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OUR OPINION: Diversity plan misses the mark

Top 10 rule would get students into college, but ignore ways to lift high school grad rate

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One of the great selling points of Georgia's HOPE Scholarship is its simplicity. Earn a "B" average in high school and go to college free. Now, Democrats are hoping to replicate that winning formula with their Georgia's Promise legislation.

Place in the top 10 percent of your public or private high school graduating class and win admission to the public college or university of your choice, regardless of your SAT scores or whether you directed the marching band or the school play. All that would matter is that you followed a college prep track and landed in the top 10.

"Parents can look into their son's and daughter's faces and tell them in no uncertain terms that if they finish in the top 10 percent, they can go to the University of Georgia or Georgia Tech," says the author of the Georgia's Promise legislation, Sen. Kasim Reed (D-Atlanta). "That is a powerful message for young people."

However, it's a troubling message for the state's universities. Schools now evaluate applicants on multiple criteria, including class ranking, standardized test scores, extracurricular activities and leadership roles. They need the flexibility to admit the kid who wasn't a great student, but a heck of a tuba player.

"We'd hate to just have to use one indicator," says Anderson Smith, Georgia Tech vice provost for undergraduate studies and academic affairs.

A dynamic campus requires more than racial and geographic diversity. A truly diverse campus boasts students who are artists, cellists, chess players and skateboarders. By basing admission only on grade point average, colleges might overlook the girl from Savannah who organized a massive Katrina relief effort or the boy from Albany who biked across the South to raise money for cancer research.

Reed's "talented 10th" proposal does offer an obvious benefit to areas where many kids attend schools segregated by race and income. In many parts of the state, poor kids go to school with other poor kids and black kids go to all-black schools. A 10 percent admission policy would guarantee these poor and minority kids entry into the top schools and assure geographic representation on the campuses beyond the metro suburbs.

Had this policy been in effect last year, 5,000 students --- 10 percent of the 50,000 college prep public school graduates in the state --- would have been able to walk onto the public campus of their choice. The problem is that a lot of them would have chosen UGA, which only accepted 4,281 freshmen this year.

Before the Legislature approves the bill, it ought to figure out how well Georgia schools are doing in racial and geographic diversity and whether rural kids who rank in the top 10 percent are facing obstacles to getting into the public college of their choice. It also has to recognize that the

demand for UGA already exceeds the supply, calling into question why Georgia doesn't have more than two premiere universities.

In drafting his bill, Reed studied the talented 10th policy pioneered in Texas in 1997 to increase the number of Latino and African-American college students. Today, seven out of 10 freshmen at the University of Texas at Austin --- the Lone Star's equivalent of UGA --- are 10 percenters. "It helped Hispanic families believe an education at the University of Texas is possible," says Sara Martinez Tucker, president of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund and herself a UT-Austin alum.

But Tucker says it also spurred a backlash from suburban parents in competitive school districts whose kids score 1500 on the SAT but rank in the top 20 percent of their class. "Many people believe that if one group progresses, it's at the expense of somebody else," says Tucker. "So if more Hispanic and more African-American kids get in, it means less white kids get in."

More white kids would have been rejected by UT-Austin even without the 10 percent law, again because college applicants in Texas, like Georgia, are increasing faster than the state is adding slots at its campuses. Yet, miffed suburban parents blamed the 10 percenters from border towns and rural outposts, saying that while these kids may sparkle in their schools, they'd be dim bulbs in the competitive Dallas and Houston systems. These 10 percenters, in other words, are dumbing down UT-Austin and Texas A&M.

There's nine years of data now from Texas with which to test that claim. Princeton University researcher Marta Tienda, who supports the program, says 10 percenters are doing just fine academically, giving fresh ammo to the folks who say class ranking better predicts college success than the SAT, Reed among them.

"There are kids who are a top 10 percent student, but they are sitting there with a 970 on the SAT and being told they can't go UGA or Tech," says Reed. "You have these hardworking kids in Georgia, and they're being shut out and nobody is dealing with that."

But the true tragedy in Georgia is not the high school senior with the 970 SAT score who can't get into UGA. That child will win admission into one of the 35 campuses in the University System.

The problem is with the students who never take the SAT. Consider that the Terrell County class of 2005 began four years ago with 146 kids and wound up with 59 earning diplomas. Of those, 40 took college prep, so Reed's top 10 percent law would have sent four Terrell students to the college of their choice.

Georgia's first promise to its children ought to be that more of them will finish high school. Because there's little percentage to a program that holds out college to poor and minority students when more than half of them don't get as far as a high school diploma.