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Lawmaker proposes college admission change

He wants top 10% of state graduates to be guaranteed spots in state universities

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LANSING - Graduating students in the top 10 percent of their Michigan high school classes would be guaranteed admission to any of the state's 15 public universities under a measure being drafted by an Eaton County lawmaker.

The proposed constitutional amendment, to be sponsored by Rep. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, is a major departure from the current practice that looks first to test scores and grade point average. But the approach is similar to admissions guidelines for universities in Texas, California and Florida, he said Thursday.

Students from both rural areas and urban neighborhoods would be getting a shot at the state's best education, he said. They also should have first choice before out-of-state or foreign students.

One of the schools most affected by the change would be the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. It's one of the top public universities in the country and one of the most difficult for Michigan high school graduates to enter.

In the late 1980s, U-M was pressured by lawmakers to limit the annual admission of non-Michigan undergraduates to about 30 percent. University officials say out-of-state students make for a more diverse student body. Out-of-state tuition also is nearly three times the \$10,000 annual in-state tuition charged by U-M.

"If you talk to any taxpayer, they'll say when you have a taxpayer-funded university, Michigan kids must come first," Jones said. "It's the fair thing to do for every Michigan child."

Michael Boulus, executive director of the Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan, the Lansing-based group that represents the state's 15 universities, said the universities will oppose the proposal.

Because state high schools do not prepare students equally for college, allowing the top 10 percent of students admission to U-M might set some of them up for failure in the highly competitive environment, Boulus said. Currently, admissions officers consider many factors to admit students they believe will be successful.

"You do a disservice to the entire admissions process," said Boulus. "You do potentially a disservice to the student who may end up failing and spending an awful lot of money."

Michigan's public universities enjoy broad autonomy under the state's constitution so Jones' proposal is being drafted as a constitutional amendment. It would need a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate before it

could be placed on the November ballot.

Then-Gov. George W. Bush pushed a similar plan in Texas more than a decade ago in response to an end to affirmative action in university admissions in Texas.

"It's much more than racial or ethnic diversity," Jones said. "It's economic and geographical diversity. This means the farm kid in Olivet and the inner-city kid in Lansing gets the same shot as the kid in Bloomfield Hills."

Rep. Pam Byrnes, D-Chelsea, said the proposal "sounds good," but runs counter to the tradition of autonomy that universities enjoy and which makes Michigan's system of higher education strong.

"We have different admissions requirements for our universities," Byrnes said. "Admission requirements at Saginaw Valley State are certainly different than the University of Michigan."

Byrnes, chairwoman of the higher education budget committee in the House, said the biggest hurdle for Michigan students is cost.