

More Scholarship Shenanigans?

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The controversial “legislative scholarship” program carries a seemingly simple rule for Illinois lawmakers: they may only award tuition waivers to college students who reside in their respective districts.

But the Better Government Association found a veteran state legislator has earned the equivalent of an “F” for apparently disregarding the program’s only real requirement on numerous occasions.

Since 1999, state Rep. Monique Davis (D-Chicago) has awarded taxpayer-funded

scholarships to at least 10 students who lived outside of her Far South Side district at the time they received free tuition to state-sponsored colleges and universities, the BGA discovered. During her career in the General Assembly, she's awarded more than 150 scholarships.

State law—specifically Section 30-9 of the Illinois School Code—says that: “Each member of the General Assembly may nominate annually 2 persons of school age and otherwise eligible, from his district...”

“The statute is pretty clear...students nominated must be from the [lawmaker's] district,” said Matt Vanover, spokesman for the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), which administers the scholarships.

Davis, who has served in the Legislature for 25 years, didn't return calls on this subject or a related BGA finding that her political supporters were among those to benefit from free tuition.

Such revelations are likely to fuel the ongoing debate about whether to eliminate the decades-old perk, which often seems to be based on politics rather than merit or need. Right now, there is a growing movement within the General Assembly to kill the legislative scholarship program but it's unclear whether such a bill will pass and be sent to Gov. Pat Quinn to sign into law.

The BGA investigation found that Rep. Davis awarded scholarships to:

- Two individuals who lived nearly three miles outside of her 27th House district;
- Relatives of campaign donors and political workers;
- One student who listed a Davis-owned apartment building as his permanent residence.

Meanwhile, the man who said he served as “scholarship chairman” for Davis and recommended potential recipients to the lawmaker insisted the scholarships were awarded to deserving individuals who were believed to be residents of the 27th district.

“It could have been an oversight,” said the advisor, Dozier Thomas. “We don't play games . . . no hanky-panky stuff.”

Still, there are unanswered questions about why Davis awarded freebie scholarships to two students who lived in the 7100 block of South Dobson – almost three miles outside of Davis’ district.

The students – Cornel McKay Jr. and James McKay – collectively received three years of free tuition at Illinois State University in 2005 and 2006, according to records obtained from ISBE under the Illinois Freedom of Information Act. The total cost to taxpayers: nearly \$40,000, records show.

Neither McKay could be reached for comment, but a man who answered the phone at the Dobson Avenue home and identified himself as Cornel McKay Sr. said: “You’re talking about very personal matters and a politician that I know personally, and I’m not sure if I care to answer any questions.”

There were at least eight other free-tuition recipients who appeared to be living outside of Davis’ district, based on public records reviewed and interviews conducted by the BGA.

But the BGA found that even among the scholarship recipients who lived in Davis’ 27th House district, some had political ties to the lawmaker.

For instance, William and Katherine Harris gave a total of \$800 to Davis’ campaign fund between 2001 and 2006, according to the Illinois State Board of Elections. They insisted the contributions had nothing to do with the free tuition worth at least \$13,800 Davis awarded their two children between 2001 and 2003 to attend Eastern Illinois University.

“There are no improprieties here,” Katherine Harris told the BGA, adding that the family has donated to other politicians as well, including former gubernatorial candidate Paul Vallas and Ald. Howard Brookins (21st).

Thomas – Davis’ scholarship advisor – has worked on Davis’ campaigns, notarizing and circulating her nominating petitions, and donating a total of \$600 to her campaign fund between 2002 and 2007, state records show.

Thomas’ son, Rodney, received a two-year tuition waiver from Davis in 1999 to attend Northern Illinois University. ISBE records don’t say how much that cost taxpayers, but NIU records indicate in-state tuition and fees at that time was around \$4,200 a year.

Thomas said he was not involved in scholarship decision-making back then, and noted Davis' scholarship recipients – including his child – typically earned good grades, attended church and performed community service. He would not answer more detailed questions about how scholarship recipients were chosen, deferring to Davis. She did not respond to detailed voice and fax messages.

Meanwhile, Davis awarded Sean Hunter two one-year scholarships in 2006 and 2007 to attend law school at the University of Illinois – waivers worth at least \$28,000, ISBE records indicate. Hunter listed his home as a multi-unit building at 99th and Wood that Cook County records show is owned by Davis.

Hunter could not be reached for comment.

Previous media reports about rampant scholarship irregularities helped fuel a federal probe, legislative proposals for reform, pledges from more than 90 state lawmakers to opt-out of the program and even a recommendation from ISBE to end the scholarships.

Moreover, BGA investigations have uncovered irregularities with the program, prompting the non-partisan watchdog's policy arm, and dozens of state lawmakers, to advocate killing the tuition waivers – whose annual price tag of \$13.5 million is subsidized by taxpayers. One BGA-Sun-Times investigation found that state Rep. Dan Burke (D-Chicago) had awarded a legislative scholarship to the daughter of a former aide – and she appeared to live Downstate, hundreds of miles outside of Burke's Southwest Side district.

But through it all, Davis has supported legislative scholarships promoting them as a pathway to college for many individuals who would otherwise lack the means to get there.

"There are some people in the State of Illinois who literally want and desire a college degree, but for some reason their parents don't earn enough money or they can't get into the university based upon their limited income," Davis said from the House floor in March 2010 while the chamber considered legislation to eliminate the scholarships. She reiterated those sentiments during a committee meeting just this past week, when a bill that would eliminate the legislative perk advanced from the panel, without her support.

The State Board of Education requires lawmakers and the scholarship nominees

to submit notarized documents verifying that the nominee's permanent home address is within the lawmaker's district. And since 2010, ISBE has manually checked the addresses to ensure that they are within the boundaries of the legislators' districts, Vanover said.

If the "district locator" tool on the Illinois State Board of Election's website shows that a nominee's address is outside the boundary of the awarding legislator's district, Vanover said ISBE notifies the legislator about the discrepancy. In most cases, the lawmakers simply withdraw their nominations, Vanover said. However, in a handful of instances, lawmakers have challenged the discrepancy and ultimately provided letters from state elections officials verifying that the nominees did indeed live in their legislative districts.

In analyzing Davis' scholarships, the BGA used the election board's electronic tool, as well as hard copies of current and past legislative maps.

The 10 scholarship recipients from outside Davis' district were given tuition waivers between 1999 and 2009.

Davis has awarded 16 scholarships since ISBE began checking the addresses, and Vanover said none of those nominees have been from outside her district.

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