

August 11, 2011 Thursday

Quinn moves to abolish legislative scholarships

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD - Gov. Pat Quinn rewrote legislation Wednesday to abolish the state's century-old General Assembly scholarship program that has been beset by cronyism and scandal for decades.

The governor's move would require approval by state legislators this fall. They have previously voted down efforts to get rid of the program, which gives them the ability to hand out free college rides to anyone they choose.

"As I have repeatedly advocated in the past, college scholarships - paid for by Illinois taxpayers - should only go to those that have true financial need for them. I cannot in good conscience sign any legislation that continues to allow legislators to bestow this benefit on a select few," Quinn wrote in an amendatory veto message to lawmakers.

The bill Quinn changed, which passed the General Assembly by veto-proof margins, would have barred lawmakers from doling out **legislative** **scholarships** to relatives and given individual legislators a choice of turning over the selection process to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission.

On Tuesday, the bill's chief Senate sponsor, Sen. Kirk Dillard (D-Hinsdale), urged Quinn to do exactly what he did.

After the governor's move, the bill's chief House sponsor followed suit.

"There's a whole lot of constituent support for the notion that if the state doesn't have money and we're underfunding universities, then why are we requiring universities to pick up the tab on these things," said Rep. Robert Pritchard (R-Hinckley).

In order for Quinn's change to take effect, both chambers of the Legislature would have to approve of his amendatory veto by a simple majority.

That could prove to be a tall order given that there have not historically been enough votes to abolish the program.

For example, in 2003, the effort fell five votes shy of passing the House, and similar efforts have failed in the Senate.

"I have long championed ending the legislative scholarship program. . . . Perhaps with the governor's intervention, the legislature will finally realize it is time for this program to end," Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno (R-Lemont) said in a prepared statement.

Quinn's move comes after the Chicago Sun-Times first reported Monday that federal investigators are probing legislative scholarships awarded by former state Rep. Robert Molaro (D-Chicago).