

# Gov. Pritzker Signs Legislation To Expand Access To Higher Education

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CHICAGO — Governor JB Pritzker today signed legislation designed to increase access to Illinois' higher education system, close equity gaps, and improve student protections and operational effectiveness. The bills expand resources available to students and build on the administration's efforts to expand equitable access to public universities and community colleges.

House Bill 4201 helps students at state universities and community colleges access benefits through “benefits navigators.” Each institution is tasked with assigning a benefits navigator for the purpose of guiding students to seek and apply for any federal, state, or local program that provides assistance or benefits for which they are eligible. HB 4201 goes into effect Jan. 1, 2023.

Senate Bill 3991 amends the Illinois Higher Education Savings Program, also known as the Children’s Savings Program, which was established to start each baby born or adopted in Illinois with a \$50 college savings deposit in the Treasurer’s 529 fund. This legislation allows the State Treasurer to increase the deposit amount for children in financially insecure households if funds are available. SB 3991 goes into effect Jan. 1, 2023.

House Bill 5464 requires State public universities and community colleges to develop and implement equity plans and practices to increase the access, retention, completion, and student loan repayment rates for minority students, rural students, adult students, women, and people with disabilities who are traditionally underrepresented in education programs and activities. The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), in collaboration with the Illinois Community College Board, will guide implementation of the new equity plans. The bill also allows IBHE to request financial reports from private universities, private business, and vocational schools, if needed, to help institutions stay on solid financial footing. HB 5464 is effective immediately.

“Access to affordable, quality higher education shouldn’t be a privilege,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “Today, we take a step forward in ensuring everyone—especially our historically underrepresented students—have the resources and investment necessary to thrive in our first-rate public education system. I am proud to sign these bills into law furthering our state’s commitment to educational equity for all Illinoisans.”

“The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a dramatic impact on students throughout our state, from pre-k to higher education. We also know it has been especially challenging for students in marginalized and rural communities,” said Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton. “During my statewide college tour, students shared stories of their struggles as they worked to develop skills and grow through paths of learning. With these bills, Illinois takes decisive action. Our state is standing up for strong education, continuing the focus on creating equitable, inclusive, affordable, safe and supportive environments for all students in Illinois.”

“Setting our students up for success means giving them and their families the support they need to help afford higher education,” said State Senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas (D-Chicago), lead Senate sponsor of HB 4201 and SB 3991. “The new laws will help us

target outreach to families so they know their options for setting up savings accounts for their child's educational future and make sure students already on campuses can access assistance programs available to them."

"By creating an on-campus point-person who can assist students with accessing benefits, we will enable more people to receive aid with food, housing and other essential services," said State Representative Maurice West (D-Rockford) and lead House sponsor of HB 4201. "Particularly during these difficult times, this new law will complement financial aid offices and help with addressing critical issues outside of scholarships and tuition aid. If we want our students to succeed in the classroom and unlock their full potential, let's make sure they have the basic support they deserve."

"Children from underprivileged families deserve the same access to higher education as everyone else," said State Representative Lakesia Collins (D-Chicago) and lead House sponsor of SB 3991. "Allowing additional assistance for these children and requiring improved reporting of racial, ethnic and socioeconomic data regarding beneficiaries will help to address systemic inequality in our state. I am pleased that SB 3991 has been signed into law."

"Education is arguably the single most important factor in promoting social mobility and a thriving economy," said State Representative Katie Stuart (D-Edwardsville) and lead House sponsor of HB 5464. "Enhancing and refining the ability of the Illinois Board of Higher Education to ensure accountability and integrity at colleges and universities will help protect access to high quality education for all Illinoisans."

"To ensure that higher education remains a key pathway for success in Illinois, it is critical to understand both the challenges and the opportunities of advancing postsecondary diversity and inclusion," said State Senator Scott Bennett (D-Champaign) and lead Senate sponsor of HB 5464. "This law puts our state on track to becoming a more inclusive economy with equitable paths to opportunity for all, especially those facing barriers."

"Together, with this year's historic investment in higher education, these bills will provide students greater access to critical support programs, improve accountability in higher education, and help make college more affordable for all Illinoisans," said Lisa Castillo Richmond, Executive Director of Partnership for College Completion. "PCC applauds the Governor and Illinois legislature for continuing to prioritize students and higher education as a critical link to the workforce and economic prosperity."

Benefits navigators

Benefits navigators will participate in a consortium to share and develop best practices as they help students obtain needed benefits and assistance to reach their educational goals. The public university consortium will be overseen by the Illinois Board of Higher Education, and the Illinois Community College Board will oversee the community college consortium.

### Illinois Higher Education Savings Program

The Illinois Higher Education Savings Program, also known as the Illinois Children's Savings Account program, was first established in 2019 and was provided initial funding of \$2.5 million in the FY 2023 budget (PA 102-698). Through this program, all children born or adopted in Illinois on or after January 1, 2023, will have access to a 529 College Savings account with a \$50 starter deposit. Research from similar programs in other states has shown that the presence of such a savings fund increases the likelihood of children attending college by three times and the likelihood of them completing college by four times.

“Given how important and costly it is to attend college or trade school, every child born or adopted in Illinois, should have the tools to save and pay for their education,” said State Treasurer Michael Frerichs, whose office will administer the program as part of its IL 529 College Savings programs.

Additionally, the State Treasurer's office is now tasked with reporting the rate of seed deposits claimed and certain demographic information of beneficiaries and of children in financially insecure households.

### Higher Education Omnibus Bill

In addition to requiring state public universities and community colleges to develop and implement equity plans, HB 5464 also requires all public and private postsecondary institutions to report student data to ensure IBHE has a complete picture of the State's college students and ensure progress is made toward achieving educational equity.

“This is a big, important step forward in reducing disparities in outcomes for underrepresented students, faculty, and staff as each institution will develop a plan and implement strategies to address its own equity gaps,” said IBHE Executive Director Ginger Ostro. “A key goal of the state's higher education strategic plan is to close equity gaps in access, enrollment, retention and completion of postsecondary education, especially for historically marginalized populations, and the changes to current statute by HB 5464 will help do just that.”

Community colleges serve the largest number of underrepresented students in the state.

“In order to continue to provide meaningful education to all, we must invest more deeply in plans that support and promote inclusion and diversity at all of our institutions of higher education,” said Illinois Community College Board Executive Director Brian Durham. “The development of equity plans and practices offer the state’s 48 community colleges an opportunity to highlight what they do to serve their diverse student body and to work across campus to enhance the success of their students, something that fits squarely within the community college mission.”