

Close Up on Ohio's Issue 3

Issue 3 on the Nov. 7 ballot, the Ohio Learn and Earn initiative, is a proposed amendment to the Ohio Constitution to establish a program of higher education grants and scholarships using proceeds from slot machines to be installed at seven existing horse racing tracks in Ohio and two downtown locations in Cleveland.

Big-spending proponents have waged a media blitz in support of Issue 3, but the present only part of the picture. If you look closer, I believe you will agree that Issue 3 is not all it's raised up to be. Instead, it would create a series of inequities that would benefit the some wealthy gambling interests, and not Ohio's future college students.

The first and most obvious inequity is the distribution of proceeds from the installation of slot machines at these nine locations. Fifty-five percent of the profits would go to proponents of the measure and just 33 percent to the college tuition program. The remaining 15 percent would be divided in fractional portions among local governments and municipalities. So "earn" is worth more than half, and "learn" is worth significantly less - a vast disparity in the number who would benefit. Local governments fare even worse.

In fact, the true beneficiaries are a handful of racetrack and casino interests with enough signatures behind them to amend the state's constitution. They're a powerful group that stands to gain billions of dollars if the amendment passes. But they would have you believe their noble intent is primarily to provide funds so all students will be able to afford college.

Ohioans who have studied the issue are voicing their opposition, among them the trustees of The Ohio State University, the mayors of Columbus, Ashland and Youngstown, the Ohio senate president, gubernatorial candidate Ted Strickland, Gov. Bob Taft, the Ohio attorney general and Ohio secretary of state.

From a higher education perspective, this measure stands to benefit only those students who attend college in Ohio and who have met a very stringent set of standards. They must have taken "core" academic courses, be enrolled in advanced placement programs, engage in community service activities, and have attended board-accredited high schools in Ohio.

We have yet to see a clear definition of "board accredited." High schools in Ohio are chartered, not accredited. Core and advanced placement courses would not funded by this amendment. That is left to local school districts. Undoubtedly, neither public school administrators in Ohio nor the state's taxpayers would welcome yet another unfunded mandate.

In writing the narrow definitions in this measure, proponents have clarified only their part of the deal: the part that would direct 55 percent of the profits to them. Remaining

beneficiaries are left to sort out terms that are very restrictive, inadequately defined and written using language that invites potential litigation and misapplication of funds.

Education and gambling make an uneasy partnership. Burdening the state with the potential for gambling addiction in the name of education is not an issue we, as educators, can support.

Additionally, there is no legal guarantee as to when the scholarships will be paid, or how much they will be worth per student. With eligibility restricted to grants to the top 5 percent of graduating seniors, the other 95 percent would be left out in the cold.

If it feels like a bad deal, then perhaps it is. Amending the constitution to bring slot machines to Ohio appears to be a last-ditch effort to gain a toehold for gambling interests in the name of education. It won't work.

I encourage you to read between the lines - and look beyond the glitzy and emotional TV ads - and consider for yourself whether gambling and higher education are a good mix. I believe the answer is no. I join many of my colleagues across the state in opposing Issue 3.