



March 30, 2023

To: Senate Higher Education Subcommittee
Re: Written Testimony Submitted FOR SB 526

Honorable Chairman Creighton and Members of the Senate Higher Education Subcommittee,

My name is Jonathan Feinstein, testifying on behalf of The Education Trust in support of Senate Bill 526. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and to Senator West for bringing forward this legislation.

This bill reflects pretty sound logic: Our higher education agency should be involved in ensuring that higher education in this state – wherever it is taking place – is of the highest possible quality.

Higher education in prison may be unfamiliar to some, but it is not new to Texas. We have had successful programs operating going back as far as the 1960s. Today, several thousand incarcerated people have received workforce credentials, associates and even bachelor's degrees from several Texas colleges and universities.

Postsecondary programming in prisons has been linked with substantially reduced recidivism, better employment and earnings outcomes upon release, and improved safety and security within prisons. There are strong reasons for us to want to get as many students involved as possible, but cost has always been a limiting factor.

What has changed is the Pell Grants. In 2020, the federal government reinstated Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students, effective July of this year.

The federal rules governing Pell Grants in prisons designate the Texas Department of Criminal Justice as the ultimate decider regarding which programs are approved, where they operate, and who has access. These rules don't prescribe a role for the Coordinating Board, however, which makes this bill very useful to ensure we utilize the full range of expertise necessary to do this right and advance our state's goals.

I also appreciate the changes Senator West has made in his committee substitute. The federal rules require two different approval processes for Pell-funded programs in prisons: an initial approval process, similar to an RFP, and a subsequent, more robust review of programs informed by data to ensure they are high quality for students. The revised language ensures the Coordinating Board lends its expertise in both of these processes.

This bill is an excellent first step for our state to capitalize on the many opportunities offered by Pell reinstatement. There is more work to be done to ensure we grow enrollment, approve the right college partners, and hold them accountable for their students' success. We look forward to working with you, the Coordinating Board, TDCJ, and our colleges to achieve these goals.

Thank you for your time, and again to Sen. West for this bill. We urge your favorable consideration.

Sincerely,
Jonathan Feinstein
Texas State Director, The Education Trust