

Governor Announces \$51.4 Million In Education Grants, New Financial Aid

By Donna Martinez

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Governor Roy Cooper directed \$51.4 million in new funding to help students access and complete post-secondary education as the state recovers from the pandemic. The Governor will invest \$44 million of the funds to help students access college and earn degrees starting this fall; \$5 million to support mental health initiatives across state postsecondary institutions; and \$2.4 million into equity-focused initiatives for K-12 and postsecondary students and families.

The funding is North Carolina's share of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) fund, federal dollars that aim to help school districts, postsecondary institutions, or other education-related entities address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Students and educators across our state have faced challenges both inside and outside the classroom over the course of the pandemic," said Governor Cooper. "The GEER funds announced today will provide much needed relief for the state's community colleges and universities, help us continue to build and grow a successful and diverse workforce and provide students equitable access to postsecondary education."

With this package, the Governor will launch the Longleaf Commitment program, a \$31.5 million investment to guarantee that graduating high school seniors from low- and middle-income families receive at least \$2,800 in federal and state grants to cover tuition and most fees at any of the state's 58 community colleges. The Commitment program will supplement the federal Pell grant and existing aid by providing an additional \$700 to \$2,800 grant per year for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 academic years for students to earn an associate degree and/or credits to transfer to a four-year college or university in North Carolina. Additional details on how students can apply for these grants will be available at www.nccommunitycolleges.edu.

To support student success after enrollment, the Longleaf Commitment program will also provide matching grants to help colleges expand student advising, success coaching, and related services.

"Education translates into opportunity, and I thank Governor Cooper for his decision to use federal funds to extend higher education opportunities for students to attend community colleges," said Thomas Stith, president of the NC Community College System. "North Carolina's 'great 58' community colleges are essential to the state's economic recovery efforts and are well poised to prepare the workforce needed, today and tomorrow."

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The Longleaf Commitment leverages the Governor's discretionary GEER aid as a first step toward the more robust NC Guarantee grant program, which the Governor proposed through the American Rescue Plan Act funding. If enacted, the NC Guarantee would ensure that students from eligible families receive at least \$6,000 per year in federal and state grants toward attending any UNC institution or North Carolina Community College.

Both programs demonstrate the Governor's commitment to affordable education and developing a skilled workforce.

"While we work with legislators to fund the NC Guarantee, today's graduates need help immediately," said Governor Cooper. "Longleaf Commitment is a down payment toward more affordable and predictable pathways for students through NC Guarantee."

The Governor will also launch the Longleaf Complete program to help college students whose education has been interrupted during the pandemic complete their degrees. \$12.5 million in flexible funding will help the UNC System Office, NC Community College System, and independent colleges and universities provide financial aid or expand student support services to help students who are near completion of their degree or credential and need the extra help.

"Independent colleges and universities have worked so hard during this pandemic to keep students safe and on track for their educational progress," said NC Independent Colleges and Universities President Hope Williams. "We deeply appreciate the Governor's support for mental health assistance and for \$4 million which will be instrumental in helping students complete their degree."

Beyond college affordability, Governor Cooper is directing \$5 million to the UNC System Office to rapidly expand mental health services for students across the state. According to UNC, 8 in 10 students say their mental health has been negatively impacted by the pandemic. National data reinforces the urgent need to supply campus communities with the training, resources, and expertise to better support students, staff, and faculty. To the extent practicable, the UNC System Office will extend access to training and shared services to institutions outside of the UNC system in consultation with community colleges and independent colleges and universities.

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“The UNC System appreciates the Governor’s support to keep our students on track towards on-time graduation through completion grants and to address urgent mental health needs especially for at-risk students,” said UNC System President Peter Hans. “The Governor’s emphasis on helping those most vulnerable during the pandemic is reflected by his leadership on these issues.”

The higher education actions build on the Governor’s recommendation to use federal American Rescue Plan funds to help at least 200,000 more people attain degrees or trade certificates by 2025.

The package will also improve data and expand equity initiatives through the following programs:

\$825,000 to expand the Jobs for North Carolina Graduates (JNCG) program, which teaches 11th and 12th grade high school students employability and workplace skills in preparation for the workforce after graduation. The program currently operates at eight high schools in mostly rural counties in North Carolina. JNCG college and career coaches at each participating school identify students who are at risk of not completing high school or transitioning into the workplace due to economic, family, academic, or personal barriers.

“To increase school completion, improve graduation and ensure students continue their education journey into postsecondary, it’s essential that our youth have access to academic and career development support, particularly as they attempt to regain momentum post COVID,” said Jill Cox, President and CEO of Communities In Schools of North Carolina. “This incredible investment in our 11th and 12th grade students in the Jobs for North Carolina’s Graduates program will ignite hope and propel future opportunities for students state-wide.”

\$750,000 to develop an Education Recovery Dashboard, which will empower education leaders with data necessary to better serve students, families, and educators as school districts and colleges manage more than \$10 billion in federal education aid. This resource will provide timely data to ensure the state’s education recovery is fast and fair.

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\$650,000 to develop and promote an accessible digital literacy toolkit that educates students and parents on the digital literacy skills that are critical to remote learning and workforce opportunities. This is a recommendation of the Andrea Harris Task Force, which Governor Cooper established to address the social, economic, environmental, and health disparities in communities of colors.

\$173,000 to further support the NC School of Science and Math and UNC School for Arts, which each received limited to no federal COVID relief funds because of the size of their high school student populations.

North Carolina previously received \$95.6 million in GEER I funds under the CARES Act. Aid from the first GEER package, which the Governor announced in the fall, has been used to hire student health staff and academic support personnel in more than 170 school districts and charter schools, help more than 5,200 students pursue industry-recognized credentials, and provide emergency financial aid to more than 6,900 college students.

In December, the federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act allocated \$42.2 million in GEER II funds to North Carolina. GEER II aid will be available for use through September 30, 2023. The awards from today's announcement include \$9.4 million in remaining GEER I funds and \$42.0 million in GEER II funds.