

Senate DREAM Act vote falls short

WASHINGTON - The Senate Oct. 24 fell eight votes short of the 60 needed to bring the DREAM Act to the floor, closing down an attempt to pass even a small piece of immigration legislation that has enjoyed bipartisan support.

The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, would have given young adults who were brought to the United States illegally by their parents at least five years ago the chance to legalize their own status while serving in the military or attending college at in-state tuition rates.

Kevin Appleby, director of immigration and refugee policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the failure of the 52-44 cloture vote, a preliminary step to bringing the bill to the floor for debate, was “terribly disappointing.”

“An extremely vulnerable group of children who needed relief fell prey to partisan politics,” he told Catholic News Service.

The bill was first introduced several years ago by Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and has had supporters from both parties all along. Its chief sponsor in this session said estimates of the number of students who might benefit from the bill range from fewer than 100,000 to fewer than 500,000.

In June, a comprehensive immigration reform bill twice failed on cloture votes in the Senate. The House has not brought its parallel legislation to the floor.

Appleby said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., has said she wants to bring to the floor the Agricultural Jobs, Opportunity, Benefits and Security Act, known as AgJOBS, which would open up more visas for agricultural workers. Farmers nationwide have had an increasingly difficult time finding enough laborers with the legal right to

work in the U.S.

That bill also has enjoyed bipartisan support. Both AgJOBS and the DREAM Act were included in the comprehensive bill considered this summer.

But Mr. Appleby said he wasn't optimistic that AgJOBS would fare any better than the DREAM Act did.

Frank Sharry, director of the National Immigration Forum, of which the USCCB is a member, urged the House to be encouraged by the fact that a majority of senators were willing to support the DREAM Act, even if there weren't enough votes under Senate procedures.

"That a clear majority wants to take some action on targeted immigration measures should encourage those leading the charge on AgJOBS to keep up the fight and encourage House leaders to consider creative ways to move a number of specific immigration measures simultaneously," said a statement from Mr. Sharry.

He said the debate about immigration is being ceded to politicians such as Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., a vocal opponent of legislation that would provide a way for people who are in the country illegally to legalize their status.

"We are saddened and angered that so many senators, including a majority of Republicans, opted to stand in the schoolhouse door and thwart the dreams of deserving young people who are American in all but paperwork," said Mr. Sharry. "This occurred the day after Congressman Tom Tancredo called for the arrest of DREAM Act kids who came to the Capitol to plead their case."

Mr. Tancredo, also a candidate for president, had written to the office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement asking the agency to arrest "any illegal aliens" participating in an Oct. 23 press conference hosted by Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., at the Capitol in support of the DREAM Act.

The press conference featured three immigrant students who would benefit from the DREAM Act. A Durbin spokesman said all three have temporary legal status. No effort was made to arrest the students.

Mr. Sharry warned that demonizing and opposing “students and soldiers who think of America as their only home,” is “not only politically shortsighted, it grates on the conscience of the nation.”