

# Student loan repayment assistance for correctional officers, speech-language pathologists, audiologists, and math and science teachers

HB 518 by Kolkhorst (Van de Putte)

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**DIGEST:** HB 518 would have created programs to provide student loan repayment assistance for certain correctional officers, speech-language pathologists and audiologists, and math and science teachers.

A pilot program for correctional officers would have been administered by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). It would have provided student loan repayment assistance for certain correctional officers who graduated from Sam Houston State University in Huntsville or another university selected to participate in the program and who met certain requirements, including two years of service as a correctional officer. Repayments would have been paid from a trust fund that was funded with gifts, grants and state appropriations and could not have exceeded the cost to enroll in 30 semester credit hours of junior or senior-level coursework. The pilot program would have terminated after the 2015-16 academic year.

Speech-language pathologists and audiologists would have been required to have been employed full time or part time for at least one year by a public school or have been a faculty member of a communicative disorders program at a public or private university for one year to be eligible for student loan repayment assistance grants. Grants would have been allocated for each year of employment and would have been limited to five years. Grants could not have exceeded 20 percent of the pathologist's or audiologist's total principal student loan amount, capped at \$30,000 over five years for a recipient holding a master's degree or \$45,000 over five years for a recipient holding a doctoral degree. Funding for the repayment grants would have been appropriated to THECB for this purpose and would have included state appropriations, gifts, grants, and donations.

The bill also would have created the Texas Teach Corps Student Loan Repayment Assistance Program for undergraduate students who agreed to teach for four years in public schools that had shortages of teachers in math or science and met certain requirements. The bill would have created the Mathematics and Science Teacher Investment Fund, consisting of general revenue funds appropriated by the Legislature, gifts, grants, and other donations received for the fund, plus interest earnings. The bill would have capped the number of eligible persons who could be awarded loan repayment assistance in any one year. Subject to the availability of funds, an assistance payment would be \$5,000 for one eligible person.

**GOVERNOR'S REASON FOR VETO:**

“House Bill No. 518 would provide student loan repayment assistance for certain correctional officers, speech-language pathologists, audiologists, and math and science teachers.

“The state currently funds 18 financial aid programs, four of which are major programs and the other 14 of which target smaller groups of students. Rather than creating new programs, the state should focus on fully funding the four main programs to make financial aid available to more students. The 2010–2011 state budget includes significant increases in funding for these key financial aid programs, which will provide assistance to more students than ever before. It is also more cost effective for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the institutions of higher education to administer a few large programs rather than many small programs.

“Additionally, the state already provides loan repayment assistance for math and science teachers through the Teach for Texas Loan Repayment Assistance Program, so another program for math and science teachers is duplicative.”

**RESPONSE:**

**Rep. Lois Kolkhorst**, the bill’s author, said: “As a longtime advocate for employees of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), and someone who represents thousands of prison employee families, I am disappointed in the veto of HB 518. Modeled after the popular federal GI Bill, this legislation would have been a strong recruitment tool that would have decreased the shortage of correctional officers needed in our state. By offering tuition reimbursement in exchange for a commitment to work in the state prison system for a set number of years, the bill was widely supported by both labor and management ranks within TDCJ, and would have produced a personal benefit to the individuals enrolled, and a positive impact to the corrections institutions. Perhaps most importantly, the taxpayer would have benefitted due to the lower attrition rate for correctional officers.

“The veto remained deaf to the bipartisan support that the bill received in the House Corrections Committee and the Senate Finance Committee as well as the approval of the House and Senate.

“By rejecting this powerful new recruitment and retention tool, the governor’s veto further accelerates and increases the problems experienced with attracting individuals to work within the state’s correctional units. More than a financial aid program, this bill would have been a benefit to taxpayers, a badly needed boost to the morale within our prison units, and an important tool for individuals to better themselves through higher education.

“This bill was also vetoed last session, and had been retooled to address many of the concerns cited in the original veto statement, specifically the view that the pilot program was too narrowly defined. HB 518 was broadened to be more than a pilot program at one university, and also included important new additional career targets

beyond correctional officers, such as speech pathologists, as well as math and science teachers. Furthermore, Governor Perry did tout his support this session for a tuition loan repayment program for rural physicians, so he is clearly not philosophically opposed to all such tuition reimbursement programs.”

**Sen. Leticia Van de Putte**, the Senate sponsor, had no comment on the veto.

**NOTES:**

The HRO analysis of HB 518 appeared in Part Four of the May 8 *Daily Floor Report*.