

WALL STREET JOURNAL

STATES TAKE LEAD IN BOOSTING IMMIGRANTS

By Miriam Jordan
January 21, 2014

While Congress mulls an immigration overhaul, state legislatures across the country are passing bills aimed at integrating illegal immigrants rather than cracking down on them.

Last week, New Jersey joined at least 18 states in approving laws or policies allowing undocumented youngsters to pay in-state college tuition, rather than the higher out-of-state rate. Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, said at a bill-signing that the measure would maximize the investment the state has made in undocumented students, whose K-12 schooling is financed by New Jersey taxpayers.

At the other side of the country last week, the House in Washington state passed a measure that would enable undocumented college students to qualify for state financial aid, a measure the state Senate is expected to back.

Colorado, Minnesota and Oregon also extended in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants last year. Meantime, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Nevada, Oregon and Vermont approved access to driver's licenses for illegal immigrants, bringing to 13 the number of states that allow it.

"There is a move away from enforcement measures to measures that support immigrants, such as in-state tuition and driver's licenses," said Ann Morse, director of the National Conference of State Legislatures' immigration policy project. The group will release a report Tuesday about the laws and resolutions passed by states in 2013.

Supporters of the immigrant-friendly bills say that educating youngsters will bolster state coffers as graduates earn good salaries and pay taxes, while issuing licenses to all motorists improves highway safety and fosters better relations between immigrants and law enforcement.

"Immigrant-inclusive laws are not only sound policy, they are also good politics," said Tanya Broder, senior attorney at the National Immigration Law Center, an immigrant-rights group. "We expect this momentum to continue in the coming year."

Opponents say giving undocumented immigrants any benefits rewards illegal behavior, encourages more illegal immigration and saps scarce resources from states.

Washington state Rep. Larry Haler, a Republican, voted against offering financial aid to undocumented immigrants. "We don't have the money," he said, adding that the state last year turned down college grants to a third of the 106,000 students who applied.

The growth in inclusive measures marks a shift from previous years, when several states, led by Arizona, passed anti-illegal-immigrant laws. It reflects concerns expressed by some GOP leaders about potential fallout at the polls if Hispanic voters feel antagonized by the party.

After Republican leaders refused to consider a Senate immigration bill last year, several Republicans in the House now are working on a piecemeal proposal to achieve an overhaul.

"Immigration has become a defining, mobilizing issue for Hispanic voters," said Frank Sharry, founder of America's Voice, a national immigrant-advocacy group.

The states' softer approach follows a 2012 Supreme Court decision involving Arizona – whose laws had served as a template for other states – that curtails state authority over immigration enforcement. That year, the Obama administration unveiled Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a policy that gives young undocumented immigrants a temporary reprieve from deportation and a work permit.

While much of the pro-immigrant legislation is originating in blue states, Mr. Christie's support of in-state tuition and Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder's recent call for immigrants to play a central role in his state's revitalization suggest more Republicans are recognizing the potential political and economic impact of immigrants.

The immigrant-friendly bills carry a cost. In California, where illegal immigrants can qualify for a driver's license starting next year, Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat, set aside \$64.7 million in his proposed 2014-2015 budget to process an anticipated surge in applications that will require more Department of Motor Vehicles staff and offices.

Mr. Christie signed the bill extending in-state tuition to undocumented students only after the New Jersey legislature dropped a provision that would have enabled such students to receive state financial aid. In-state tuition is generally half to a third of the cost of that charged out-of-state students.

The U.S. is home to an estimated 2.1 million undocumented students of college age. In California, which offers both in-state tuition and financial assistance to this group, they represent less than 1 percent of enrollment at public colleges and universities.

Moses Chege of Tacoma, Wash., say the impact of such legislation could be life-changing. "I'm 18 years old and sound and look American," said the undocumented Kenyan, who was brought to the U.S. when he was 3 years old.

Mr. Chege, who was a commanding officer in his junior ROTC unit before realizing his immigration status was a barrier to the military and college, has testified before lawmakers on the issue. "I had ticked all the boxes – doing well in school, running track, leading worship at church," he said.

The son of parents who work as caretakers to the elderly and infirm, Mr. Chege hasn't been able to afford tuition at any university. "It was almost as if the acceptance letters didn't mean anything," he said. Even at lower in-state rates, Mr. Chege said he can't attend college unless he gets financial aid, which will happen only if the new Washington state measure passes.