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**SENATE BILL 6254**

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**State of Washington 68th Legislature 2024 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Nobles, Hansen, Conway, Frame, Hasegawa, Kuderer, Lovick, Saldaña, Valdez, and C. Wilson

AN ACT Relating to student navigational supports to increase postsecondary enrollment; amending RCW 28B.50.940; adding a new section to chapter 28B.77 RCW; creating new sections; and providing an expiration date.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The legislature recognizes that Washington stands among the top 10 states for job opportunities requiring education beyond high school, and that large majorities of high school students self-report aspirations to continue their education beyond 12th grade. However, only an estimated 40 percent of Washington's high school class of 2021 is projected to obtain a postsecondary credential. This issue is particularly pressing for students from lower income households. The legislature further recognizes that the real or perceived cost of postsecondary education is a critical systemic barrier that impedes prospective students from applying and enrolling in postsecondary education. This is despite Washington boasting one of the most expansive and equitable set of state-level postsecondary financial aid programs in the country. The legislature further recognizes that counseling, advising, and coaching that help students with the postsecondary financial aid, application, and enrollment processes, and that provide hands-on assistance, are proven approaches to increasing rates of postsecondary enrollment. In order to broaden access to student navigational supports, Washington should invest in student navigational supports and services to advise students to and through postsecondary education and training. Therefore, it is the legislature's intent to establish a financial aid completion and community and technical college retention pilot program.

**Sec.**  RCW 28B.50.940 and 2022 c 214 s 3 are each amended to read as follows:

Subject to availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the college board shall administer a ((~~free application for federal student aid and Washington application for state financial aid outreach and completion initiative pilot program~~)) financial aid completion and community and technical college retention pilot program for every educational service district.

(1) The college board shall select community or technical colleges to participate in the pilot program. The ((~~colleges selected to participate must each be located within educational service districts that are in the bottom two for free application for federal student aid completion rates when combining their respective school districts' free application for federal student aid completion rates over the past three completed academic years prior to June 9, 2022~~)) college board may also consider tribal organizations or community-based organizations to participate in the pilot program if deemed appropriate for the context of a given educational service district. The colleges or organizations selected to participate must include at least one college or organization from each educational service district. Colleges or organizations selected to participate shall employ outreach and persistence specialists to work directly with the high schools located in the corresponding educational service district. It is the legislature's intent that the outreach and persistence specialists be employed at a ratio of one to 600 high school seniors within the corresponding educational service district. The outreach and persistence specialists shall make significant contact with high school students and their families, with a focus on those households who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, the federal supplemental nutrition assistance program, medicaid, or other similar public benefit programs, for the purpose of increasing free application for federal student aid and Washington application for state financial aid completion rates. The outreach and persistence specialists shall use the free application for federal student aid and Washington application for state financial aid data maintained by the student achievement council to conduct targeted outreach and free application for federal student aid and Washington application for state financial aid completion assistance to high school seniors. The outreach and persistence specialists shall also provide information on how to access private scholarships. The outreach and persistence specialists shall conduct other outreach as appropriate, including virtual or in-person presentations with students and families, announcements on ((~~school intercoms and~~)) social media channels, outreach to recent high school graduates as peer messengers, and events at school college or career fairs.

(2) The outreach and persistence specialists shall assist students in exploring college services and programs to improve their skills and increase academic achievement, with a focus on those students who are eligible for public benefit programs, for the purpose of helping community and technical college students reach their education and career goals.

(3) The college board shall report annually to the appropriate committees of the legislature in accordance with RCW 43.01.036 beginning December 1, ((~~2023, on the free application for federal student aid and Washington application for state financial aid outreach and completion initiative pilot program~~)) 2025, on the financial aid completion and community and technical college retention pilot program. All colleges or organizations selected to participate in the pilot program and employing outreach and persistence specialists shall share student-level data with the student achievement council. Any tribal organizations or community-based organizations that are selected to participate shall enter into data-sharing agreements with partner colleges. The report must include details on how the colleges selected used the funding ((~~and~~)), how the initiatives worked to increase free application for federal student aid and Washington application for state financial aid completion rates, and how the initiatives worked to increase college retention. The report must ((~~also~~)) include before and after free application for federal student aid and Washington application for state financial aid completion data and specific details about the number and demographic information of high school students assisted in completing the free application for federal student aid and Washington application for state financial aid. The report must also include details about the rates of college student first-year retention with corresponding demographic information.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 28B.77 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The legislature intends to ensure that every school district has access to at least one qualified financial aid professional to provide expert support and ensure accurate and timely administration of financial aid forms. To achieve this, the legislature intends to make available, at no cost to participants, comprehensive financial aid training for teachers, school counselors, postsecondary staff, and community partners.

(2) The council shall administer a financial aid certification program that is available to secondary school teachers and counselors, staff at the institutions of higher education, and community partners. The certification program must cover topics including the administration of state and federal financial aid, eligibility criteria, family educational rights and privacy act regulations and standards, consumer information reporting and disclosures, and cost of attendance and need analysis. The council may contract with a third-party entity to provide the certification program. The certification program must be offered at no cost to program participants.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  (1) The professional educator standards board, in consultation with the office of the superintendent of public instruction and the Washington student achievement council, shall explore whether completion of a financial aid certification program, as provided for under section 3 of this act or through a third-party entity, can be recognized as continuing education. The professional educator standards board, in consultation with the office of the superintendent of public instruction and the Washington student achievement council, shall make recommendations to the legislature by October 1, 2025, in accordance with RCW 43.01.036 about the minimum requirements for a financial aid certification program to be recognized as continuing education and any additional incentives that should be available to encourage participation in the certification program.

(2) This section expires November 1, 2025.

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