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Senate votes to end clout scholarships

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD - The Illinois Senate voted Thursday to end the abuse-ridden legislative scholarship program, which for more than a century has enabled lawmakers to dole out free college tuition to the children of campaign donors and other political insiders.

The Senate's 43-5 vote, with an additional five members voting present, sends the measure back to the House, which OKd a similar bill in March.

"You wouldn't think we'd take relish in eliminating 1,400 opportunities for kids to go to college . . . But there were abuses," said Senate President John Cullerton (D-Chicago).

He changed the House bill by adding language to set up a panel to scrutinize $414 million in tuition waivers beyond those that legislators hand out - such as half-off tuition waivers public university employees can claim for themselves or their children.

Five senators voted against Cullerton's bill, including Sen. Mattie Hunter (D-Chicago), Sen. Emil Jones III (D-Chicago), Sen. Iris Martinez (D-Chicago), Sen. Michael Noland (D-Elgin) and Sen. Donne Trotter (D-Chicago). Voting "present" votes were Sen. Jacqueline Collins (D-Chicago), Sen. William Delgado (D-Chicago), Sen. Toi Hutchinson (D-Olympia Fields), Sen. Kimberly Lightford (D-Maywood) and Sen. Kwame Raoul (D-Chicago).

The Chicago Sun-Times, with help from the Better Government Association, uncovered cases in which lawmakers repeatedly 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.