Longtime Residents Not Allowed In-State Tuition
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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Some high school teachers worry about grooming students for admission to elite universities. Judah Lakin worries about getting his students’ immigration papers so that they can afford college.

Illegal immigrants do not qualify for federal financial aid, and those living in Rhode Island, as in 39 other states, do not qualify for in-state tuition at public universities. Since out-of-state tuition is about three times as high as in-state, many young immigrants forgo higher education.

Mr. Lakin, a 26-year-old history teacher at Hope High School here, is out to change that.

“One of my students has been here since she was 1 year old, but she can’t afford to pay the out-of-state rate to a university in a place she’s grown up in,” Mr. Lakin said. “Her mother has a work permit and pays taxes here, yet her daughter is essentially denied access to higher education.”

The difference in the cost of tuition is considerable. At the University of Rhode Island, out-of-state students pay $24,776 a year, compared with $8,678 for in-state students. In the last few years, Mr. Lakin has become the go-to person for immigrants at Hope High School. Ever since he helped one student navigate the bureaucracy to gain citizenship and raised money on her behalf, he has had students, parents, teachers and even other schools asking him for assistance.

Mr. Lakin wants the school district to give presentations each school year encouraging illegal immigrants in all grades to go to organizations that can advise them on their legal options. He said that would have greatly benefited the student who had been in the country since she was an infant.

“This student always assumed she’d go to a good college,” Mr. Lakin said. “She’s used to getting awards and internships, but nobody ever explained to her the gravity of what remaining undocumented would mean for her college prospects.”
Twenty-two percent of Rhode Island children live in immigrant families, according to the advocacy group Rhode Island Kids Count.

“People think immigration status is black and white, but in a lot of cases, people can qualify as being here legally but don’t know how to approach the process,” said Carl Kruger, a staff lawyer at the International Institute of Rhode Island, an organization that assists immigrants. “They need to know how to get relatives to petition for them or to find out how else they could qualify.”

But some of Mr. Lakin’s students will have to wait many years to earn citizenship. One student he tried to help is working as a dishwasher because, without financial aid, he cannot pay for college.

Grace Diaz, a state legislator, has introduced legislation that would make students who have lived in the state for more than three years eligible for in-state tuition.

“I testify in support of her legislation whenever it comes up,” said Robert Carothers, who has been president of the University of Rhode Island for 18 years. “It does no good to keep people who live here from an education by which they could make contributions back to the state. It perpetuates ignorance, which is not in our interest.”

The office of Gov. Donald L. Carcieri would not comment on the legislation.

But Terry Gorman, executive director of Rhode Islanders for Immigration Law Enforcement, is strongly opposed. “I think it’s unfair to U.S. citizens to have to pay the tax burden for the college educations of illegals,” he said.

Debate on this issue continues nationally, with 30 states having considered legislation to allow illegal immigrants to receive in-state tuition since 2001, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Ten states passed the legislation, but in 2007 Oklahoma repealed its law.

Even if the Federal Dream Act, which would provide a path to citizenship to immigrants who go to college or serve in the military, were to pass, it would not necessarily resolve the issue of in-state tuition because states could rule that temporary residents are not eligible, said Michael Olivas, a law professor at the University of Houston.

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