

HB

403

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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Statement

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Representative David Guttenberg

"An Act creating a postsecondary scholarship grant program for Alaska residents based on high achievement and financial need "

The rising cost of an education is changing the perception of affordability among our middle and high school students and their parents, as well as adults who are interested in continuing their education. For students approaching their high school graduation, the cost of a postsecondary education is the most important topic discussed by the student and the family. For nontraditional or continuing students, it can be the primary factor in the decision to further their education. It is unacceptable that Alaskans who show promise do not move on to higher learning simply because of the cost.

A 2007 report from the State Higher Education Executive Officers found that a \$1,000 difference in the price of college may impact college enrollment for the most financially needy students by as much as nine percent. A 2007 Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education report determined that for every \$160 in increased tuition, low income enrollments dropped by 5 percent in four year, public institutions and by 2.3 percent in community colleges. Perhaps most alarming, a recent internal University survey found that the number two reason why students dropped out was because of financial reasons.

Alaska's high school graduation rates are among the lowest in the country. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that Alaska ranks 42nd in high school graduation rates at 60.7%. There is no doubt that more students will be encouraged to graduate by providing the promise of a postsecondary education. Action is desperately needed. HB 397 will establish the Alaska Achievers Incentive Program within the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education. This program will help reduce the costs of a postsecondary education for those students who demonstrate academic success as well as financial need. By so doing, this program will increase educational opportunities for more bright, hardworking, and capable Alaskans so they may be ready to fill Alaskan jobs.

I urge your support of HB 397.

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SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/357080_college31.html

State promises help with college costs for low-income students

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By MANUEL VALDES
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TACOMA -- Teresa Jackson is raising three grandchildren by herself on a fixed income, and saving money for their college education is nearly impossible.

But now Washington is stepping in to help low-income students like Jackson's grandchildren go to college.

A new scholarship for low-income middle school students comes with a promise that if grades are kept up through high school -- at least 2.0 -- the state will pay for college. Children need to keep out of trouble with the law, too -- no felonies.

"This is my only opportunity," said Jackson, who at 61 is taking care of two teenagers and a third child in elementary school after their mothers -- Jackson's daughters -- developed substance-abuse problems.

"We just barely make enough to survive. And saving up for college is impossible. It's a burden off my shoulders," Jackson said.

The College Bound scholarship is part of a recent string of initiatives by the state and universities trying to usher low-income students into a college education.

The state began rolling out registration for the scholarship this year. The only stipulation is students need to be under the free-or-reduced lunch program. The deadline to enroll is June 1 for eighth-graders.

Students who enroll must continue to meet low-income criteria when they apply for college admission.

Around 3,200 students have registered so far out of the possible 56,000 seventh- and eighth-graders eligible statewide.

But just as children need to keep their grades up, lawmakers will have to keep funding the scholarship, even as looming state deficits forced lawmakers to do some budget trimming in the last legislative session.

In 2007, \$8.1 million was earmarked to launch the scholarship, but the first class will not spend the money until 2013. After that, lawmakers will have to find additional money.

"We've been through deficits before, we'll go through them again, but one of our goals, one of our priorities is to provide access to higher education," said Sen. Rosemary McAuliffe, D-Bothell, chairwoman of the state Senate's education committee.

The scholarship is based on a program launched in Indiana more than 15 years ago that has proved to be successful in increasing college enrollment. Oklahoma also has a similar scholarship, and California

lawmakers have drafted a measure as well, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The College Bound scholarship could attract thousands more students to college in the future. High school completion and college attendance rates among low-income students rank at the bottom of all economic groups in the state.

"Part of working with kids in poverty is just giving them hope," said Harjeet Sandhu, principal at Tacoma's Jason Lee Middle School, where more than 80 percent of students qualify for the free-or-reduced lunch program.

Along with Jackson's granddaughter, Nikole, other students at Jason Lee are getting prepped by their teachers to start thinking about college. An advisory program was set up this year so when eighth-graders choose classes for high school, they also know the requirements to get into college. They visit colleges, too.

The state is estimated to spend more than \$180 million to fund need-based grants for the more than 72,000 low-income college students in the 2007-08 school year. The money provided in College Bound would help supplement that, and students would get the aid only for state schools.

Steve Thorndill, executive director of the Issaquah-based College Success Foundation, an organization helping low-income students get to college, said College Bound is the best such legislation he has seen. But Thorndill said if the number of low-income students attending college increases, more funding would be needed for the needs-based grants.

"I don't know how they can't continue it," Thorndill said. "It's kind of a moral imperative to me."

There have been other efforts to help low-income students. Washington State University and the University of Washington have pledged to waive tuition for such students.

Around 5,500 students, representing 21.5 percent of the UW's undergraduate student body, qualified under the "Husky Promise" during the 2007-08 school year. At WSU, 18.1 percent of all new undergraduates in fall 2007 are covered under the "Cougar Commitment" program.

"I think the state and university are trying to send that same message, that college is a possibility," said Kay Lewis, the UW's financial aid director.

McAuliffe said now the state's job is to spread the word about College Bound.

At Jason Lee, a handful of students enrolled now in the advisory program showed off what they know about college. They know it will be away from home. There will be clubs to join and lots of classes to take. And they've heard their parents talk about college.

College "costs a lot of money," said Tevin Richmond, an eighth-grader at Jason Lee.

But now for Jackson and Principal Sandhu, helping the students get good grades for the next three years is the challenge.

"They need the support of the parents and the community, of some grown-up, some way or another," Jackson said.

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