

We Need a New HOPE

By Curt Thompson

The numbers are in after this last year in which Governor Deal billed his "reform" to Georgia's most shining educational achievement, the HOPE Program, as both the signature issue of his governorship to date and the best way to "save HOPE". However, many in the Georgia legislature did the math, despite the smoke and mirrors, and found out that that Governor Deal's solution wouldn't work. Sadly, these legislators spoke up and were shot down, even though they were right. As State Senator Jason Carter, who led opposition to the bill in 2011, said when we started getting in the hard numbers in January that showed the Governor emptying the lottery reserves in 2012 to hide the problems he'd created: "We just didn't realize how wrong they were".

Governor Deal's HOPE "solutions", based on ideology and not in practical math, have undoubtedly increased funding problems for HOPE. What other conclusion can you make when the funding to each HOPE (Or as Maureen Downey at the AJC calls it rightfully, HOPE Lite) Scholar in the state of Georgia has been cut and then program is still on track to overspend, and at a faster rate than even before now that the effects of the Great Recession have fully washed over our state? On top of that, Deal and his crew were unable to predict how much money the Zell Miller Scholarship will need in order to stay solvent instead of breaking the bank. Now the Zell Miller Scholarship is overspent and sends students predominantly from suburban Atlanta schools to only two Georgia universities. At the same time, cuts to the HOPE Grant for our technical schools has turned 4,200 potential students away from a technical degree, a program that directly ties to our ability to train and retrain people for today's job market and to address our soaring unemployment.

There are fundamental flaws in the 2011 HOPE Lite reform; flaws that, with a little bit more scrutiny, could have been avoided and would not have penalized Georgia's rising Class of 2011 in the process. The most painful fact of all is that there is enough money left in the fund to promote HOPE for more than a decade, if only it was used properly.

Let's take a look at the interplay between the Zell Miller and regular HOPE Scholarship, which is the most obvious example of rushed reform. This year, 5,000 more students qualified for the Zell Miller scholarship than were estimated to, whose extra payouts might not have been that hard to manage under normal circumstances. However, 86% of those who qualified only went to two institutions: UGA and Georgia Tech. Both are fine institutions, known for good academics and, more importantly, extremely high tuition. Tuition will only get higher at these institutions, and that means that Zell Miller Scholarships are only going to cost us more in the future. And since Zell Miller and HOPE Lite share the same funding pool, this means a smaller slice of the pie each year for each HOPE Lite recipient.

HOPE Lite recipients have their own troubles under this plan, however. While Zell Miller Scholars are using a large portion of the HOPE Fund, tuition increases mean that HOPE Lite Scholarships are going to start covering less and less of the real cost of college. Since the 2011 reforms give the responsibility of raising the amount of HOPE Lite paid out to each student to the legislature, Georgian's aren't going to see their scholarships matching the same amount of funds paid out to them last year. In fact, by the end of this decade, HOPE Lite is going to be paying for less than half the amount of tuition. The issue is that the Georgia Student Finance Commission is reporting that the HOPE Fund is going to run out of money before we're able to reach that point.

Deal's educational reform, a promise made to make HOPE sustainable for our future generations, is already unsustainable after the first year it's have been put into place. This is beyond the ability of band-aid legislation to fix. Georgia needs a paradigm shifting solution, or it won't only be the Class of 2011 or 2012 that's harmed in a quest to keep ideological purity, but an entire generation of students needed to keep our state competitive for the future.