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End may be near for legislative scholarships

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD - Illinois' top Senate Democrat dropped his resistance Wednesday to abolishing the state's scandal-tainted legislative scholarship program and advanced a measure that would kill the waivers this fall.

The legislation carried by Senate President John Cullerton (D-Chicago) that moved to the Senate  floor also would set up a panel to scrutinize $364 million in tuition waivers beyond those that legislators themselves hand out - such as waivers that grant half-off of tuition for public university employees or their children.

Until recently, bowing to pressure particularly from within his own caucus, Cullerton had held out hope of reforming and preserving the legislative scholarship program that allows lawmakers to dole out free tuition to whomever they want.

"There's a lot of good reasons to keep it, but obviously it's become a distraction here with a small number of people abusing it," Cullerton said.

The Chicago Sun-Times, with help from the Better Government Association, uncovered a series of cases in which lawmakers repeatedly have violated state law with no consequences by awarding waivers to students living outside their legislative districts. The awards also have gone to the children of campaign donors, political allies and even a reputed mobster.

In early March, the Sun-Times reported on state Sen. Annazette Collins (D-Chicago) awarding tuition waivers to five students who listed Collins' former home as their in-district residence, even though three of them listed addresses far outside her West Side district as their homes on their driver's licenses.

She later lost her Senate race after Democratic rival Patricia Van Pelt-Watkins made that report a cornerstone of her bid to unseat Collins.

The State Board of Education asked the FBI to investigate two other cases highlighted in the Sun-Times in which state Sen. Martin Sandoval (D-Cicero) and state Rep. Dan Burke (D-Chicago) gave legislative scholarships to students who also appeared to live outside legislators' districts.

The Sun-Times disclosed last August that Sandoval awarded scholarships to five students with different last names who listed their home address as a residence belonging to a 14th Ward precinct captain and paid Sandoval campaign worker. Motor vehicle and voter registration records cast doubts on whether the students actually lived at that address.

Sandoval blamed the State Board of Education for not discovering a peculiarity for which he had no explanation. He also took the unusual step of moving to revoke a waiver he gave to the son of three-time felon and reputed mobster Michael C. "Jaws" Giorango, an award Sandoval described as an "error" on his staff's part.

In Burke's case, he waived four years of college tuition at Southern Illinois University for the daughter of his one-time Springfield legislative secretary. The daughter listed her residence as a home in Burke's district that belonged to the elderly parents of his Chicago legislative secretary.

Also last August, the Sun-Times first disclosed that federal investigators were probing legislative scholarships awarded by former state Rep. Robert Molaro (D-Chicago) to four children of a campaign donor. The feds issued two rounds of subpoenas to the State Board of Education last year seeking records about Molaro's waivers.

And in January, the Sun-Times and BGA reported on a $37,000 tuition waiver state Rep. Robert Rita (D-Blue Island) awarded to the daughter of Ald. Anthony Beale (9th), a political ally who endorsed Rita for the statehouse and whose wife is employed by Rita as a $400-a-month staffer.

Cullerton's bill, which would eliminate the scholarships this September, was embraced by Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno (R-Lemont), who has been a leading advocate for abolishing legislative scholarships.

"It was clear to everyone this needed to happen. I don't care who gets credit for it. It s the right thing to do," she said. "It's very difficult to argue that these things were being handed out in a fair way and that legislators were equipped to do that well."

Gov. Pat Quinn, who has also spoken out against the scholarships, through a spokeswoman praised Cullerton's move as "the right thing for taxpayers who deserve better than the status quo."

Cullerton's legislation moved out of a subcommittee on a 2-0 vote, with state Sen. Kimberly Lightford (D-Maywood) voting present. Lightford voiced regret about the "dismantling" of the legislative scholarship program, which she said most legislators use responsibly to help needy students get a college education.

The bill later passed the Senate Executive Committee by a 12-1 vote, with one present vote, setting the stage for a possible floor vote on the measure Thursday.

"I think it's a travesty for education in the state of Illinois," said Lightford, who again voted present in the Senate Executive Committee.

Sen. Donne Trotter (D-Chicago) was the lone opponent in committee.

The legislative waivers helped "probably thousands of Illinoisans enhance their own quality of life. I just think this is a bad idea," she said.

House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) supports the changes Cullerton made to the scholarship bill that passed the House, spokesman Steve Brown confirmed.