

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center
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C.S.S.B. 620
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Higher Education
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Committee Report (Substituted)

AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

Currently, approximately 300 speech-language pathologist (SLP) positions are vacant throughout the state, which means that 22,000 students who need help are not getting it. This represents an overall vacancy rate of 8.7 percent, with a 19.2 percent vacancy rate for bilingual SLPs. Currently there are only 11.5 audiologists employed in Texas public schools statewide. Such a low number of audiologists means that the vast majority of school districts contract out services for students with hearing disabilities to a private provider. This is an undesirable result, in terms of both effectiveness and cost efficiency.

Due to attrition and a recent decrease in SLP graduates, the number of licensed pathologists needed to work in public schools is expected to increase by 30 percent by 2016. National data show that appropriately trained and educated SLPs make a significant difference not only in a child's communication skills but also in his or her educational achievement. Fully licensed (master's degree) SLPs are best qualified to independently help students with complex disorders that are becoming more common in schools—including developmental disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, voice disorders, stuttering, autism, and various other social disorders.

Sixty-four percent of Texas university students in communication disorders programs (SLPs and audiologists) surveyed indicated that the cost of tuition and fees is the greatest barrier to seeking and completing a master's degree. A major contributor to this problem is that many programs are full, due to a shortage of doctoral faculty teaching courses—a vicious cycle. This critical shortage of doctoral level faculty in Texas and nationwide is largely due to the “graying of the profession” and the cost of obtaining a doctoral degree. National accreditation standards require faculty expertise at the doctoral level for training of master's degree students.

In order to help meet the growing need for SLPs and audiologists, C.S.S.B. 620 aims to decrease the cost of obtaining an advanced degree in these areas. The bill creates a loan repayment assistance fund from which the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board can distribute monies it receives from gifts, grants, and donations. Providing loan repayment assistance grants to SLPs/audiologists who hold a master's degree and teach in public schools and to SLPs/audiologists who hold a doctoral degree and are employed at institutions of higher education would create an incentive to furthering education in a critical field.

C.S.S.B. 620 amends current law relating to student loan repayment assistance for speech-language pathologists or audiologists employed by a public school or as faculty members of certain graduate programs at public institutions of higher education.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

Rulemaking authority is expressly granted to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in SECTION 1 (Sections 61.9812, 61.9813, 61.9815, and 61.9819, Education Code) of this bill.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. Amends Chapter 61, Education Code, by adding Subchapter II, as follows:

SUBCHAPTER II. REPAYMENT OF CERTAIN SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST AND AUDIOLOGIST EDUCATION LOANS

Sec. 61.9811. DEFINITIONS. Defines "audiologist," "communicative disorders program," "public school," and "speech-language pathologist" in this subchapter.

Sec. 61.9812. REPAYMENT ASSISTANCE AUTHORIZED. Requires the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to provide, in accordance with this subchapter and THECB rules, assistance in the repayment of student loans for speech-language pathologists and audiologists who apply and qualify for assistance.

Sec. 61.9813. ELIGIBILITY. (a) Requires a speech-language pathologist or an audiologist, to be eligible to receive repayment assistance, to:

(1) apply to THECB; and

(2) at the time the speech-language pathologist or audiologist applies for the assistance:

(A) have been employed as a speech-language pathologist or as an audiologist, as applicable, for at least one year by, and be currently employed in that capacity by, a public school; or

(B) have been employed as a faculty member of a communicative disorders program at an institution of higher education or private or independent institution of higher education for at least one year, and be currently employed in that capacity at such an institution.

(b) Authorizes THECB by rule to provide for repayment assistance on a pro rata basis for speech-language pathologists and audiologists employed part-time by a public school or institution of higher education.

Sec. 61.9814. LIMITATION. (a) Authorizes a speech-language pathologist or an audiologist, on qualifying for the assistance, to receive repayment assistance grants for each year of employment, not to exceed five years, by:

(1) a public school; or

(2) a communicative disorders program at an institution of higher education or private or independent institution of higher education.

(b) Prohibits the total amount of repayment assistance grants received by a speech-language pathologist or an audiologist under this subchapter, for each applicable year of employment described by Subsection (a), from exceeding:

(1) \$6,000 for an eligible recipient who holds a master's degree but not a doctoral degree; or

(2) \$9,000 for an eligible recipient who holds a doctoral degree.

Sec. 61.9815. ELIGIBLE LOANS. Authorizes THECB to provide repayment assistance for the repayment of any student loan, as defined by THECB rule, for education at any public or private institution of higher education in or outside of this state received by an eligible speech-language pathologist or audiologist.

Sec. 61.9816. REPAYMENT. (a) Requires THECB to deliver any repayment made under this subchapter in a lump sum payable to:

(1) the lender and the speech-language pathologist or audiologist, in accordance with any applicable federal law; or

(2) the lender or other holder of the loan on behalf of the speech-language pathologist or audiologist.

(b) Authorizes a repayment made under this subchapter to be applied to the principal amount and accrued interest of the loan.

Sec. 61.9817. **ADVISORY COMMITTEES.** Authorizes THECB to appoint advisory committees to assist THECB in administering this subchapter.

Sec. 61.9818. **PROGRAM FUNDING.** Authorizes the program to be funded solely from gifts, grants, and donations solicited and accepted by THECB for the purposes of this subchapter.

Sec. 61.9819. **RULES.** (a) Requires THECB to adopt rules necessary for the administration of this subchapter.

(b) Requires THECB to distribute a copy of the rules adopted under this section and pertinent information regarding this subchapter to:

(1) each appropriate institution of higher education or private or independent institution of higher education;

(2) any appropriate state agency; and

(3) any appropriate professional association.

SECTION 2. Effective date: September 1, 2013.