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A drive to admit state's students

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State Rep. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, is sponsoring a proposed constitutional amendment that would guarantee that the top 10 percent of all Michigan high school graduates would be granted automatic admission to any of the state's public universities. The approach is similar to admissions guidelines in Texas, California, and Florida.

Q: Why push for this now?

A: A Harvard study has been released that shows that this concept has worked extremely well for a decade, and it's worked well in Texas.

Q: Why do you think this would work in Michigan?

A: I've heard from a number of people across the state that it's difficult for their children to get into universities. In fact, I heard from a teacher this morning at Springport High School, a small farming community. They graduate about 70 students a year. Their academics are just fine, and they've never been able to get a student into the University of Michigan. That's just one teacher. And I've spoken with a number of teachers, and people across the state that feel that taxpayer-funded universities should put Michigan students first.

That's so wonderful about the Texas system. Every student gets the same opportunity, whether they are from a farming community or inner-city Detroit.

Q: Do you think those students are going to be equally prepared to go to these universities?

A: In Texas it showed that the 10-percent students under the 10-percent law got higher grades and had a higher rate of graduation because they were motivated young people. And another very important thing: The study showed that the Texas plan has increased diversity in the Texas universities by race, by economics, and by geographic factors.

If a child from a farming community or a child from an inner-city community does not have the same opportunity as a child from Bloomfield Hills or Grosse Pointe, then shame on us. It is our duty as a state to make sure that every Michigan student is treated the same. And I object to any university saying they are so elite that they need to recruit certain types of students, and that students from farming communities and inner cities are not good enough, because they will be proven wrong.

Q: What would be the impetus for high school students to take more challenging courses that might lower their GPA?

A: The students who take tougher courses are often going to have the opportunity to get into universities, because they will show by their background the quality of the courses.

Q: How would this system work in Michigan, which has a different style of public university system than Texas?

A: Michigan has publicly funded universities, and I think that it would transfer easily. Because of the way the Michigan Constitution is, we would have to do it as a constitutional amendment. But I believe it would work just fine in Michigan.

Q: Would this reduce the funding the schools get from out-of-state students, who pay a much higher tuition rate than in-state?

A: We don't need any elite universities keeping certain types of children out and cherry-picking others because of money. If that's happening anywhere in Michigan, then shame on us, and let's re-evaluate how we're paying university presidents and coaches.

Maybe we should be paying our coaches that we bring in from West Virginia less money. What's important is the education of our children, and not perpetuating a system that's unfair.

What I am hearing from taxpayers across the state is that they're tired about certain universities cherry picking students that are going to pay at a higher rate. I think that some universities would rather recruit from a foreign country or another state so that they can have a higher income.

There should be no university that is so elite that the hard working student from the farming community, or the hard working student from the inner city, doesn't have the same opportunity to go there.

Q: So is this more about equal opportunity among Michigan kids, or is it about opportunity versus out-of-state and foreign students?

A: I'm saying that when the system becomes so elitist that only certain types of students get in, that is a bad thing for our future, because the inner city child growing up in Detroit, the farm child growing up in Olivet, Michigan, should all have the same opportunities.

I hear a lot of reporters say, "They've gotta have those foreign students and they've gotta have those out-of-state students because they need the money."

What I would say is, if we're going to have a university that is so elitist that if they're going to have certain kinds of students that meet their goals, then fine, become a private institution, like Hillsdale. But when you're publicly funded, like the University of Michigan, then Michigan students must come first.

Q: Critics of this plan argue that this would lower the standards by which the schools choose their students. At the University of Michigan, for example, would allowing students in whom they consider to be less desirable tarnish their national reputation?

A: I really doubt that it would lower their reputation. I think we can debate that all day, what's the best university in the country.

The option is, either set up a system that's fair to all of the children throughout Michigan, or let's go private. Because then a system has become too elitist, and that's my point exactly. If you're going to be a publicly

funded university, let's be a university for the children of Michigan first, and let's educate the rest of the world later, after we educate our students first.

Q: Ideally, when would your proposal go into effect?

A: Ideally, it would be put on the ballot this fall and go into effect the following school year. I doubt that that will happen. This is a concept that I am promoting. I have planted the seed and I am hearing from citizens all over Michigan, and hearing that this is what they want. We will go from an elitist system to a system for the people.

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