message that education for undocumented immigrants is not valued.

"It becomes a tough moral dilemma," Church said. "These are the most inspirational, hard-working students on my campus. They see the vision of America's promise. Their aspirations are true-blue American."

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SB180 Regents' Scholarship Program

What would it do?

Provide a financial incentive to Utah high school students to prepare and save for college.

How would students qualify?

Maintain a "B" average while completing a curriculum recommended by the Utah Scholars Initiative: four years of English, four years of math, three years of lab-based science, 3 1/2 years of social studies, and two years of the same foreign language.

Who would be eligible?

Students who are U.S. citizens or otherwise eligible for federal aid and attend a public institution of higher education in Utah within a year of graduation.

What would students receive?

The scholarship would give \$1,000 to all qualifying students, plus provide bonuses to those who are first-generation college students, meet higher academic standards and contribute to a college savings plan.

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