

Barchi pushes lawmakers on driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants

By Carly Sitrin

09/25/2019 05:03 AM EDT

Rutgers University President Robert Barchi is stepping down at the end of the current academic year, but before he goes, he wants New Jersey lawmakers to pass legislation that would allow undocumented immigrants access to state drivers licenses.

POLITICO has obtained letters Barchi sent earlier this month to state Senate President Steve Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin expressing Rutgers' support for the measure, [NJ S3229 \(18R\)](#) / [NJ A4743 \(18R\)](#).

"This bill is of particular interest and importance to the University and hundreds of students at Rutgers who have [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] protections. Many of these students commute to our campuses in Newark, Camden, Piscataway and New Brunswick," Barchi wrote. "Simply put, driver's licenses are essential to their pursuit of a college degree."

Barchi concludes his letters by urging the Senate and Assembly leadership to hold hearings and schedule a vote on the bill "as soon as possible."

A state [Office of Legislative Services report](#) said that during the fall 2017 semester Rutgers indicated there were 471 undocumented students attending its three campuses.

The letters represent the second time in less than a week that Barchi has challenged state lawmakers. On Friday, during his final address to the Rutgers University Senate, [Barchi called out the Legislature](#), saying he thinks Rutgers' title as the "State University" might need to be rethought if lawmakers don't increase state funding.

"Are we a state university anymore when the state support for Rutgers has gone from 90 percent to less than 20 percent?" Barchi asked. "At some point you cross the line into being a state affiliated university rather than a state university."

Though Barchi, 72, is stepping down from his post as Rutgers' 20th president at the end of this academic year, he plans to return to the faculty as a professor next year.

Several Rutgers student leaders and [DACA recipients sent their own letter](#) to state lawmakers earlier this month as well urging movement on the drivers license bill. In addition, Nancy Cantor, chancellor of Rutgers University-Newark, and Esder Chong, a Rutgers student and DACA recipient, [co-wrote their own op-ed](#) in favor of the measure.

The bill was introduced in the Legislature in December, but has not moved out of committee in either house despite having nine sponsors in the Senate and 30 sponsors in the Assembly. It's become a source of tension between legislative leadership and Gov. Phil Murphy, who has publicly supported the measure.

Murphy has called passage of the the bill a “no brainer,” and said he was “incredibly frustrated” the legislation had “stalled.” At an event earlier this month, [Murphy encouraged members of the public](#) “to call your Assembly person or your senator and ask them why it is stuck and why it's not on the governor's desk, because I will sign it.”

POLITICO reported the next day that [Coughlin was incensed by the comments](#), with one source saying the speaker was “inordinately pissed off at the governor for calling a day of action against his members.”

Legislative leadership has given little attention to the matter and the issue will likely play a role in Assembly elections this November. But there are no signs the bill would move before then. Advocates and supporters are pressing for the issue to be brought up in lame-duck session this winter. All 80 seats in the lower house are up for election this year.

Dory Devlin, a Rutgers spokesperson, said in an email that Barchi "understands that, given the legislative calendar, that the bill is not likely to be considered until sometime later this year. He is hopeful that it will be discussed and considered during the lame-duck session."

Kevin McArdle, a spokesperson for Coughlin, said in an email that “as stated previously this is a complicated and technical bill, and it’s critical to get it done correctly rather than quickly. The speaker is awaiting a finished product for a thorough review before deciding on a course of action and a timeframe for moving the bill.”

Sweeney’s office declined to comment.

[Read Barchi’s letter to Coughlin.](#)

[Read Barchi’s letter to Sweeney.](#)