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Assembly passes contentious for-profit college bill

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The Assembly on Tuesday approved a long-debated proposal to renew oversight of California's 1,700 for-profit and vocational colleges.

The 43-to-32 tally came one day after the same measure, SB 823, failed to attract enough votes, and it brought the 123-page bill significantly closer to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's desk.

The Senate, which passed an earlier version last year, must first agree to subsequent changes.

For-profit schools have gone without state oversight since July 1, when an agency that watched the industry expired. Lawmakers had been discussing a replacement agency for three years.

An industry leader criticized the legislation Tuesday and said it was too complicated.

"There's so many bad things in this bill," said Robert Johnson, executive director of the California Association of Private Postsecondary Schools. "I don't think the governor will sign this."

Schwarzenegger has vowed to veto all bills brought to him until legislators approve a state budget. A spokeswoman said Tuesday that the governor does not take a position on bills before he receives them.

The new agency would oversee colleges that enroll

tens of thousands of students, teaching them everything from religious leadership and accounting to hairdressing and truck driving. Some schools have attracted criticism for luring students with promises of lucrative jobs and then sending them off with worthless degrees.

Though the now-defunct oversight agency had its share of critics who said it was ineffective, its primary role was repaying students who lost money when financially unstable schools went out of business. The new agency will bring back some of those protections.

"At least it gives students a place to complain to," said Betsy Imholz of the Consumers Union. "It's not all we wanted, but it's better than nothing."

Lawmakers on both sides of the issue, including Sen. Don Perata, D-Oakland, the bill's sponsor, could not be reached for comment.

Tuesday's vote was mostly partisan, although two Democrats — Albert Torrico of Newark and Nicole Parra of Hanford — voted against the measure.

The Department of Consumer Affairs opposed the legislation, saying it was no improvement over the former troubled agency.

The department has received student complaints during the past two months, a spokesman said, and policy makers have uneasily watched fly-by-night schools known to be diploma mills set up in California.

"We want a law that is fair and easy to understand for everybody involved," said department spokesman Russ Heimerich. "This one doesn't do it. It's too much like the old law."

Matt Krupnick covers higher education. Reach

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