If I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it a thousand times: Legislators don’t lose elections over what happens at the Statehouse; they lose because they don’t take care of business back home.

There’s a lot of truth to that. Visible, accessible legislators with topnotch constituent services usually don’t lose elections. If you look at the roster of losing Democrats in 2010, you’ll see a bunch of incumbents who became invisible in their districts, or let things slide. That’s not a hard-and-fast rule, of course. Nothing approaches universality in the political business. Some districts change, some people are elected as onetime flukes. But constituent services are all-important. Period. End of story.

In most parts of the state, however, taking care of the home front means making sure that local political and business powers are constantly stroked. And this is where members have often gone too far, particularly with the legislative scholarship program. The number of city, Downstate, and suburban party chairs, precinct captains, fundraisers, and other honchos who have “absolutely brilliant children totally deserving of these scholarships” has been a constant refrain. It is probably the most abused program in all of state government.

That’s not to say the scholarship program has done no good. Plenty of kids have gone to college, or medical school, or law school who never would’ve otherwise managed to do so without a legislative scholarship. Legislators often get into this business to help people, and many are deservedly proud of the real, honest good they’ve done with this program.

But recent revelations have convinced all but the most hardcore legislative adherents that this program is so rife with abuse that it must die.

How, for instance, can anyone defend Senator Martin Sandoval (D-Cicero) handing out scholarships to five unrelated students whose “official” address all happened to be the home of Sandoval’s fundraiser and an Ed Burke precinct captain?

Former Representative Bob Molaro (D-Chicago) has also been questioned about scholarships awarded to all four children of a campaign worker who doesn’t live in the district.

The Illinois State Board of Education forwarded the Sandoval case to the FBI, as well as one involving Representative Dan Burke (D-Chicago), who gave a scholarship to the daughter of a legislative aide who didn't' appear to live in his district. The feds were already investigating the Molaro scholarship when the Board of Education referrals arrived.

ChicagoTalks.org took a look at legislative scholarships last summer and found that about a third of sitting state legislators had awarded scholarships to kids outside their districts. Some of those scholarships can easily be explained away because parents moved, or kids just went to school in the legislative district, or other honest mistakes were made. Some of the questioned scholarships also appear to have been totally legal. The Board of Elections' online legislator-locating system apparently isn't 100-percent accurate.

Whatever the case, it's against the law to award one of these scholarships to a student who doesn't live in a legislator's district, and it has been for a very long time. If the feds really wanted to, they could conceivably indict a large number of legislators for mail fraud. A very big chunk of the General Assembly might be wiped out on this residency issue (including, possibly, even some leaders). And it goes without saying that it's totally indefensible to hand out scholarships to the progeny of party functionaries, brilliant or (far more likely) not.

If the General Assembly cannot find a way to once and for all reform this program, then legislators must end it. And, frankly, I'm not sure how the scholarship program can be reformed, because way too many legislators have resisted, circumvented, or blatantly ignored past reforms. If they want a district-based program for truly needy and deserving students, then they should set one up with real oversight and regulations. Otherwise, this must end, or the feds will do the job on their own and a whole lot of legislators might wind up in prison. Heck, that could happen anyway.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax *(a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com .*