



Workforce Training and
Education Coordinating Board

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Washington endorses lifelong learning benefit for workers *Employers partner with employees to fund joint education savings accounts*

OLYMPIA--Washington has become the first state in the nation to formally recognize a voluntary employee benefit program that encourages workers to continue their education with assistance from their employer.

Today, Governor Chris Gregoire signed into law Senate Bill 6141 creating the Lifelong Learning Program. The bill legally defines Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs) which are savings accounts funded through matching employer-employee contributions and dedicated to covering the education costs of the participating employee. While Illinois legislated a pilot LiLA program and Senator Maria Cantwell has introduced LiLA legislation in Congress, the state of Washington is the first to adopt legislation recognizing LiLAs as an optional employee benefit.

The law builds on a pilot program that has operated since 2009 with employers in Thurston, Lewis, Pacific and Grays Harbor counties. The pilot was launched through the support of a grant from a national funder and private partners such as the Association of Washington Business. The bill does not provide any state funding but will make it easier for the program to secure additional private support and expand to more employers statewide.

"For Washington to remain competitive, we need creative ways to make education more affordable to working adults so they can grow their skills and knowledge. LiLAs allow employees and their employer to co-invest in their future success," said Gov. Chris Gregoire.

Unlike tuition reimbursement programs which are usually dedicated to improving current job-related skills, LiLAs cover the costs of education outlined in a plan developed by the employee. In addition, LiLAs provide career planning assistance to participants.

In the case of Erin Batchelor, an employee with Hanner Enterprises which operates McDonalds restaurants in Grays Harbor and Pacific counties, her Lifelong Learning Account is helping her complete an associate's degree at Grays Harbor College with the ultimate goal of earning a business degree.

"Employees who want to succeed and move ahead in life should be supported," said Julianne Hanner, owner of Hanner Enterprises and an early adopter of LiLA. "If that means they eventually move on to something better, that's great. I'm honored to have played a part in their success."

"LiLAs support the American Dream of workers being able to improve themselves and move up the career ladder, earning better wages and a better life for their families," said Senator Derek Kilmer, prime sponsor of the bill. Representative Phyllis Kenney was sponsor of the House companion bill.

By being put into statute, LiLAs will gain greater acceptance with employers, financial institutions and private funders, making it possible to grow the program so that it is more universal and portable. More important, the law recognizes Washington's intent to support lifelong learning strategies.

"Ideally, LiLAs would become a standard offering in employee compensation packages, making them truly portable, similar to other benefits," explained Pamela Tate, President and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. "This bill in Washington can spark support at the federal, state and local levels, bringing LiLAs to scale nationally."

The pilot LiLA program began with funding from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the Lumina Foundation for Education. Additional support has come from the following program partners: Washington's Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, the Association of Washington Business, the State Labor Council, the Higher Education Coordinating Board, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Financial Institutions, and the Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council.

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The Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board is a partnership of labor, business and government, dedicated to helping Washington residents obtain and succeed in family-wage jobs, while meeting employers' needs for skilled workers.