PRESS RELEASE
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Contact: Senator Berger Press
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Senate Passes Bipartisan Legislation to Expand Eligibility for School Choice Programs

Programs allow parents to send children to school that best suits the child’s unique gifts

Every student deserves equal shot at success, regardless of ZIP code, income, or color

Raleigh, N.C. – The N.C. Senate today passed Senate Bill 609, which expands eligibility for several school choice programs. The bill, sponsored by senators Deanna Ballard (R-Watauga), Ben Clark (D-Hoke), and Todd Johnson (R-Union), impacts the following programs:

- Opportunity Scholarships, which provide low-income and working-class parents with up to $4,200 to send their children to a school of their choice;
- the Disabilities Grant program, which provides students with disabilities up to $8,000 for expenses related to education; and
- the Education Savings Account program, which also provides students with disabilities up to $9,000 for expenses related to education.

Since the Opportunity Scholarship’s inception in 2013, applications for the program have more than doubled. In the 2018-19 school year, 11,935 applications were submitted, 7,593 scholarships were offered, and 5,257 scholarships were accepted.

Senators Ballard and Johnson said, "The changes afforded in this bill have bubbled up from families experiencing limitations to accessing these programs. Understanding parents, not politicians, should choose which school is the best for their children, Senate Bill 609 expands access and empowers parents and working-class families themselves to help their kids find success."
Senator Clark said, "Parents are the ultimate accountability check regarding the overall efficacy of the educational experience provided to their children. These programs mitigate financial barriers to parents with limited fiscal flexibility and empowers them to seek and choose alternatives for their kids to match them with the optimal educational environment for achieving success."

The legislation expands eligibility for the programs in four ways, none of which imposes any additional costs.

First, under current law, only 40 percent of new Opportunity Scholarship recipients can be kindergarten or first grade students. The bill eliminates that cap. Second, it increases eligibility guidelines for Opportunity Scholarships from 133 percent of free and reduced lunch eligibility criteria to 150 percent. Third, the legislation expands education opportunities for children with disabilities by streamlining eligibility requirements for the Children with Disabilities Grant to match Education Savings Accounts. Fourth, the bill extends eligibility for Opportunity Scholarships, Children with Disabilities Grants, and Education Savings Accounts to gifted four-year-olds determined to be mature enough to enter kindergarten early.

Of the 2018-19 Opportunity Scholarship recipients: 12% are Hispanic; 1% are American Indian or Alaskan Native; 2% are Asian; 29% are Black or African American; 0.1% are Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; 4% are two or more races; 49% are White; and 15% chose not to answer.

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