

# Dream Act students live in state of limbo

By Stephen Magagnini, Sacramento Bee

Mandeep Chahal is a young woman in limbo. An honors student at UC Davis, Chahal has plans for medical school and a career spent healing children in poor communities.

She is also undocumented, which means no matter what academic degrees she ultimately earns, her ability to work in her chosen profession in the United States remains clouded in doubt. In just more than a year, under the California Dream Act legislation Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law in October, Chahal and more than 10,000 other undocumented students in the state can start competing for millions of dollars in public and private college financial aid.

The legislation allows undocumented students who came to the country before age 16 and attended California high schools access to public financial aid, including Cal Grants. Those students already are eligible for in-state tuition, and Brown in July signed a companion measure affording them access to private financial aid. But nothing in the legislation eases their path toward citizenship; and no matter how well those students do in college or graduate school, they will have a tough time landing professional jobs because undocumented students can't get the Social Security cards required by hospitals, law practices, engineering firms, universities and other employers.

Chahal, who was 6 years old when her mom brought her to the United States from the Punjab region of India, wonders if her hard work and growing debt will pay off. "People like me are in this limbo state," said Chahal, now 21. "I don't have a path to legalization. You can absolutely get into medical school,

but if I don't have legal status, all that work will go down the drain. I won't be able to help anyone here in California, where I grew up.

"President Barack Obama is pushing federal Dream Act legislation that would create a path to citizenship for young people who were brought to the United States illegally as children and went on to attend college or serve in the U.S. military. But the bill has failed to get out of Congress, opposed by some Republicans who argue it would draw more undocumented immigrants.

Assemblyman Tim Donnelly, R-Twin Peaks, makes the same argument about the California legislation. He is gathering signatures for a referendum that would repeal Assembly Bill 131, which he calls "The California Nightmare Act." Donnelly rails against the "unfairness" of AB 131, saying the children of parents who broke the law shouldn't go to college "on the backs of taxpayers" while "California is billions of dollars in the hole, 2.5 million people are out of work, the governor has cut our schools, shut down job centers, closed our state parks and slashed veterans' reentry services ... "The architect of the Dream Act legislation, Assemblyman Gil Cedillo, D-Los Angeles, counters that California's future depends on undocumented students who, once they get legal status, will shore up California's economy and tax base." Many parents of these children pay taxes for many services they cannot get," said Cedillo.

Even without citizenship, the so-called "Dreamers" can work as tutors, researchers, caregivers, architects and lawyers, Cedillo said.

"We want them to be prepared to optimize their God-given talents so they can make a constructive contribution," he said. "By not educating them, they may end up being illiterate, ignorant and a burden on society."

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