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FOR RELEASE:

Dec. 8, 2008

Derek Roseman
(609) 292-7065

CONTACT:

Assemblyman Diegnan
(908) 757-1677

Assemblywoman Lampitt
(856) 435-1247

DIEGNAN/LAMPITT NJ STARS REFORM LEGISLATION CALLS FOR HIGHER STANDARDS, SUSTAINABILITY

Legislation Seeks to Enact Recommendations of NJ STARS Task Force

(TRENTON) – Legislation Assemblyman Patrick J. Diegnan and Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt sponsored to revise the popular NJ STARS I and NJ STARS II college scholarship programs to ensure their long-term viability was released today from the Assembly Appropriations Committee by a vote of 10-1 with one abstention.

Diegnan and Lampitt were members of a 12-member task force Gov. Jon S. Corzine convened during the summer to examine the NJ STARS program. The task force developed a plan to strengthen eligibility standards for entrance to and continuation in the program, ease the financial burden on the state's four-year colleges and, most notably, ensure the program's stability.

"NJ STARS has become a great source of pride for countless students across the state, but the program is at risk of becoming a victim of its own success," said Diegnan (D-Middlesex). "We've got to make sure these scholarships get to the smartest, most hard working kids out there – and that it keeps working for them as long as they need it. We need to make these changes to ensure this program will be able to help high-achieving students for years to come."

The NJ STARS I scholarship program provides a full community college scholarship to more than 4,100 students who graduated in the top 20 percent of their high school class. The STARS II program extends \$4,000 scholarships at any state college or university for roughly 1,200 STARS I participants who graduated with a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher.

Diegnan and Lampitt noted that the task force learned that some NJ STARS recipients need to take remedial courses to bring them up-to-par with their community college classmates. They also said that the costs borne by four-year schools may become crushing as more STARS I graduates seek their bachelors degrees – and could lead to further tuition hikes.

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“There is no doubt that the students who graduate from NJ STARS truly are stars, but we need to ensure that more than just this generation of students will be able to benefit,” said Lampitt (D-Camden). “We must consider the future viability of both NJ STARS programs. We need to make a promise to our most-prepared, highest-achieving students that assistance will be there for them when it comes time to get their degrees.”

The Diegnan/Lampitt reform legislation (A-3373) would:

- Enhance the eligibility requirements for NJ STARS I from the top 20 percent to the top 15 percent of one’s high school graduating class;
- Increase the minimum GPA necessary to qualify for NJ STARS II from 3.0 to 3.25;
- Limit NJ STARS II funds to cover tuition only with a maximum benefit of \$7,000 to be covered equally by the institution and the state;
- Bifurcate the benefits available per academic year through NJ STARS II based on GPA -- \$7,000 for GPA of 3.5 or better, \$6,000 for GPA between 3.25 and 3.49;
- Allow NJ STARS and NJ STARS II students to take more than 15 credits per semester;
- Create an adjudication board to address unforeseen issues; and
- Place a cap on family income at \$250,000.

“These reforms will serve a dual purpose of rewarding New Jersey scholars by increasing benefits while also ensuring the long-term financial stability of the program,” said Diegnan. “Students who excel in school and want to go to college in New Jersey should have every opportunity to do so. Under this plan, we will be able to deliver the promise of a college degree for our highest achieving students who need it most.”

The bill now heads to the Assembly Speaker, who decides if and when to post it for a floor vote.

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