

Kansas Immigrants Await Senate Vote

A bill that would repeal a law passed by the Kansas legislature in 2004 granting in-state tuition rates for undocumented immigrant students cleared the Kansas House of Representatives in late February. The House voted 69-49 to approve the bill, which is now pending action in the state Senate.

The current law grants in-state tuition to illegal immigrants who have graduated from a Kansas high school or received a GED, lived in Kansas at least three years, and pledged to become citizens. Last fall, 413 Kansas university and college students — including more than 60 at Seward County Community College/ Area Technical School — received this benefit.

Unsuccessful attempts to repeal the law have been launched previously, but with different representatives sitting in this session of the state legislature, the effort to repeal the bill has gained more attention.

Seward President Dr. Duane Dunn suggests why. “The repeal was unsuccessful, probably because of the people that were in the legislature at the time,” Dunn said. “I think this year there’s more emotional passion about illegal immigration.”

Supporters of the law argue that the current law costs the state about \$1 million a year. Some also believe that these students are eligible for state and federal assistance for tuition. Dunn emphasized that is not true because the students do not qualify for those benefits.

“They don’t get state or federal assistance, and I don’t think some people understand that. I think they believe these students get Pell grants, federal loans or whatever, but they are not eligible for that,” Dunn said.

Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback said he has no current position on the in-state tuition issue, but believes that immigration issues should be handled at the federal level, not by states.

“The legislature is wrestling with the issue of whether or not to grant in-state tuition rates to somebody that is here illegally although they went to school here in a legal fashion, and I’m watching the process to see what the legislature resolves to do with it,” Brownback said. “I do believe that immigration should be handled at a federal level, not at a state level.”

Supporters of the in-state tuition bill say the current law gives an advantage to the students of undocumented immigrants over students in Kansas legally, but opponents suggest that the bill would penalize students who had no choice in following their parents to the United States. They also argue that it would discourage students from continuing their college education after the state invested in their public elementary and high school educations.

If the bill passes in the Senate, it would remove in-state tuition rates for students who are not here legally. Students who would not qualify for in-state tuition could still attend regents colleges in Kansas but pay the international tuition rates.