

One immigration bill advances, another stalls

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A bill that would grant in-state tuition to the children of undocumented immigrants has picked up speed in the state legislature, but a related measure that would offer the same benefit to undocumented students who attend high school in Tennessee still appears to face steep obstacles.

The House and Senate finance committees are scheduled to vote Tuesday on House Bill 1929/Senate Bill 2115, legislation that would let U.S.-born children whose parents entered the country illegally get in-state tuition to the University of Tennessee and other public universities. Under current state law, the children of undocumented immigrants must pay out-of-state tuition because their parents lack legal residency.

Approval by the finance committees would clear the legislation for votes by the full House and Senate.

But the future remains uncertain for House Bill 1992/Senate Bill 1951, which would give in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants who grow up in Tennessee and attend high school. The legislation picked up House Majority Leader Gerald McCormick as a sponsor last week, but the leader of the state Senate, Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey, says he is not ready to embrace the proposal.

"I have a problem with that," said Ramsey, R-Blountville. "I have the compassionate side, but you can have compassion on any issue you want. But the law is the law."

Both measures were filed by state Sen. Todd Gardenhire, a first-term Republican from Chattanooga. That either bill would gain traction represents a major shift for GOP lawmakers, who as recently as two years ago were passing bills meant to encourage undocumented immigrants to leave Tennessee.

Supporters say granting in-state tuition to high school students who are undocumented or whose parents are undocumented is fair because the beneficiaries would be children who have no control over their parents' decision to come to Tennessee. They also argue that the state would benefit if they continued their education.

HB 1992/SB 1951 could be taken up again on Tuesday afternoon in the House Education Subcommittee and on Wednesday in the Senate Education Committee.

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