



August 7, 2019

Education Grants Should Go to Families Who Truly Need Them

Dozens of suburban Chicago families, perhaps many more, exploited a legal loophole to win their children need-based college financial aid and scholarships they would not otherwise receive.

This is an alarming story. As the Chair of the Illinois House Appropriations-Higher Education Committee, our committee's job is to fund higher education adequately, and in my first year as Chair, I am glad to report some success. Higher education funding will increase \$150 million to \$1.94 billion next fiscal year, 24 percent of all new funding in the state's operating budget. But our budget woes during the Rauner administration severely injured our students and state institutions of higher education. Universities have made up for much, but not all, of the deficit by raising their tuition rates. And that has priced students out of several of the "directional" schools, because other states like Missouri and Iowa have been aggressively recruiting our high school graduates with attractive financial deals. All of this, combined with the state government's chronic fiscal uncertainty, has driven Illinois college students to other states in droves. In 2002, about 23% of high school students chose out-of-state colleges. By 2017, that was up to almost 50%. As a result, Northern, Western, Southern (Carbondale) and Eastern Illinois universities saw enrollment drop 30-40% between Fiscal Years 2008 and 2018. Besides the cost of Illinois colleges rising, wage growth for the vast majority of Americans has stalled, and more people are struggling to afford college. And, the average earnings of a man without a college education is lower now than it was 50 years ago.

The crisis is even direr for Black students and families. According to the Institute for Policy Studies think-tank, when researchers from the institute looked at median wealth from 1983 to 2016 (adjusting for inflation), Black families saw their wealth decrease by more than half, while White families saw theirs rise by 33 percent. While White families have a median wealth of \$171,000, Black families have a median wealth of just \$17,600.

To revive our public colleges and fix the inequities, we need more state financial support, but we also need to be sure of the integrity of our educational programs and their administration. The same thing can be said about the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC). The Monetary Award Program (MAP) administered by ISAC is the only way many Black and White students can go to college to get an opportunity to pursue a career.

As Chair of Appropriations-Higher Education in the Illinois House of Representatives, I called a hearing to demand answers and begin exploring legislative solutions to these recent reports that wealthy parents are exploiting a legal loophole to dishonestly receive college financial aid intended for middle-class and low-income families. Members of the Illinois House Higher Education Committee and House Appropriations-Higher Education Committee plan to convene a hearing on the matter on Thursday, August 8, 2019, at 10 a.m. in the Bilandic Building in Chicago.

The committees will hear testimony regarding a report from ProPublica Illinois, which found wealthy Illinois parents had turned over guardianship of their college-aged children to friends or relatives. The student then declared financial independence to qualify for scholarships and other forms of financial aid intended for middle-class and low-income students. This manipulative practice may have prevented other Illinois students from receiving need-based assistance they deserved. Last year, more than 80,000 students who were eligible for a MAP grant did not receive it because there wasn't enough money. The grant, up to \$5,000, is awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. ProPublica Illinois found more than 40 guardianship cases fitting this profile filed between January 2018 and June 2019 in the Chicago suburbs of Lake County. The news organization has since identified ten additional cases in McHenry County that appear to follow the same pattern.

Taxpayer-funded assistance, such as the MAP grants, is a critical tool for middle-class and struggling students seeking a college degree to pursue a career. It is an outrage that some well-off families decided to game the system at the expense of those who genuinely need help to afford an education, hurting Illinois students and families, particularly Black students.

Also participating at the hearing will be the Illinois Association for College Admission Counseling (IACAC), which in a statement said that IACAC looks forward to working with our committees as we seek policy solutions to this problem. I also want to hear from the parents who turned over guardianship of their children to understand if they resorted to the tactic because they struggled to pay for college, or if they "cheated the system." During our hearing and in the future, I pledge to fix this injustice and try to put all families and students on an equal footing.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSK', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District