Access Missouri proposal advances

By Terry Ganey

JEFFERSON CITY – The Senate Education Committee voted 6-3 Wednesday afternoon to give a “do pass” recommendation to a plan equalizing payments to college students under the Access Missouri scholarship program.

The program currently provides a maximum award of $1,000 for students attending two-year community colleges, $2,150 for students attending four-year public colleges and $4,600 for students at four-year private colleges.

The bill sponsored by Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, would provide $1,500 to students attending two-year community colleges and $2,850 to students attending four-year institutions, public and private. It would go into effect for the 2014 school year.

Schaefer said given the state’s tight financial situation with core cuts and tuition caps affecting public colleges, it wasn’t fair for individual private college students to get more than twice as much scholarship money.

Public and private university officials are meeting to resolve differences over the issue. Committee Chairman David Pearce, R-Warrensburg, said that although they might be able to reach a compromise, advancing the bill will keep the discussion going.

About $95 million has been appropriated for Access Missouri this year. The current program is scheduled to expire in 2013.
Senate committee considers bill to give children of illegal immigrants in-state college tuition

By Theo Keith
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JEFFERSON CITY — No one voiced opposition to a bill providing children of illegal immigrants in-state tuition in a Senate committee hearing Wednesday, something the bill’s sponsor said was a surprise.

Still, Sen. Jolie Justus, D-Jackson County, said she wasn’t confident the legislation would move any closer to becoming law in the coming year.

The bill would provide Missouri students in the country without legal documentation in-state tuition rates at Missouri's colleges and universities.

It requires that they graduate from high school, live with a parent or guardian while attending high school and go to a Missouri high school for at least two years. They also must file an affidavit with their college or university promising they will apply for permanent U.S. residency when the opportunity becomes available.

Missouri is losing talented young students because they don’t have options after graduation, Justus told the Senate Education Committee.

"High school counselors have told me they’re having a really hard time engaging some of the students – preventing dropouts, preventing gang activity, keeping kids engaged – when they know that as soon as they graduate, they don’t have documentation to work, and they don’t have the financial ability to be able to go to college," Justus said.

Education groups and the Catholic Charities of St. Louis gave supportive testimony during the 10-minute hearing.

"Some of these children have been in Missouri since they were little kids," said Otto Fajen, spokesman for the Missouri National Education Association. Fajen said the bill would provide
"those people who identify themselves with this country, with this state, the opportunity to continue to develop their services and develop to the best of their ability."

The committee’s chairman, Sen. David Pearce, R-Warrensburg, said the hearing was an opportunity for Justus to present her bill. It’s now up to her to drum up support, he said. Pearce wouldn’t say when or if he would schedule a committee vote.

"If we don’t get a vote this year, that’s OK, we’ll file it again next year and hope we can advance a step further," said Justus, who has sponsored the legislation for two consecutive years. "We’re in this for the long haul."

Other states, including neighboring Kansas, Illinois and Nebraska, have passed similar bills, Justus said.

The committee later voted, 6-3, to pass a bill making the maximum Access Missouri scholarship money available to private and public institution students equal.

Scholarship recipients, regardless of whether they attend public or private institutions, would get a maximum of $2,850 annually under the bill. That’s a $700 jump for students attending public colleges and universities and an $1,800 decrease for private school students. Students attending two-year institutions could receive a maximum of $1,250 per year.

The Access Missouri program provides need-based funding to college students.

"People argue that private schools are more expensive," said Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, who sponsored the bill. "But we don’t ever reward people for choosing the more expensive option."

If the legislature passes the bill and the governor signs it, the new funding amounts would go into effect for the 2014-15 school year.

Former Education Committee Chairman Sen. Rob Mayer, R-Dexter, was among the three lawmakers voting against the bill Wednesday.

A year ago, when Mayer was chairman, the bill didn’t come up for a vote in the committee, Schaefer said.
More High-Schoolers Reinvent or Skip Their Senior Year

NO MU Mention

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

When Utah state Sen. Chris Buttars unveiled a cost-cutting measure this month that would have made the high school senior year optional, perhaps no one in the state Capitol Building was more surprised than 18-year-old Jake Trimble, who already opted out of the second half of senior year just weeks earlier.

He has spent the past month working at the Capitol as an unpaid intern for the state Democratic Party's communications team, designing posters and writing scripts for legislators' robocalls. Trimble graduated in January, one semester early, from the nearby Academy of Math Engineering and Science (AMES).

"I'm very happy to not be in high school anymore," says Trimble, who proudly reports that he's "not rotting in my parents' basement." Actually, when the legislative session ends next month, he'll move on to another internship (this one paid) as a lab assistant at the University of Utah's Orthopedic Center.

Trimble is part of a small but growing group of students — most of them academically advanced and, as a result, a tad restless — who are tinkering with their senior year. A few observers say the quiet experiment has the potential to reinvent high school altogether.

Already, 21 states allow early graduation, according to the Education Commission of the States. And among the other 29, it's not entirely clear whether state law actually prohibits it. Thirty-five states allow students to finish high school based on mastering proficiency standards in state tests rather than satisfying course credit requirements or years spent in school.

By the fall of 2011, a small group of high schools in eight states will take part in a new initiative, announced last week, that will allow high school sophomores who pass a series of "board exams" to graduate two years early and move directly to a two- or four-year college.

Since 2002, another effort, underwritten by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has created more than 200 "early college high schools," which enroll 50,000 students for a similar purpose.
As with Trimble's school, many high schools now allow students to enroll in college concurrently, often with a chance to earn a high school diploma and associate's degree in five years.

Joel Vargas, a program director at Jobs for the Future, a Boston non-profit that works with struggling and out-of-school young people, says that helps many kids, "hard-wiring college expectations" into the high school experience and giving them an early taste of rigor.

"The power of the model is this explicit crossing and overlay of college into high school," he says.

At AMES in Salt Lake City, about three-fourths of the school's 90 seniors take two or more University of Utah classes. While he doesn't see eye-to-eye with Buttars on making 12th grade optional, Principal Al Church says the debate over Buttars' bill — since withdrawn — "has ignited a renewed and necessary controversy: How can we make 12th grade really meaningful?"

He adds, "The research on adolescents is pretty clear — these kids are ready for adult responsibilities ... so let's put them in environments in which they can be active learners, experiential learners, project-based learners."

Buttars, a longtime Republican lawmaker from West Jordan, south of Salt Lake City, initially proposed eliminating senior year altogether, then later modified the proposal to make senior year optional. Still, he notes that legislative analysts calculate that it costs $120 million to fund 12th grade in Utah's 41 school districts — money that could be better spent helping kids who really need help.

"Too often, teachers move at the pace of the slowest student," he says. "Well, this allows a student to race forward if he wants to, where the teacher can maybe give more time to the one that's struggling."

If half of Utah's seniors planned ahead, doubled up on coursework and graduated early, he says, the state could trim $60 million from its $700 million deficit. The smaller student population would also reduce transportation costs and ease local pressure to build new schools.

"We'd solve a lot of budget woes in our schools if we accepted this principle," he says.

Most educators frown on excising senior year as a cost-cutting measure, but several actually say that, as it's currently experienced by most teens in the USA, senior year is an expensive boondoggle.

"For many youngsters, it's a waste of time," says Daniel Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators. "And it's certainly a waste of money for hard-pressed school systems, who could better use those dollars to spend on the youngsters that need the additional time."
Domenech says schools need to "break the mold of the traditional K-12, year-by-year educational cycle," which doesn't take into account the needs of each student.

Rather than expecting that all kids proceed through a year of kindergarten and 12 years of elementary and secondary school, he says, why not give struggling students an extra year or two to master academics while letting talented, motivated kids finish in 10 or 11 years?

A former New York City teacher, Domenech recalls that as far back as the 1970s, his boss, New York state Education Commissioner Gordon Ambach, envisioned a public school system that began and ended one year early. Ambach wanted kids to start with preschool at age 4 and end high school by age 17.

"Even then, it was recognized that, for many kids, the senior year is just basically standing in place and marking time, waiting for the year to be over so you can graduate — while for others, it's not enough."

Church, the Salt Lake City principal, would agree. He says educators "are not doing the kind of job we need to do" turning out graduates who can think and apply what they know. Letting kids like Trimble graduate early and take on more responsibilities is just what's necessary, he says. "We have to hold out hope that teenagers, young adults, once given opportunities to be independent, to show their intellect, to show their analytic skills, to show their experiential knowledge, will be able to apply it in a realistic setting," he says.

For his part, Trimble, who's still waiting on acceptance letters from a handful of colleges, says he has no idea what he wants to study. But he says, "Now that I have all this free time on my hands, I've just been exploring and seeing what I like — and so far, so good. I don't think I want to be a legislator, but it's very fascinating the way that everything works up here."

He adds, "Academically I'm still being challenged ... so it's not like I've ended my education. I've just sort of moved on."