

Dear Senators and Representatives,

I serve on the Corvallis School Board, and I am writing to urge you to support SB 1537, a bill carefully crafted to restrict the use of state school funds for community college tuition for students who have met requirements for a standard high school diploma. Why is this bill so important?

- Increasing high school graduation rates is a critical goal we all share. SB 1537 carefully ties the Post-Graduate Scholar Program (formerly known as fifth year programs) to improving high school graduation rates for at risk students. It is modeled after the experience of districts that have been using this strategy to retain students at risk of dropping out and to engage students who previously dropped out of high school. The fifth year is the “carrot” that gives some students hope and has helped many become first generation HIGH SCHOOL graduates.
- This bill is also crafted to encourage districts to support more students to earn college credits in grades 9-12, including underserved students who are not accessing college credit opportunities. In fact, it requires that the majority of students earning college credit on a campus must be in grades 9-12, or students with a modified or extended diploma, or a GED.
- This bill reduces the risk of escalating costs by ensuring that only students who have no other pathway to college are able to participate. Students eligible for Oregon Promise or Pell Grants are not eligible to be Post-Graduate Scholars.
- Many students with a GPA below 2.5 can and will succeed in college if only given the chance. Many of these students are low income or face other educational barriers. For these students, access to post-secondary education has the potential to be truly transformational and break cycles of intergenerational poverty. These students, who are excluded from the Oregon Promise program, would qualify for college opportunities under the Post-Graduate Scholar program in SB 1537.
- SB 1537 isn’t just about tuition. It requires school districts to provide face to face, 1:1 counseling with school district staff at least twice a month. In addition, districts can hold students accountable for attendance, course selection, and academic performance. This support is essential for our most at risk students to be successful in college.
- Districts can’t profit from this new post-graduate scholar program. This is because funding declines each year, and districts must commit district resources to supporting students. In almost every case, districts will need to contribute general fund dollars beyond their ADM to offer this program.
- We lack good data about how many students are participating in these programs currently, and what the programs cost. SB 1537 finally creates a mechanism to track the students and the cost.
- Data will help us have a discussion about the future of this program in 2018, and make needed changes—including a potential shift to a new funding source—during the 2019 session.
- SB 1537 is equitable, creates a safety net for our most at risk students, and will help further strategies to increase high school graduation rates.

Thank you in advance for your support of SB 1537.

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