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Report on the Impact of Legislation Allowing Certain Graduates from Private High Schools to Participate in the A+ Scholarship Program

Coordinating Board for Higher Education
March 8, 2018

BACKGROUND

With the passage of Senate Bill 638 during the 2016 legislative session, the State Board of Education was authorized to designate non-public Missouri high schools as A+ high schools. This designation would then allow graduates of those high schools that meet the eligibility requirements, including attending an A+ participating postsecondary institution, to receive reimbursement for their postsecondary tuition and fees through the scholarship component of the A+ program.

As has been the case for the life of the A+ program, students that graduate from a high school after the date of designation are immediately eligible for the scholarship component, assuming they have met the program's eligibility requirements. One of the primary changes that has occurred since the program was originally established is the length of time to complete the designation process. Initially, that process required three years from the time of application for the high school to become designated.

Beginning with the transfer of the scholarship component of the program to the Missouri Department of Higher Education (MDHE) in 2010, the Governor's office launched an initiative to encourage the remaining undesignated public high schools to seek and achieve A+ designation. To accomplish that goal, the application timeline was shortened, allowing a high school to apply for A+ designating and achieve that designation within the same academic year. Even under this shortened designation time frame, students that graduated after the formal designation by the state board of education were eligible for the scholarship component, assuming they met all of the other eligibility requirements. The major impact on the program of this change is that, because there was no longer a three year preparation period, usage of the program at newly designated schools ramped up more slowly than when the full three year period was in place. MDHE staff believe this phenomenon will continue with the designation of private high schools.

CURRENT STATUS

In March of 2017, the State Board of Education designated 58 private high schools as meeting the A+ designation criteria. With that action, 2017 and later graduates of those schools were potentially eligible to participate in the scholarship component of the program. Once those designations were confirmed, MDHE staff contacted the designated high schools to provide additional information about the program and to request information about the number of their 2017 seniors they expected to use the A+ scholarship benefit. Based on the response to the request, MDHE staff estimated that 450 private high school graduates would attend an A+ participating postsecondary institution and use the tuition and fee reimbursement.

Our first opportunity to assess actual usage of the program by private high school graduates came at the end of the fall 2017 payment cycle. Because most institutions wait until after the semester has ended to request reimbursement, accurate numbers for that cycle were not available until after the payment cycle closed on February 15. Based on the data available, MDHE staff confirmed payments to 152 graduates of private high schools during the fall cycle. In addition, there were 144 individuals for which staff was unable verify the high school from which the student graduated. Although there are always some unknowns, because of the limited data about private high school graduation, staff assume the majority of the individuals without a confirmed high school were graduates of a private high school. Based on that assumption, staff estimate fall 2017 payments totaling \$538,913 were made to 296 private high school graduates. That constitutes approximately 2.5 percent of the students served and payments disbursed.

NEXT STEPS

Based on the experience during the fall semester, we would assume A+ will provide reimbursement to more than 300 private high school graduates during the 2017-18 award year and the total payments will likely exceed \$1.1 million dollars. It is important to keep in mind that additional schools may be designated by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education later this spring and that we expect usage at previously designated schools will increase faster than the overall program growth rate during the next couple of award years.

RECOMMENDATION

This is an information item only.

NO ATTACHMENTS