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## DEMOCRATS UNVEIL “FREE 2 START/FREE 2 FINISH” COLLEGE COMPLETION PLAN

As part of its Democratic Values Agenda for the 2018 legislative session, Democratic leaders today unveiled their ‘Free 2 Start/Free 2 Finish’ college scholarship program – House Bill 5371 – which promises state aid to help qualified Connecticut students start and complete their college careers at community colleges and state universities, thereby improving college graduation rates and preparing our state workforce for the thousands of new jobs needed in the near future.

If approved, the scholarship would take effect in the fall of 2019, and Connecticut would become one of several states in America – following recent efforts in New York, Rhode Island, and others – to provide a state-sponsored higher education scholarship for qualified students.

“Free 2 Start/Free 2 Finish is about expanding opportunities in higher education for students in Connecticut, and building the future workforce in Connecticut,” said state **Senator Beth Bye (D-West Hartford)**, the Senate Co-Chair of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee. “It will increase the number of students who complete the FAFSA. It helps students and their families afford a college education without going into debt. It will increase our number of college graduates, and it helps employers by turning out a more educated workforce.”

“As a student from a working-class background who attended a public university in Connecticut, I know the transformative effect earning a degree can have on the trajectory of one’s life. I know the opportunities it opens to contribute for the benefit of our Connecticut community,” said state **Representative Gregg Haddad (D-Mansfield)**, the House Chair of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee. “This bill will guarantee that no student is denied an opportunity to go to college, earn a degree, and be a contributing member of our Connecticut community. To eligible students, it offers a tuition-free path to an associate’s degree and to a bachelor’s degree. This bill

grows our economy by helping thousands of students earn a degree, and assisting our employers by supplying the educated workforce they need.”

“A college education should be within reach for every hardworking Connecticut resident,” said **Senate President Pro Tempore Martin M. Looney (D-New Haven)**. “Yet it has become increasingly difficult for low- and moderate-income students to be able to afford the higher education necessary for success in today’s highly complex economy without having their futures’ consumed by crushing debt. That’s why Democrats are proposing the Free 2 Start/Free 2 Finish plan.”

“Educational opportunity and the future of our economy are intertwined, so we need to find better ways to reduce cost barriers to pursuing a college degree,” said **Speaker of the House Joe Aresimowicz (D-Berlin/Southington)**. “The ever-rising cost of attending college is shutting out more and more people every year, and though some will say we can’t afford to help, I say we can’t afford not to make this investment.”

“Connecticut’s largest manufacturers are preparing to fill a generation’s-worth of jobs,” said **Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff (D-Norwalk)**. “Ensuring that everyone has access to an affordable higher education is the best investment we can make in Connecticut workers and their future success. Our Free 2 Start/Free 2 Finish plan and our Democratic Values Agenda will help build a stronger, more prosperous Connecticut for the middle class and all our families.”

Similar to New York State’s “Excelsior Scholarship Program” and Rhode Island’s “RI Promise,” Connecticut’s ‘Free 2 Start/Free 2 Finish’ college scholarship program is a so-called “last dollar” program which does not supplant existing institutional awards or other aid, it simply fills in the missing funding gaps.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, from 2009-2015, 74% of Connecticut students completed their four-year public college degree within six years (the fifth-best completion rate in the country), but only 34% of students completed their 2-year community college degree within six years – placing Connecticut 33<sup>rd</sup> out of 50 states.

The ‘Free 2 Start/Free 2 Finish’ program has two main components:

### **Free 2 Start**

- State aid for tuition and required fees for the first two academic years at a regional community-technical college
- Must be a full-time undergraduate student (30 or more semester credit hours in an academic year) in good academic standing
- Must meet specific annual family income guidelines (i.e. \$48,060 for a family of two, \$60,480 for a family of three, \$72,900 for a family of four)

- Must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form and accept all financial aid (including scholarships, grants, waivers and institutional aid)
- State provides a minimum benefit of \$1,000 per year.

### **Free 2 Finish**

- State aid for tuition and required fees to complete an associate's or bachelor's degree at a Connecticut public university
- Eligible students must have graduated from a Connecticut high school
- Like Free 2 Start, must be a full-time undergraduate student in good academic standing
- Like Free 2 Start, must meet specific annual family income guidelines
- Like Free 2 Start, must complete the FAFSA form and accept all financial aid
- Like Free 2 Start, state provides a minimum benefit of \$1,000 per year
- Students must participate in a volunteer-based mentorship and counseling program

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