

Washington state expected to enact college aid for undocumented immigrants

By Jonathan Kaminsky

OLYMPIA, Washington Wed Feb 26, 2014 7:03am EST

(Reuters) - Washington is set to become the fifth state to offer college financial aid to students brought into the country illegally by their parents.

Democratic Governor Jay Inslee is expected on Wednesday to sign legislation that provides grants to students whose families meet income and residency guidelines. California, Illinois, Texas and New Mexico have passed similar measures.

"This bill ensures that the young men and women we've invested in at our high schools and who aspire to become productive American citizens will now have fair access to the financial support they need," Inslee said in a statement following the bill's passage last week.

Passage of the measure, dubbed the Dream Act of Washington state, marks a victory for immigrant-rights advocates and a shift within the state Republican party, whose members blocked a similar measure last year.

Just last month, Republicans signaled they would not pass the bill but in a sudden turnabout introduced their own version of the bill in the Republican-dominated state Senate with \$5 million to help fund the initiative.

Lawmakers estimate that 800 to 1,200 students might be eligible for aid under the new law.

However, students in the country illegally still face an uncertain future after graduation.

A bill that would have provided a path to citizenship for the approximately 11 million immigrants living in the United States illegally stalled in the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives.

An influx of Hispanics to Washington state has caused some Republicans to change their stance on helping immigrants who came to the country illegally as children, said David Nice, a political science professor at Washington State University.

"Republicans are influenced by the continued growth of the Hispanic population, particularly in Republican areas of the state," Nice said.

Hispanics made up 11.2 percent of its population in 2010, up from 4.4 percent in 1990, according to U.S. Census figures.

Other analysts attribute the Republican shift to lobbying efforts that featured moving stories of how this financial aid would allow immigrants to go to college and secure a future.

"There aren't many (Washington state) Republicans who have to worry about a competing Latino vote right now," said Luis Fraga, a University of Washington political science professor. "It's more likely that their consciences were tapped by the humanity of the stories that they heard from the students."

The newly eligible immigrants will face a higher standard to qualify for aid than legal residents, said Jim West, a residency specialist at the Washington Student Achievement Council, which administers the financial aid.

While U.S. citizens must live in the state one year before qualifying, undocumented students will need to have attended at least three years of high school in the state and have earned a high school diploma or equivalent in the state.

In all cases, a qualifying student's family income must be below \$57,500, or 70 percent of the state's median family income. Washington state has granted in-state tuition to otherwise qualified undocumented immigrants since 2003.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/26/us-usa-immigration-washingtonstate-idUSBREA1P0SI20140226>