

USA TODAY

Editorial/Opinion

Posted 7/6/2004 11:28 PM

Keep admissions rule

Eighteen-year-old Jesselyn Allen couldn't be more excited about heading to the University of Texas this fall. The African-American student graduated from an inner-city school in Houston that traditionally doesn't place many graduates into the state's most elite public university.

In fact, if not for the state's 1997 law guaranteeing admission for all seniors graduating in the top 10% of their class, Allen probably wouldn't have made the admissions cut. She boasts a straight-A average, but like many in similar circumstances, she earned subpar scores on her college admissions tests.

The 10% rule that saved her was once hailed as a creative, economically based alternative to traditional affirmative action from a Republican governor, George W. Bush. It was widely imitated. But the rule is now under attack in Texas and elsewhere, and race again is an undercurrent.

Given the finite number of seats at the University of Texas, offering a freshman spot to Allen means another Texas student — probably one with higher test scores — won't win acceptance there. Odds are that student would come from one of the 28 schools in the middle-class suburbs of Texas dubbed "feeder" schools because prior to that law they supplied up to a third of the freshman class at the Austin campus.

Spurred in part by complaints from students and parents from those feeder schools, Texas last month began reconsidering the 10% rule. Those calling for change include Gov. Rick Perry, who warns that some of the brightest academic stars in Texas are fleeing to other states.

Without doubt, the 10% law creates some problems. But instead of worrying about the B-plus students in top high schools in Dallas and Austin, the governor should be worrying about whether the state meets its goal of offering education opportunity to all Texans.

The rule flips the disadvantage of attending a low-performing school into an advantage, and that's not a bad thing. Fewer than 20% of Texas Hispanics over age 25 are college graduates, compared with a third of whites and half of Asians.

Complaints about the rule, meanwhile, are largely suburban legend:

- The best research suggests students aren't fleeing. Princeton University demographer **Marta Tienda**, who tracks the impact of the law, concludes that most Texas students leaving for out-of-state colleges list those colleges as their first choice. Texas' public universities are their backups.
- The rule does not burden the university with unqualified students, according to the records the University of Texas keep. In fact, the 10% students earn higher-than-average grades. Those low admissions-test scores in high school don't mean as much as the determination to succeed.

During the next decade, a unique demographic bubble will emerge. Not only will the college-age population swell, but a growing number of that group will be minorities who come from modest means. In short, students such as Jesselyn Allen.

With raced-based-admissions plans facing legal hurdles, Texas-style percentage plans can play an increasingly important role in guaranteeing equity in college degrees. If the politicians allow them to survive.