

Board policy bars illegal immigrants from 2-year schools.

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PELL CITY -- The state board of education passed a new policy Thursday denying illegal immigrants admission to Alabama's two-year colleges despite one board member's calls to delay it for more discussion and four of the nine members being absent.

The policy, which takes effect next spring, was passed on a 4-0 vote, with Ethel Hall of Fairfield abstaining. Four board members -- David Byers of Birmingham, Ella Bell of Montgomery, Sandra Ray of Tuscaloosa and Gov. Bob Riley -- were not at the meeting, which was held in Pell City.

Hall said she was hesitant to vote because there was only a brief discussion when the policy was first presented to the board at a work session two weeks ago.

"I don't think we've done the kind of research we need to do in order to approve the policy," she said before describing how her brushes with racial discrimination -- such as being denied admission to the University of Alabama despite extensive qualifications -- added to her reluctance.

"It's very, very, dear to me because I have been one of those who have been excluded and I was certainly capable and an American-born citizen," Hall said. "So I cannot support this policy until I am given additional information.

"Starting next spring, applicants to the community college system will be required to show an Alabama driver's license, state ID card, an unexpired U.S. passport, or an unexpired U.S. permanent resident card.

Two secondary forms of documentation, including a photo ID card and a Certificate of Naturalization, also will be accepted. All international applicants must provide a visa and an official translated copy of their high school/college transcript along with information such as exam scores and proof of adequate financial support.

Shay Farley, attorney and spokeswoman for the Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, addressed the board during a public comment period, questioning the policy's necessity and cautioning that there could be unintended consequences.

"We are bound by federal law to provide education to any student, K-12, regardless of legal status," she said. "A lot of children are brought by their parents -- they did not choose to come here. If we deny them a two-year college education, where will they go for their education?"

"Two-year Chancellor Bradley Byrne said he was willing to work with opponents as the system develops guidelines for implementing the policy.

"I don't think we can address all of their concerns, but I think we can address some of them," he said.

Byrne said there was no way to know for sure how many students would be affected or how much money the policy would save, but he did not think there were a lot of illegal immigrants enrolling at two-year colleges based on student population.

Admissions personnel at each college will check the documents, he said.

"For 90 percent or more of our students, all that's going to mean is they give them their driver's license," he said.

Schools in a few other states have passed a similar policy but it's not a big movement, said Raul Gonzalez, director of legislative affairs for the National Council of La Raza advocacy group.

Still, Alabama's actions are troubling, he said.

"They need to make sure in their zeal to deny public higher education to undocumented immigrants that they may deny those services to U.S. citizens who don't have documentation," he said.

Gonzalez acknowledged that the documents the system would soon require are the same needed in order to obtain legal employment, but said officials should also be realistic.

"That's a good point, but that's another reason why we need to look at immigration reform," he said. "The bottom line is people will find jobs. How many people do you know who are working under the table? It's not about immigration; it's about poor people who need jobs."