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State Agencies Get Creative on Student Loans

As various lenders and some of its peers in other states announced in recent months that they would stop making federal or private loans because of disruptions in the capital markets, the Illinois Student Assistance Commission steadfastly held firm. "We saw it as a must do, and had said we'd be there no matter what," said Andrew Davis, the commission's executive director.

The only problem, Davis acknowledges, is that officials at the agency — which guarantees student loans and oversees most student aid programs in Illinois — "weren't quite sure how we would fund" the operations behind that promise. Like many nonprofit lenders, particularly, Illinois had seen its primary source of financial backing for its loans dry up, because of the collapse of the auction-rate securities market.

Fortunately for the agency and the 20,000-plus students whose federal loans it will finance this academic year, the Illinois commission became one of several state loan providers that have found alternative ways of funding their loans in the current economic climate. Last month, days after the Massachusetts loan agency announced that it would not make federal loans this academic year, the state of Kentucky said that it was issuing a $50 million bond to ensure that the Kentucky Higher Education Student Loan Corp. could continue to issue federal student loans. (Massachusetts officials had considered but then backed away from a similar plan.)

The Illinois agency contemplated several options for finding the money to finance its 2008-9 loans, including bank financing and the federal government's newly designed process for bolstering lenders to ensure that students continue to have access to federal loans. Davis was most intrigued, though, by an idea he liberally borrowed from North Carolina.

There, last spring, officials at the State Employees' Credit Union had approached Steve Brooks, executive director of the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority, after learning about the turmoil shaking the student loan industry. "It's a very civic-minded group, and they wanted to make sure North Carolina students were protected," said Brooks. The credit union agreed to back a $1.1 billion student loan bond to refinance some of the authority's auction-rate securities (for private and federal loans) and to finance some new loans in the new academic year.

While the credit union's investment will not finance all of the state agency's loans for the year or refinance all of its outstanding debt, the vote of confidence should make it easier, Brooks said, for the state loan authority to refinance another $1.3 billion through variable rate bonds in the coming months.

"This represented a great breakthrough for us," he said.

North Carolina's arrangement inspired Davis in Illinois. He approached the Illinois Credit Union League to see if its member credit unions might be interested in backing the student loan agency, given the organizations' tradition of making "mission-based loans," Davis said.

The result: a pending agreement for eight credit unions to provide about $100 million, in three traunches timed to the annual financial aid cycle, through the course of the 2008-9 academic year.

"This will more than meet our anticipated need, but if we find there is more need" — more students than usual have been applying for loans through the agency's Web site, Davis said — "we may be able to go back for more." The agency provides loans to most students at about a half dozen colleges in the state, including Western Illinois University, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, and the University of Illinois at Springfield, Davis said; many colleges in Illinois participate in the federal government's competing direct loan program.

— Doug Lederman

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/09/05/loans.

The Salt Lake Tribune http://www.sltrib.com

Paying for college

State stepping in as banks bail out of student loans

As the number of private lenders shrinks, Utah agency expects to help thousands of borrowers

By Brian Maffly
The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

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For the first time, the state of Utah has begun originating student loans, a shift that will ensure that any Utah college student who needs financial assistance can get it, although it will cost more.

The Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority (UHEAA), the agency that oversees financial aid to Utah students, is bracing for loan applications worth $100 million this academic year after big banks all but abandoned the federally guaranteed loan program.

Last fall, Congress cut what participating lenders could make on student loans at the same time money became more scarce. That created a double disincentive for financial institutions to lend to college students. With fewer lenders available, Utah students are expected to flock to UHEAA, agency director David Feitz told his board Thursday.

"We would rather have a full cadre of lenders, but that is unlikely to happen in the near future until Congress raises the yields," he said.

Adding to the pressure was a recent move by Congress to raise the maximum students can borrow by $2,000 (to $5,500 for freshman, $6,500 for sophomores and $7,500 for upperclassmen). Feitz estimated UHEAA will see applications worth one-fourth of the state's total student loan volume this coming year, but he won't know how much until students begin applying as they return to school.

"It could be $60 million, it could be $200 million," Feitz said of a development that represents a profound change in the way UHEAA conducts business.

UHEAA has access to $121 million to lend over the coming academic year.

The U.S. Department of Education promises to buy participating states' loans issued this year under the Federal Family and Education Loan program (FFELP). This would enable states to "recycle" the money back to students in the form of new loans. The UHEAA board voted unanimously Thursday to approve Utah's participation in the complex arrangement.

Feitz cautioned that the program, which runs only for one year, isn't a permanent solution to the liquidity mess that has caused "tremendous chaos" in the $50 billion system that subsidizes the popular Stafford and PLUS loan programs.

"Now we're calling on Congress and the departments of Treasury and Education to take additional action to further stabilize the student loan program for years to come," he said.

In recent months four banks - Wells Fargo, Zions, J.P. Morgan Chase and Key - pulled out of Utah's program, leaving only U.S. Bank. Fifteen credit unions, led by America First, still lend to students, but the banks' departure left a vacuum. Wells Fargo and Zions were the top lenders last year, accounting for more than half of the state's student loan volume.

Lenders also have become picky about which institutions they work with. One Utah school, Snow College, found itself with no lenders, so UHEAA last month began lending directly to students at the Ephraim school.

"Were in a pretty good place, a much better place than our sister agencies across the country," board chairman David Jordan said. "From the students' perspective, this will work. We will be able to help them without depleting our resources."

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Utah students can expect to pay more for college loans under steps taken by the Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority to preserve universal access to federally guaranteed loans.
But the news isn't all bad.

"I'm not aware of lenders offering better terms than what UHEAA is offering," said John Curl, the University of Utah's financial aid director. "We encourage students to research who they're going to get loans from and find the best terms they can get. They are going to have to pay more interest; that's unfortunate."

Congress last year cut the rate on some student loans from 6.8 to 6 percent. But in order to participate in an emergency federal bail-out measure, Utah slashed two rate reductions. Until now, students who had payments automatically drawn from their accounts received a 1.25-point reduction and another 2-point reduction after four years of timely payments. Losing these benefits adds $1,763 to the cost of servicing a $15,000 loan.

On Thursday, the UHEAA board suspended issuing consolidation loans to avoid tying up scarce capital needed to serve current students. Former students looking to simplify repayment plans have other options for consolidating their loans in the federal program.

But Utah students still get breaks on up-front costs of the most common loans, Stafford and PLUS. UHEAA continues to cover the 1 percent origination fee and 1 percent default fee, translating into a $100 subsidy on a $5,000 loan.
- *Brian Maffly*

Financial aid
* **Students who are considering borrowing** for college for the upcoming school year should start researching their options now, said John Curl, financial aid director at the University of Utah.
* **Students should consult the financial aid office** at their school, check Web sites that serve as information clearinghouses, such as finaid.org, or www.uheaa.org, the Web site for the Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority.

The Boston Globe A late try to salvage student loans

Patrick calls on pension board, colleges to invest in agency bonds

By Casey Ross, Globe Staff | August 7, 2008

Governor Deval Patrick has asked the state pension fund to invest $50 million and will ask Harvard University and other local colleges to invest millions more to provide student loans to thousands of families struggling to pay college tuition bills that are due in the coming weeks.

Patrick's 11th hour proposal, floated among key officials yesterday, would prop up the troubled 26-year-old Massachusetts Educational Financing Authority, which announced last week that it would be unable to provide student loans for this school year because of turmoil in the nation's credit markets.

The proposal would entail the investment funds buying portions of a $425 million bond sale that MEFA is planning this month. The agency would use the proceeds to finance student loans.

"We have 40,000 students and families who need help, and we're right up against it," Patrick said in an interview with the Globe last night. "This is a sound investment for the pension board and the endowments."

The governor and his aides, along with state lawmakers, have been brainstorming ways to restore student loan funds for the past week. MEFA had previously offered low-cost, fixed-rate loans, but now borrowers have to look to other lenders whose loans may carry higher rates and higher costs.

Yesterday, Patrick's top budget aide, Leslie Kirwan, asked the state pension board to consider buying $50 million of the upcoming MEFA bonds. Administration officials also hope the state investment would be seen as a show of confidence in the bond market and MEFA, spurring purchase by other investors that could finance more loans.

Patrick said he intends to call officials today from Harvard, Boston College, the University of Massachusetts, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, among other schools, about making similar investments in MEFA bonds.

The chairman of the state pension board, state Treasurer Timothy Cahill, was noncommittal about Patrick's request, but said the board would consider it.

The pension fund staff "will examine the options legally available to invest in any debt issuance set up by MEFA and report back to the trustees before any action is taken," Cahill said through a spokeswoman.

With $51.7 billion in assets, the pension fund invests monies for state employees and retirees. And while it is unusual for the fund to use anything other than financial returns as grounds for investment, the board has already committed funds to local projects that are intended to produce economic and social benefits within Massachusetts. The program was a major policy goal of Cahill, who got the pension board to adopt it in 2003.

Even without Cahill's commitment, Patrick has a strong start on getting the board to adopt his measure, as he appoints three of its nine members, one of whom is Kirwan.

Another board member, Robert Brousseau, reacted favorably to Patrick's request and said he did not hear strong objections from fellow board members at yesterday's meeting.

"I can't see anybody opposing it, but we have to see the parameters of the investment and what form it would take," said Brousseau, who represents teachers on the board.

Patrick said he is seeking swift consideration from the pension fund board because MEFA is planning to hold its bond sale within two weeks.

"We need action," he said. "If they need to call a special meeting to approve this, then I hope they will."

Meanwhile, representatives of the local colleges said the institutions will consider the investment.

"We're always more than happy to have discussions with the governor," said John Longbrake, a spokesman for Harvard University, the governor's alma mater. "We welcome the opportunity to learn more about the challenges MEFA is facing and to discuss ways to address them."

Robert Connolly, a spokesman for UMass President Jack Wilson, said: "This is an idea we're definitely willing to explore. We do see it as a potential win-win in terms of providing the university with a sound investment while helping families cope with their financial aid challenges."

Officials at the student lending agency, meanwhile, said Patrick's plan carries minimal risk to the investment funds because MEFA's bonds provide reliable returns. Executive Director Tom Graf said the default rate on the authority's loans is less than 1 percent. "This plan allows" the pension board "to make a stable investment that is especially warranted in this financial climate," he said.

The problems in the bond market, which started with the foreclosure crisis and spread to other credit markets, have imperiled student lenders across the country, prompting more than 50 agencies to stop making federal or private loans.

Graf said the size of the upcoming bond sale may change based on investor interest. If the sale is a success, he hopes the agency will then be able to offer loans with rates below 8.5 percent, which is the current charge for Federal Plus loans. Last year, the authority's private 20-year loan rate was 6.39 percent.

The agency made $400 million in private loans in the last school year, and another $110 million in federal student loans.

State Senator Brian A. Joyce, who authored a letter last week signed by other legislators urging Patrick to support MEFA, applauded the governor's actions. "This critically important to an awful lot of Massachusetts families," he said. "The governor can use his bully pulpit to ask for some assistance, and I wholeheartedly support what he's doing."

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