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Local advocates applaud state 'Dream Act'

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Photo provided

Alma Chacón, Community for the Advancement of Family Education (CAFE)



WENATCHEE — Gov. Jay Inslee appears poised to sign into a law a key piece of bipartisan legislation that will put college within reach of thousands of undocumented young people across the state.

And that includes one graduate of Cascade High School who is currently taking a single class at Eastern Washington University, because it's all she can afford.

The legislation, called the "Dream Act" in the state House and the "Real Hope Act" in the Senate, extends financial aid to Washington students brought to this country illegally as children.

Inslee hasn't signed it yet, but he's been an enthusiastic supporter. It's passed the Senate and, Tuesday, the House approved it with overwhelming bipartisan support. All three of North Central Washington's 12th Legislative District lawmakers endorsed the legislation.

The Cascade graduate declined to speak on the record for this report, but Alma Chacón knows her well. The student has been living in the U.S. since age 2, when her parents brought her here from Mexico.

"She's been working as much as she can to pay for her tuition," said Chacón, a retired career educator who has worked tirelessly with a local group of immigration advocates to keep the pressure on in Olympia and Washington, D.C.



Chacón was one of several adults who encouraged the Cascade graduate to keep working toward a college degree, despite her migratory status.

Working two jobs, she earned her AA from Wenatchee Valley College, but classes at Eastern are much more expensive.

“I told her the Washington Dream Act is going to pass, and she just started crying,” Chacón said. “It just gives new hope and motivation that there is life after high school.”

The state legislation is designed to dovetail with the Obama Administration’s “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals,” which provides young immigrants who arrived in the United States as children a legal way to live in the country on re-applicable two-year stays.

Under the state legislation, young people have to first receive the federal deferred action status. They also have to have received a high school diploma in Washington state and have lived here for at least three years.



The bill allocates \$5 million in taxpayer funding through June 20, 2015 for financial for all qualifying students under the state need-grant program, not just undocumented students.

The legislation brings hope and motivation, but it’s no substitute for federal immigration reform, other local observers say.

“I’m happy it passed,” says Jon Wyss, president of the Okanogan County Farm Bureau. “We invest a lot of money in these students in our schools and many of them were brought here without legal status and don’t know anything else.”



He added, “I’m still concerned, because the deferred action granted by the president is only as good as the president. It was an executive order. It could go away. That’s why it’s so important that we do immigration reform at the federal level. We need a permanent solution. This is just a stop-gap measure to get at a permanent solution.”

Kirk Mayer, manager of the Wenatchee-based Washington Growers Clearinghouse, says his agency has not taken an official position on the state legislation, but continues to support comprehensive federal immigration and guest worker reform, which, he says, needs to include an adjustment of status for those covered by the Dream Act.

“We appreciate the state Legislature for tackling this,” he said, “but it needs to be dealt with on the federal level.”

Wenatchee attorney Phil Safar, whose practice includes immigration law, expresses similar concerns.

“I applaud the Legislature for recognizing that the education of our youth is the key to our state’s future,” he said. “Hopefully, other states will follow suit to help influence change in federal legislation to expand upon the deferred action for childhood arrivals, enact the (federal) Dream Act legislation and provide comprehensive immigration reform.”

Wenatchee School Board member Jesús Hernández agrees it’s a positive step toward helping the state address a perceived future lack of educated workers.

“It’s also good for so many kids, whose lives have been in limbo for so many years,” Hernández said. “The economics of the state and the nation support this. That’s why you see so many businesses getting behind immigration reform.”

For pure passion, it’s hard to beat Chacón and a group of local supporters who applaud the state legislation, but still have their efforts focused on federal reforms.

“These students are part of our community,” Chacón said. “They’ve been here for years. They’re our neighbors. They’re the families we’ve grown up with. Their parents have been paying taxes. They’ve been paying taxes, and they’re going to be contributing even more to our community once they get their education.”

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