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Tennessee's immigrant high school grads seek in-state college tuition

Monday, May 28, 2012 at 9:09pm

By [Joey Garrison](#)



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Diploma in hand, Johnny Garcia walked off the stage at McGavock High School's graduation and left behind a sparkling academic record. A 3.8 grade point average placed him in the top 10 percent of his senior class, earning him the title "distinguished scholar" from Metro.

"I tried my hardest in school," Garcia, who graduated May 20, told *The City Paper*. "I want to make it so where my parents struggles and efforts some day pay off."

But classroom success carried no meaning in his search to find affordable, in-state tuition to continue his education. Not in Tennessee.

Garcia, born in Mexico, arrived in the United States when he was 4. His residency in this country was unauthorized, however, and he became one of the estimated 70,000 undocumented students nationwide who graduate annually.

In Tennessee, undocumented students like him are not eligible for the state's in-state tuition at public universities. Lacking this financial tool makes the cost of higher education three times higher, he said, a price tag out of reach for him and other immigrant students.

"It's an investment that we've made and that the government has made to help go to K-12 education," Garcia said. "And then when it comes to the end, that's it. It's like those 13 years were just a waste. We went through the school system, only to not be able to afford to go to college."

Clad in cap and gown, Garcia was among a few dozen Metro students who held a rally at the Parthenon at Centennial Park hours before they took part in their respective graduation ceremonies. Their campaign is twofold. Undocumented students tied blue ribbons around their wrists as a pledge to continue their education — some way, some how. The second objective deals with state policy: Students hope to open in-state tuition to undocumented students.

Things managed to work out for Garcia, who discovered a financial incentive program 70 miles up the road at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, where he plans to major in architecture. He will receive that school's in-state tuition, available to students in designated nearby cities. He wishes Tennessee offered the same opportunity.

"We want the class of 2012 to be the last class to go through tuition inequality in Tennessee," Garcia said. We'd like to change things for the future classes."

The goal certainly seems a long shot in Tennessee, however, where the Republican-dominated state legislature doesn't usually welcome immigrant causes. Causing angst among immigration activists during the most recent legislative session, for example, the General Assembly approved a measure that limits the number of foreign workers permitted at charter schools, a measure Gov. Bill Haslam allowed to pass without signing.

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THE BIG DEAL

For now, no plans appear to be in the works to open in-state tuition to students whose residency is not authorized. Still, Democratic state Rep. Mike Stewart of Nashville said he would explore the issue.

"I'm told I have a lot of undocumented citizens in my district, many of whom are students," Stewart said. "Some of these people have lived here for their entire young lives. I'm going to explore this issue with them during the offseason because in many cases, we have some very talented people being denied access to school."

But the general mood on the issue among state legislators likely reflects the sentiments of Rep. Jim Gotto, a Nashville Republican, who called in-state tuition for undocumented students a "complex situation" that boils down to "fairness."

"For the children of illegal immigrants, we have to remember their parents made the decision to come here illegally, which automatically places the student in the out-of-state category," Gotto said. "In order to be fair to those families who legally came to this nation, it is likely that law is going to remain unchanged for the foreseeable future."

In all, 13 state legislatures have passed measures over the past decade that made in-state college tuition available to immigrant students, though Oklahoma later repealed its law. In certain states, Maryland for instance, there are pushes to enact similar legislation. Meanwhile, state lawmakers in Kansas have discussed following Oklahoma's path, and overturning its in-state tuition law. Nationwide, the topic is a hot-button issue.

States that grant in-state tuition to undocumented workers include immigrant-concentrated Texas and California, as well as states such as Nebraska, Utah and Wisconsin, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Such laws tend to grant in-state tuition at state universities to graduating undocumented students with at least two or three years of state residency.

Amelia Post, youth director of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, an immigration advocacy organization that has helped launch the in-state tuition campaign, estimated more than 1,000 undocumented students graduate from Tennessee high schools each year. Numbers for Nashville are unclear, as Metro schools do not track the documentation of its students.

"There could be different paths to get that goal," Post said of achieving "tuition equality" in Tennessee, stopping short of pledging that her group would try to mirror legislative endeavors in other states. For now, efforts seemed centered more on public awareness. "Right now, we're just looking at how we can work together with a lot of people who care about this issue."

Post pointed to Tennessee's renewed focus on education and the education goals professed by politicians. "If we want to improve K-12 education, if we want to lower dropout rates, if we want more students going to college and completing college in Tennessee — in order to meet those really important goals, then we need tuition equality."

Supporters of in-state tuition for undocumented workers might have an ally in Metro Nashville Public Schools, though the district hasn't taken an official position on the issue.

This winter, the Metro school board approved a nonbinding resolution in support of the federal DREAM Act, decade-old legislation that would grant citizenship to students who arrived in the United State illegally as minors if they were to commit time in the military or at higher education institutions.

With 22 percent of its student body coming from backgrounds where English wasn't the first language, Metro has the largest immigrant community of any school district in the state.

Jay Steele, Metro's associate superintendent for high schools, attended the recent "tuition equality" rally at Centennial Park at the invitation of the organizers. "Many of them are graduating as valedictorians, salutatorians," he said. "They've met all the requirements of the state of Tennessee, and their opportunities after they leave high school are very limited.

"My goal is for every kid to have a fair and equal opportunity no matter where they're

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from," Steele said. "If they graduate from a Tennessee public high school, I would love for them to be considered as in-state students. That's not my decision, but I do support that."

Those hoping to change Tennessee's in-state tuition policy point out that only 5 percent of undocumented students who graduate high school move on to college.

Nineteen-year-old Arely Bravo, who graduated this month from Metro's Overton High School, plans to enroll at Nashville State Community College to study criminal justice. Born in Mexico, Bravo has lived in Nashville since she was 5. Her plan is to eventually transfer to Lipscomb University.

"It would open the doors to so many students to go to college," said Bravo, who called it "insane" to charge out-of-state tuition for students who have attended public school in Tennessee for years.

Janet Garcia, an undocumented student who graduated from McGavock in 2009, said she couldn't afford college immediately after high school. She said many of her undocumented friends in the same situation were forced to go back to their native countries or found jobs in construction, house cleaning or other low-paying fields.

Initially, she worked jobs translating and babysitting to earn enough money to make college an option. Still, without in-state tuition, she said financing is a challenge.

"It's really hard because I have to pay three times as much, so I can only take three classes per semester," she said. "It's taken me three semesters to complete my freshman year."



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18 Comments on this post:

By: [Rasputin72](#) on 5/28/12 at 9:29

While I admire his accomplishments I would certainly deny him in-state tuition. Then again I am against anything that has to do with giving people "free stuff"

By: [JayBee56](#) on 5/28/12 at 10:00

Sad that the parents of these children have placed them in this position. The students need to apply for citizenship as soon as they are able. Otherwise they will remain in a shadow world where opportunity is limited.

By: [rockhoundtn](#) on 5/28/12 at 10:05

Congrats, he got a free education while being an illegal immigrant as stated in the article: "Garcia, born in Mexico, arrived in the United States when he was 4. His residency in this country was unauthorized, however, and he became one of the estimated 70,000 undocumented students nationwide who graduate annually."

Please when you write an article please label it correctly "Illegal Immigrant" and not "Immigrant", because my tax dollars went to pay for his High School education as I don't have any kids in school.

By: [yogiman](#) on 5/28/12 at 10:13

The is no illegal immigrant, rockhoundtn. They are illegal aliens. An immigrant is one who goes to a foreign nation to settle there legally.

By: ralane on 5/28/12 at 10:15

I agree with Rasputen72. Garcia said it all in his own words, reading this he believes he is entitled to a free ride through college in Tennessee. If the lottery system reserves have to be tapped in the future like the Tennessee lawmakers say it will we sure don't need a law that will contribute to that burden. I hope our lawmakers do not allow or pass a law giving undocumented students (children of illegals) this opportunity to use our system a little bit more. Here are Garcia's words: It's an investment that we've made and that the government has made to help go to K-12 education," Garcia said. "And then when it comes to the end, that's it. It's like those 13 years were just a waste. We went through the school system, only to not be able to afford to go to college." His 13 years are wasted since he does not get a free ride through college, on Tennessee residents, he needs to pay for college like the rest of us have to do for our children.

By: sales1544 on 5/29/12 at 4:25

ZBY020120529 If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with triumph and disaster
New Era Hats
Cheap 59fifty Hats
Cheap Snapbacks
Wholesale New Era Hats
Cheap New Era Hats
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By: spooky24 on 5/29/12 at 6:20

Parents are to blame for his situation and not the taxpayers of Tennessee. Upon reaching legal age he need to return to Mexico and begin the process of becoming an American citizen.

sp

By: brownmm1 on 5/29/12 at 6:30

Western Ky will take him. Give him a good scholarship.

While it is not his fault. It is not our responsibility. If we had done the proper job in not hiring illegals - if we deported those we find - if we refused to pay to educate them because they are breaking the law - we would not have thousands in the city of Nashville.

By: slacker on 5/29/12 at 7:03

Its really not a good time for "illegals" to be demanding more freebies, when a tax increase debate is in play.

By: opryman65 on 5/29/12 at 8:23

Although it is not his fault, he needs to work to become a legal citizen as soon as possible. The fact he was able to stay in school all twelve years as an illegal alien says alot about our country and the way in which it protects it's own people and soveriegnty. We, as legal American-born citizens of the United States, should never have allowed such a thing to happen (using our own hard-earned taxpayer money to put illegal aliens through school), but since many people have their heads buried in the sand when it comes to legislating protection of it's own legal citizens, we are getting what we deserve for not enforcing the borders and not expelling these illegals from our country. The United States is in financial peril partially because of issues just like this one - paying for the education and medical bills of illegal aliens everywhere while cutting programs for veterans and the elderly as the border remains basically open to our south so that anyone of any intent can cross on over and do whatever damage to the United States that that person wants.

By: Bellecat on 5/29/12 at 8:33

NO.

Just look around--America cannot even take care of our own. This is yet another system of the disease--not enforcing our borders and laws.

By: BEOWULF on 5/29/12 at 8:34

BEOEWULF: FINE! This as well as too, too many areas of public assistance are under attack. ALL taxpayer \$\$\$'S need to assist TN and US citizens ONLY! The jelly-bellies have left chunks of jelly on the counter in such quantity and with such frequency, the "ants" [INCLUDING MANY OF OUR OWN CITIZENS] now see them as entitlements. Every US AMERICAN CITIZEN HS GRAD deserves a shot of going to college...NEVER an illegal...Go to Mexico as an illegal and see what you get - Hassle! This is not just an illegal alien problem with those from Mexico - tens of thousands of illegals from around the world are sucking us dry...and the jelly-bellied socialist-minded politicians let the problem go unchecked...VOTE'EM OUT!

By: Bellecat on 5/29/12 at 8:36

That should be "symptom". No coffee yet---lol.

By: labtech2004 on 5/29/12 at 8:44

You have to be kidding me. Their parents came and lived here illegally and we gave them our money to live on and raise their children. Now they want us to feel sorry that the state will not give their children that we have already raised a break on in state tuition. This eats me alive. I have had enough of this. I am sick and tired of seeing all these illegal aliens getting all this assistance and then riding around in brand new trucks and SUVs. Being behind them in stores when they have carts full of food and pay with our money (Food Stamps), then roll them out to a brand new vehicle and they are all dressed in brand new cloths etc. They are laughing in our faces. This needs to stop and stop now. We are not responsible for sending these illegal Aliens children to school, either grade school, high school or college. I just recently went back to college and NO ONE GAVE ME ANYTHING. I am an American, white, paid taxes for 31 years. My parents and every generation before them paid taxes but NO I could not get assistance.

By: JeffF on 5/29/12 at 8:51

I don't understand. We give them a free public education which still does not entitle them to work legally in the U.S. Now, we need to provide the same funding so they can go to college and get a degree which also does not entitle them to work legally in the U.S. How far down the road do we take this? Why keep pouring public funds into a hole that will not ever pay off?

If they cannot live or work here why do we feel obligated to continue funding ILLEGAL alien educations? There is zero chance at payoff while they are occupying a foreign land. Is this purely education for the sake of education? This is beginning to look more like a education professional full employment plan than an actual educational system.

I do find it funny that no one quoted noted who pays for these reduced tuition plans.

By: pswindle on 5/29/12 at 9:10

He's preaching to the wrong choir. I do not understand how he has been in this country that long without being deported along with his family.

By: joe41 on 5/29/12 at 9:32

We have so many people in Tennessee who just don't get it. Johnny Garcia is just like our great grandparents who came to America and succeeded. We should encourage them. Garcia would make a better citizen than some of the people who responded to this post. Congratulations and you have my vote for in-state tuition!

Joe

By: JohnGalt on 5/29/12 at 9:54

Send him a check, Joe.

