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Legislators kill scandal-tainted scholarship perk

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Staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD-Illinois lawmakers have killed a scandal-ridden legislative scholarship program after years of debate and reports of abuses.

The House voted 79-32 Monday to do away with the tuition-waiver program this fall.

The legislation - already passed by the Senate - goes to Gov. Pat Quinn, who said Monday he looks forward to signing it, adding that "there is no place for a political scholarship program in Illinois."

For a century, Illinois lawmakers have been handing out college scholarships. They can give two four-year tuition waivers every year or divide them so they can give them to as many as eight students per legislator each year.

The program has been under fire for years but survived until a series of reports by the Chicago Sun-Times and the Better Government Association since last summer, as well as other news reports, laid bare that some legislators were giving scholarships to the children of campaign contributors, political allies and even a reputed mobster, as well as ignoring a requirement that recipients must live in the legislator's district.

Rep. Fred Crespo (D-Hoffman Estates), the chief House sponsor of the bill, who credited the reporting with pushing legislators to finally act, faced criticism Monday from black Democratic colleagues who argued that the program has helped cash-strapped students who otherwise couldn't afford to go to college.

Rep. Ken Dunkin (D-Chicago), who voted to keep the program, accused Crespo of putting "a nice press pop for you in some newspaper" ahead of needy students, touching off a heated exchange.

In March, in the latest of a series of reports, the Sun-Times revealed that state Sen. Annazette Collins (D-Chicago) awarded tuition waivers to five students who listed Collins' former home as their in-district residence, though three of them had listed addresses outside her West Side district as their homes on their driver's licenses or voter registration. Her Democratic primary rival, Patricia Van Pelt-Watkins, made that a cornerstone of her successful bid to unseat Collins.

Federal investigators are investigating the program.