

Syracuse teen's college dreams hinge on immigration debate

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Syracuse, N.Y. -- Nico Saralegui, a standout soccer player taking advanced placement classes at Henninger High School, checks the mailbox every day.

The high school senior isn't looking to see if he's been accepted to college. He's checking his mailbox to see if he's been granted a deportation deferral. Saralegui applied under President Obama's executive order that gives certain undocumented immigrants two-year deportation deferrals and the ability to work. Without that, he can't get tuition assistance or scholarships to college.

Saralegui is not a U.S. citizen. He has lived in the country illegally since he was five years old.

Two different laws winding their way through the New York State Legislature would give Saralegui a shot at getting some help to pay for college.

The first, a [proposal](#) in the state Assembly, would expand the state's tuition assistance program to an estimated 6,200 students who are in the country illegally. Called the [NY Dream Act](#), it would also extend tax-free college savings accounts to undocumented immigrants and set up a private scholarship fund for them.

That legislation was approved Feb. 12 by the state Assembly's Higher Education Committee. [Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver](#) has been pushing the legislation. Both Republicans and Democrats supported it. Except for [Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton](#), D-Ithaca, no Central New York legislators have signed on as sponsors of the bill.

The Assembly plan doesn't say where the state would obtain the millions of dollars needed to provide financial aid to undocumented immigrants.

A similar proposal died in the state [Senate](#) last year without ever getting to a vote. But some Republican senators are onboard with the part of the plan that creates a private scholarship fund.

Undocumented immigrants have been able to attend SUNY and CUNY schools and receive in-state tuition since 2002. But they cannot get access to state or federal tuition assistance money. If the legislation passed, New York would join California, New Mexico and Texas in extending tuition assistance to undocumented students.

Senate GOP Leader [Dean Skelos](#) opposes expanding taxpayer-funded tuition assistance to undocumented residents, but he supports the privately funded scholarship, said his spokesman, Scott Reif.

Many New Yorkers don't like the idea of people who are in the country illegally getting financial aid paid for with taxpayer money. There's barely enough to pay for the people who are here legally, said [Sen. John DeFrancisco, R-Syracuse](#).

"It would be wonderful to provide all to all people, but if the funding is not there, we certainly have to provide to citizens before we can provide to illegal immigrants," DeFrancisco said.

He also said he wouldn't support the idea of a state commission for a private scholarship fund. "If there's a group of private individuals who wants to create this, create a foundation and start doing it," DeFrancisco said. "Why do you need a special commission?"

The state Senate Dream Act bill has been introduced by the Independent Democratic Conference. Conference leader [Jeff Klein](#) is the co-leader of the Senate with Skelos.

Instead of providing taxpayer-funded tuition assistance right away, the Senate plan relies on that private scholarship fund until 2015. At that point, the state tuition assistance program would be expanded to students in the country illegally.

That expansion of state aid in the Senate plan relies on proposed \$4 million licensing fees for each of the new casinos the governor has proposed, said Eric Soufer, a spokesman for Klein.

Soufer said the state would generate \$28 million from those fees. It would be more than enough to cover the cost of expanding the state's tuition assistance program, he said.

The Senate plan estimates that the total cost of expanding the program would be \$19.5 million a year. That's less than 2 percent of the \$1 billion the state spends on financial aid every year.

But there are a lot of "ifs" in the Senate plan. The new casinos have been proposed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo but still have to be approved by both the state Legislature and voters.

[Sen. Dave Valesky](#), a member of the Democratic group that proposed the plan, said now is not the time to expand tuition assistance.

"Unfortunately, we are experiencing continued economic distress and, as such, we should first consider the Dream Fund, which provides this chance using private funds," Valesky said.

Exactly where those private funds would come from is unclear. And Cuomo so far has been silent on the private fund and the expansion of tuition assistance.

Saralegui isn't planning to wait for state laws to change. He's hoping his application for a deportation deferral will be approved in the next few months. That paperwork would allow him to apply for financial aid and allow him to work legally while he's in the school.

Saralegui is in a line of 23,000 people in New York who have applied under the president's executive order that allows undocumented youth who arrived here before age 16 to apply a deferral that would let them go to school and work legally.

Nationwide, about 400,000 people have applied. So far, 154,000 people have been approved, according to numbers from [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#).

Saralegui, his parents and his two younger brothers came to this country from Uruguay on a 90-day visa in April 2001 and simply never went home. People like them – who have overstayed visas but have committed no crimes – are not a priority for [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#).

Saralegui's grandparents are now U.S. citizens and are in the process of sponsoring his parents' citizenship, but they aren't certain how long that will take. His little sister was born in this country and is a U.S. citizen.

Saralegui's mother, Alejandra, cleans houses. His father, Martin, is a line cook. They've lived in Syracuse for most of his life in the U.S., except for a year in Florida. Saralegui said they have been paying taxes on their earnings even though they are not citizens. Undocumented workers paid \$104 million in New York state income tax in 2010.

Saralegui, 18, chose the only option that seemed to be available to him without financial aid: [Herkimer Community College](#).

Because most colleges all use the same online application, which requires a Social Security number, Saralegui thought he couldn't apply to any four-year schools. The computer kept rejecting his application.

SUNY and CUNY schools and [Syracuse University](#) allow undocumented students to apply. But Saralegui has missed all the deadlines now. And he's not sure how he would pay for any of it without financial aid.

Saralegui is not eligible for the [Say Yes to Education](#) program because he isn't a U.S. citizen. Say Yes completely covers tuition at SU and some other schools for Syracuse high school graduates that meet the program criteria.

Saralegui, a solid B-plus student, is not certain he'll be able to afford Herkimer, either, without financial aid. The tuition there is \$3,640. That doesn't include books, transportation or living expenses, if Saralegui decides to live near the school.

"This is not going to stop me from doing what I want to do in life," said Saralegui, who wants to be a physical therapist. "I know my parents came to this country for me and my siblings so I want to make them proud of me."

http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2013/02/syracuse_teens_college_dreams.html