

BILL ANALYSIS

S.B. 620
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Higher Education
Committee Report (Unamended)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Speech-language pathologists and audiologists help children and adults prevent or overcome a variety of communication disabilities, including speech, language, hearing, reading, and learning disorders, or combinations thereof. Many such specialists are employed by public school districts to provide services to students with complex disorders that are becoming more common in schools, such as developmental disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, stuttering, autism, and other social disorders. According to interested parties, national data shows that appropriately trained and educated speech-language pathologists make a significant difference not only in a child's communication, but also in the child's educational achievement. Interested parties contend that there is a critical shortage, however, of speech-language pathologists and audiologists in Texas public schools and a critical shortage of the doctoral-level faculty nationwide needed to educate and train master's level speech-language pathologists and doctoral-level audiologists.

S.B. 620 seeks to reduce this shortage by providing a student loan repayment program for speech-language pathologists or audiologists employed by public schools or as faculty members of certain graduate programs at public institutions of higher education.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that rulemaking authority is expressly granted to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in SECTION 1 of this bill.

ANALYSIS

S.B. 620 amends the Education Code to require the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, in accordance with the bill's provisions and coordinating board rules, to provide assistance in the repayment of student loans for speech-language pathologists and audiologists who apply and qualify for assistance. The bill requires a speech-language pathologist or audiologist, as a condition of eligibility for such assistance, to apply to the coordinating board and to have been employed for at least one year, and be currently employed as a speech-language pathologist or audiologist by a public school district or as a faculty member of a communicative disorders program at a public, private, or independent institution of higher education. The bill authorizes the coordinating board by rule to prorate repayment assistance for speech-language pathologists and audiologists employed part-time by a public school or institution of higher education.

S.B. 620 authorizes a qualifying speech-language pathologist or audiologist to receive repayment assistance grants for each year of employment, not to exceed five years, by a public school or a communicative disorders program at a public, private, or independent institution of higher education and caps the total annual amount of such repayment assistance at \$6,000 for an eligible recipient who holds a master's degree but not a doctoral degree or \$9,000 for an eligible recipient who holds a doctoral degree. The bill authorizes the coordinating board to provide repayment assistance for the repayment of any student loan, as defined by coordinating board rule, for

education at any public or private institution of higher education in or outside of Texas received by an eligible speech-language pathologist or audiologist.

S.B. 620 requires the coordinating board to deliver any repayment in a lump sum payable to the lender and the speech-language pathologist or audiologist, in accordance with any applicable federal law, or to the lender or other holder of the loan on behalf of the speech-language pathologist or audiologist. The bill authorizes a repayment to be applied to the principal amount and accrued interest of the loan.

S.B. 620 authorizes the coordinating board to appoint advisory committees to assist the coordinating board in administering the bill's provisions. The bill limits program funding to funding solely from gifts, grants, and donations solicited and accepted by the coordinating board for the program's purposes. The bill requires the coordinating board to adopt rules necessary for the administration of the bill's provisions and to distribute a copy of the rules and pertinent information to each appropriate public, private, or independent institution of higher education, any appropriate state agency, and any appropriate professional association.

EFFECTIVE DATE

September 1, 2013.