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Quinn signs bill ending scandal-ridden scholarship program;

Bill ends legislative tuition waivers

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Staff reporters

Gov. Pat Quinn signed a bill Wednesday ending 100 years of legislators being able to hand out scholarships to deserving or undeserving college students.

"Instead of scholarships going to those who truly deserve them and were qualified ... too often the program was abused in a political way," Quinn said.

"It wasn't what you know, it was who you knew."

The Chicago Sun-Times and other media have uncovered instances over the years of legislators passing out the scholarships to relatives or children of campaign donors, students who live outside legislators' districts and children of employees of legislators.

The latest twist came Tuesday, when the Sun-Times reported that the U.S. attorney's office has subpoenaed records from state Sen. Anazette Collins' office involving five students Collins gave scholarships to who listed their addresses as her address.

"If there have been any rules that have been broken, they have to pay the consequences," Quinn said about Collins, a Chicago Democrat.

Asked if he has had second thoughts about asking Collins to sponsor his ethics legislation, Quinn said, "I need to get a majority of legislators to put that on the ballot at the state level, and she was willing to sponsor the legislation. She came forward."

Quinn has fought for years to end the troubled scholarship program. Legislators including state Sen. Jeff Schoenberg (D-Evanston) and state Sen. Kirk Dillard (R-Hinsdale) likewise have tried for years to end the perk their fellow legislators were loath to give up.

But it diverted $13.5 million in money that could otherwise go to scholarships for worthier students - children of "hard-working people who don't have a political connection," Quinn said.

State Rep. Fred Crespo (D-Hoffman Estates) pointed out, "It is not a scholarship. It's a tuition waiver. A scholarship means there is money or funding behind it. There was never any funding for this."

The $13.5 million a year had to come from more deserving students, he said.

Legislators will get one last shot at doling out the money this year, though many of the legislators have voluntarily stopped handing out the tuition waivers.

Dillard passed a bill in the past session banning legislators from giving the waivers to relatives. Dillard called Quinn and suggested he use his amendatory veto to end the entire program. Quinn did that, but House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) refused to call the amended version of the bill for a vote, Dillard said.

This time - following more unflattering stories in the press about abuses of the program and after all Republican senators stopped handing out the waivers - pressure mounted, and a majority of votes to end the program was assembled with support from all the legislative leaders.