

Spending cuts expected in Georgia education

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Georgia Governor-elect Nathan Deal is quickly realizing he has quite a task ahead of him as he takes office. Since winning the election, Deal has spent the past month examining the state budget and has come to the conclusion that education spending may be a target for future budget cuts, specifically the Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) scholarship.

The HOPE scholarship program, created in 1993, is a merit-based higher education scholarship funded entirely by the Georgia Lottery and its revenue. To receive HOPE scholarship funding, a student must meet one of the following academic requirements:

- Graduate from a HOPE-eligible high school with a 3.0 grade point average for college preparatory diploma or a 3.2 grade point average for other diploma types
- Complete a HOPE eligible home study program with a 3.0 grade point average
- Georgia high school graduates who begin their high school careers during or after the 2008-2009 school year must graduate with a 3.0 grade point average
- Graduate from an eligible high school, complete an eligible home study program, or earn a GED, and score in the national composite 85th percentile or higher on the SAT or ACT tests
- Graduate from an ineligible high school or complete an ineligible home study program, and then earn a 3.0 grade point average on 30 semester hours or 45 quarter hours of college degree-level coursework. This option allows for payment of the first 30 semester hours or 45 quarter hours after they are taken
- Earn a 3.0 grade point average at the college level on degree coursework after attempting 30, 60, or 90 semester hours, or 45, 90, or 135 quarter hours, regardless of high school graduation status

In addition, the student must also meet all of the following requirements:

- Be enrolled as a degree-seeking student at an eligible public or private college or university or technical college in Georgia
- Meet HOPE's Georgia residency requirements
- Meet HOPE's U.S. citizenship or eligible noncitizen requirements
- Be in compliance with Selective Service registration requirements
- Be in compliance with the Georgia Drug-Free Postsecondary Education Act of 1990. A student may be ineligible for HOPE payment if he or she has been convicted of committing certain felony offenses involving marijuana, controlled substances, or dangerous drugs
- Not be in default or owe a refund on a student financial aid program
- Maintain satisfactory academic progress as defined by the college

This scholarship covers full tuition and most fees for the recipient to attend any public university in Georgia. However, as it stands right now, the overseeing body of the scholarship, The Georgia Student Finance Commission, projects a shortfall of \$244 million this fiscal year and around \$317 million in 2012. Although the scholarship maintains about \$1 billion in reserves, the amount is expected to shrink to \$371 million by the end of 2012.

It seems this scholarship slashing is going to take a major toll on educational spending throughout the state. Budgets will have to be examined and every spare dollar will have to be tracked. As the governor puts it, "There are going to be tough choices on K-12 education again this year." Nevertheless, this is a very important and popular program within the state, and Deal stressed a fundamental approach will be taken in assessing what changes need to be made to successfully continue it. He believes the first step is to maintain the origins of how the scholarship was designed as well as examine the enhancements made to it over the years, and then decide which enhancements can be continued and which should be eliminated.