

BLOG: Senate takes aim at rising tuition rates

By **TERRENCE STUTZ** / **The Dallas Morning News**
tstutz@dallasnews.com

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Six years after the Legislature gave up direct control of college tuition rates - sparking hefty increases at most schools - the Senate on Monday voted to put new limits on future tuition hikes. A bill by Senate Higher Education Committee Chairwoman Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, would bar college regents from raising tuition rates more 5 percent a year - or the average rate of inflation if that figure is lower - if their current tuition levels are above the state median.

Zaffirini said the measure "would provide financial relief to college students and their families while recognizing the responsibility of the Legislature to keep a college education affordable without sacrificing quality." Although several options were considered to control tuition - including a statewide freeze on rates - Zaffirini said her bill incorporates several ideas but not a freeze. One is a proposal by Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, to allow entering college freshmen to pay the same tuition rate for four years. The bill passed by the Senate Monday would allow institutions to voluntarily enact such a tuition policy.

The legislation puts pressure on lawmakers to adequately fund higher education since tuition could not be increased more than what would be needed to achieve a 5 percent increase in total funding - including tuition and appropriations by the Legislature. More money from the state would help keep tuition rates down.

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