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HB 923 – SUPPORT

“Higher Education – Appointment of Secretary and Student Financial Assistance - Alterations”

House Appropriations Committee
February 28, 2023

CollegeTracks submits this written testimony in support of HB 923.

CollegeTracks is a non-profit organization in Montgomery County that works in partnership with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). Our mission is to empower first-generation-to-college students and students from low-income and immigrant households in Montgomery County, Maryland by helping them bridge systemic opportunity gaps with enough support to get to and through postsecondary education and onto a career pathway.

CollegeTracks is currently working with over 1300 High School students from 5 MCPS High Schools, and over 520 college students, 96% of whom attend colleges in Maryland. The program begins with our CollegeTracks Access Program, which serves high school students starting in their junior year and focuses on College Admissions and Financial Aid advising. The CollegeTracks Success Program supports these students once they graduate high school, and helps them enroll, persist, and graduate from college, and move on into a meaningful career. 99% of our students are accepted into at least one college or vocational school, and they enroll, persist, and graduate at rates that match their more affluent peers.

Overall, CollegeTracks supports the effort to streamline the process of applying for and administering Maryland state financial aid. The process of getting and maintaining state aid is unduly complicated and we know from experience that many deserving students do not get the aid they need to pursue their education. HB 923 is an important step in redesigning Maryland state financial aid so that those students who cannot afford college are able to pursue their education in the state of Maryland.

Specifically, we support the provisions in HB 923 eliminating a GPA requirement of 2.5, as well as the removal of the requirements to enroll within one year of high school graduation and to be under the age of 22. For Maryland students from low-income households, the Guaranteed Access Grant can be the difference between earning a higher education credential or not. Removing these barriers to this important grant is a positive development.

In 2022, CollegeTracks served 650 high school seniors. Of these students 122 were eligible for the Guaranteed Access grants and 112 of these students chose to attend a Maryland institution of higher education, in part because the Guaranteed Access Grant meant they

could afford it. 118 students were eligible to receive the Educational Assistance Grant. 19 of these students had a GPA of less than 2.5 and at least 10 of these students had an EFC of 0, which may have made them eligible for the Guaranteed Access Grant and could have been the difference that allowed them to attend a four-year institution.

We also support provisions in HB 923 which make the College Promise Scholarship a campus-based program and allow for the scholarship to be awarded to students taking at least 6 credits, with priority given to full-time students. We have had a number of students lose the College Promise Scholarship when they have reduced their course load to part-time for family and/or economic reasons.

The largest impediment to a student completing their postsecondary education is financial pressure. We strongly believe that all young people in Maryland deserve the opportunity to pursue higher education, if they choose, and to have access to as much financial aid as they need to do so. It is our hope that through continued research and collaboration, Maryland state aid will be adjusted so that the Guaranteed Access Grant and the Educational Assistance grant are combined into one program, with awards made on a sliding scale, utilizing a simplified and streamlined process for students, including the process of verification. We also will support provisions that will expand outreach to students who have unmet requirements and allow students to regain their state aid should they lose it.

HB 923 takes important steps towards ensuring that those who have the most financial need in Maryland are given the assistance they need to pursue higher education, get on a career pathway, and continue contributing to a thriving state economy.