

Senate Bill 233

By: Senators Dolezal of the 27th, Brass of the 28th, Still of the 48th, Moore of the 53rd, Setzler of the 37th and others

AS PASSED SENATE

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT

1 To amend Title 20 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to education, so as to
2 provide for the establishment of promise scholarship accounts to be funded by the state in
3 the amount of \$6,000.00 per school year for each participating student; to provide for
4 definitions; to provide for qualified education expenses; to provide for qualifications for
5 students to participate in the promise scholarship account program; to provide for
6 requirements for participating schools and service providers; to provide for accounts and
7 account funds; to establish a parent review committee to review expenditures upon request;
8 to authorize the Georgia Student Finance Commission to participate in the promise
9 scholarship account program; to authorize the Georgia Student Finance Commission to
10 promulgate rules and regulations; to provide for an annual report on the program by the
11 Georgia Student Finance Commission; to provide for annual testing of participating students;
12 to provide for audits by the Department of Audits and Accounts; to provide for an annual
13 report by the Office of Student Achievement; to provide for a short title; to provide for
14 contingent effectiveness; to provide for related matters; to repeal conflicting laws; and for
15 other purposes.

16 BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF GEORGIA:

17 SECTION 1.

18 Title 20 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to education, is amended by
19 adding a new chapter to read as follows:

20 CHAPTER 2B

21 20-2B-1.

22 This chapter shall be known and may be cited as the 'Georgia Promise Scholarship Act.'

23 20-2B-2.

24 As used in this chapter, the term:

25 (1) 'Account' or 'promise scholarship account' means a consumer directed account
26 established pursuant to this chapter and composed of state funds deposited on behalf of
27 a participating student and which may be used for qualified education expenses.

28 (2) 'Account funds' means the funds awarded on behalf of a participating student.

29 (3) 'Commission' means the Georgia Student Finance Commission.

30 (4) 'Curriculum' or 'curricula' means a complete course of study for a particular content
31 area or grade level, including any supplemental materials required by the course of study.

32 (5) 'Parent' means a biological parent, legal guardian, custodian, or other person with
33 legal authority to act on behalf of a student.

34 (6) 'Participating school' means a private school that has notified the commission of its
35 intention to participate in the program and that complies with the commission's
36 requirements.

37 (7) 'Participating student' means a student for whom an account has been established
38 pursuant to this chapter.

39 (8) 'Private school' means a nonpublic school, sectarian or nonsectarian, which is
40 accredited or in the process of becoming accredited by one or more of the entities listed
41 in subparagraph (A) of paragraph (6) of Code Section 20-3-519.

42 (9) 'Program' means the account program provided pursuant to this chapter.

43 (10) 'Qualified education expenses' means any one or more of the following:

44 (A) Tuition, fees, and required textbooks at a participating school, accredited
45 community college or postsecondary education institution, or nonpublic online learning
46 program or course;

47 (B) Tutoring services provided by an educator certified by the Professional Standards
48 Commission;

49 (C) Payment for the purchase of a curriculum, including any supplemental materials
50 required by the curriculum;

51 (D) Services from a physician or therapist licensed pursuant to Chapter 10A, 28, 33,
52 34, or 44 of Title 43, including, but not limited to, for occupational, behavioral,
53 physical, or speech-language therapies;

54 (E) No more than \$500.00 per year to a fee-for-service transportation provider for
55 transportation to or from a participating school or service provider;

56 (F) Fees for the management of account funds in accordance with subsection (e) of
57 Code Section 20-2B-7;

58 (G) Other expenses authorized by the State Board of Education or the commission; or

59 (H) Individual education expenses authorized by a majority of the parent review
60 committee provided for in Code Section 20-2B-6.

61 (11) 'Resident school system' means the public school system in which the student would
62 be enrolled based on his or her residence.

63 (12) 'Service provider' means a person or entity that provides services that are covered
64 as qualified education expenses other than a participating school.

65 20-2B-3.

66 (a) A student shall qualify for a promise scholarship account under this chapter if:

67 (1) The student's parent or parents currently reside within Georgia;

68 (2) The student is an eligible student as defined in code section 20-2A-1 and resides in
69 the attendance zone of a public school that is included on the list of public schools
70 provided for in Code Section 20-2B-10;

71 (3) The student does not meet any of the ineligibility criteria provided for in
72 subsection (b) of Code Section 20-3-519.1;

73 (4) The student's parent signs an agreement promising:

74 (A) To provide an education for the participating student in at least the subjects of
75 reading, grammar, mathematics, social studies, and science;

76 (B) Not to enroll the student in a local school system school, local charter school, or
77 state charter school while participating in the program; and

78 (C) To use account funds only for qualified education expenses of the participating
79 student; and

80 (5) The student's parent submits an application for an account to the commission no later
81 than the deadline established by the commission; provided, however, that the commission
82 shall provide quarterly application periods that correspond with quarterly funding dates
83 pursuant to subsection (b) of Code Section 20-2B-5.

84 (b) Upon acceptance of the account, the parent assumes full financial responsibility for the
85 education of the participating student, including transportation to and from the participating
86 school or service provider.

87 (c) Students enrolled in a school operated by the Department of Juvenile Justice are not
88 eligible for the program.

89 (d) A participating student shall continue to be eligible to receive account funds until the
90 student returns to a public school, graduates from high school, or reaches the age of 20
91 years, or for special education students, reaches the age of 21 years; provided, however,

92 that a student who participated in the program for any length of time before returning to a
93 public school must submit a new application for an account in order to participate in the
94 program for a second or subsequent time.

95 (e) The creation of the program or the granting of an account pursuant to this chapter shall
96 not be construed to imply that a public school did not provide a free and appropriate public
97 education for a student or constitute a waiver or admission by the state. A participating
98 student's resident school system shall not be obligated to provide services to such student
99 that would be required if such student were enrolled in such resident school system unless
100 such student re-enrolls in such school system.

101 (f) Any account funds directed to a participating school or service provider are so directed
102 on behalf of the participating student's parent, the recognized recipient of such participating
103 student's account funds, and wholly as a result of the genuine and independent private
104 choice of the parent.

105 (g) The parent of each student participating in the program shall comply fully with the
106 participating school or service provider's rules and policies.

107 (h) Any parent who fails to comply with the provisions of this chapter and commission
108 regulations relating to the program shall forfeit the account and all account funds therein.

109 20-2B-4.

110 (a) To be eligible to enroll a participating student, a participating school shall:

111 (1) Demonstrate fiscal soundness by having been in operation for one school year or by
112 submitting a financial information report for the school that complies with uniform
113 financial accounting standards established by the commission and conducted by a
114 certified public accountant. The report must confirm that the school desiring to
115 participate is insured and the owner or owners have sufficient capital or credit to operate
116 the school for the upcoming school year serving the number of students anticipated with
117 expected revenues from tuition and other sources that may be reasonably expected. The

118 report shall be limited in scope to those records that are necessary for the commission to
119 make a determination on fiscal soundness of the school;

120 (2) Comply with the antidiscrimination provisions of 42 U.S.C. Section 2000d;

121 (3) Comply with all health and safety laws or codes that apply to private schools; and

122 (4) Comply with all provisions of Code Section 20-2-690 and any other state law
123 applicable to private schools.

124 (b) A participating school or service provider may apply to the commission to participate
125 in the program and accept account funds for providing services covered as qualified
126 education expenses.

127 (c) The commission shall, not later than 60 days after receiving a participating school's or
128 service provider's application for approval, notify such school or service provider as to
129 whether its application has been approved or denied. If the commission denies an
130 application, the commission shall provide a reason and notify the school or service provider
131 that it may appeal the decision to the parent review committee created pursuant to Code
132 Section 20-2B-6.

133 (d) A participating school and service provider shall not refund, rebate, or share account
134 funds with a parent or student in any manner.

135 (e) The creation of the program shall not be construed to expand the regulatory authority
136 of the state, its officers, or any local school system to impose any additional regulation of
137 nonpublic schools beyond those reasonably necessary to enforce the requirements of this
138 chapter.

139 (f) The commission shall not require a participating school or service provider to alter such
140 school's or provider's creed, practices, admissions policies, employment policies, or
141 curricula in order to receive funds under the program.

142 20-2B-5.

143 (a) The account funds granted to a participating student pursuant to this chapter shall be
144 \$6,000.00 per school year.

145 (b)(1) When a student enters the program, the commission shall receive all
146 documentation required for the student's participation during a quarterly enrollment
147 period provided for in paragraph (4) of subsection (a) of Code Section 20-2B-3 before the
148 first quarterly account payment is made for the student.

149 (2) Upon proper documentation received by the commission, the commission shall make
150 quarterly payments to the account of a participating student, beginning with the first
151 quarterly payment that corresponds with the enrollment period in which the student's
152 application was received. As nearly as practical, such quarterly payments shall be equal.
153 The state auditor shall cite as an audit exception any failure by the commission to meet
154 any payment deadlines and shall include such audit exceptions on the website established
155 pursuant to Code Section 50-6-32.

156 (3) The commission shall develop a system for parents to direct account funds to
157 participating schools and service providers by electronic funds transfer, automated
158 clearing-house transfer, or another system that the commission finds to be commercially
159 viable, cost-effective, and easy for parents of participating students to use. The
160 commission shall not adopt a system that relies solely on reimbursing parents for
161 out-of-pocket expenses, but may determine certain qualified education expenses that must
162 require reimbursement or preapproval for purchase. The commission is authorized to
163 qualify private financial management firms to manage the payment system. The
164 commission, at its discretion, shall be authorized to create a system of individually
165 funded accounts or notional accounts funded through a single state omnibus account.

166 (4) If the participating school requires partial payment of tuition prior to the start of the
167 academic year to reserve space for students admitted to the school, such partial payment
168 may be paid by the commission prior to the first quarterly payment of the year in which

169 the account is awarded, up to a maximum of \$1,000.00, and deducted from subsequent
170 account payments. If a student decides not to attend the participating school, the partial
171 reservation payment must be returned to the commission by such school. Only one
172 reservation payment per student may be made per year.

173 (c) Funds received pursuant to this Code section shall not constitute taxable income of the
174 parent of the participating student.

175 (d) Funds deposited into an account shall be used only for qualified education expenses
176 for the participating student. Unused funds in an account, up to an amount not greater
177 than 50 percent of the total funds deposited into the account for the current school year,
178 shall roll over to the following school year; provided, however, that, if an account has been
179 inactive for two consecutive years or the participating student graduates from high school,
180 the funds in such account shall be returned to the state general fund and the account shall
181 be closed.

182 (e) Nothing in this chapter shall be deemed to prohibit a parent or student from making a
183 payment for any tuition, fee, service, or product described in this chapter from a source
184 other than the account funds of the student.

185 20-2B-6.

186 (a) To assist in the determination of whether certain expenses meet the requirements to be
187 considered a qualified education expense under this chapter, a parent review committee
188 shall be established.

189 (b)(1) The committee shall be composed of eight parents of eligible students. Four of
190 the parents shall reside in local school systems with student enrollment greater
191 than 10,000, and four of the parents shall reside in local school systems with student
192 enrollment less than 10,000.

193 (2) Members of the committee shall be appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the
194 executive director of the commission.

195 (3) Members of the committee shall serve for one-year terms and may be reappointed;
196 provided, however, that no individual shall be permitted to serve more than three terms.

197 (4) The executive director of the commission or his or her designee shall serve as the
198 chair of the committee and shall only vote in the event of a tie.

199 (c) The commission may request the committee to determine whether an expenditure of
200 account funds from an account qualifies as a qualified education expense under this
201 chapter.

202 (d) The commission may request the committee review appeals of participating schools
203 or service provider application denials pursuant to subsection (c) of Code Section 20-2B-4.

204 20-2B-7.

205 (a) The commission shall adopt rules and regulations as necessary for the administration
206 of the program and shall include rules and regulations prioritizing the selection of
207 educationally disadvantaged students if either the number of participating students or the
208 number of applications for accounts exceeds the funds available for the program; provided,
209 however, that continued participation in the program by participating students shall be
210 prioritized over new applications for accounts. The commission shall adopt rules and
211 regulations regarding eligibility and participation of participating schools and service
212 providers, including, but not limited to, timelines that will maximize student and private
213 school participation, the calculation and distribution of accounts to participating students,
214 and the application and approval procedures for participating students, participating
215 schools, and service providers. The commission shall develop and utilize a compliance
216 form for completion by participating schools and service providers. The commission shall
217 be authorized to require any pertinent information as it deems necessary from participating
218 schools and service providers for the purpose of implementing the program. Participating
219 schools and service providers shall be required to complete such forms and certify their
220 accuracy.

221 (b) No liability shall arise on the part of the commission or the state or of any local board
222 of education based on the award or use of an account awarded pursuant to this chapter.

223 (c) The commission shall have the authority to conduct or contract for the auditing of
224 accounts and shall, at a minimum, conduct random audits on an annual basis. The
225 commission shall have the authority to make any parent or participating student ineligible
226 for the program in the event of misuse of account funds.

227 (d) The commission shall have the authority to refer cases of substantial misuse of account
228 funds to the Attorney General for investigation if evidence of fraudulent use is obtained.

229 (e) The commission may deduct an amount from accounts to cover the costs of overseeing
230 and administering the program, up to a maximum of 5 percent annually.

231 (f) The commission may contract with a qualified organization to administer the program
232 or specific functions of the program.

233 (g) The commission shall provide parents of participating students with an explanation of
234 the allowable uses of account funds, the responsibilities of parents, and the duties of the
235 commission.

236 20-2B-8.

237 (a)(1) In order to allow parents and taxpayers to measure the achievements of the
238 program, the commission shall annually approve no fewer than three nationally
239 norm-referenced tests that measure student academic progress in math and language arts.

240 (2) Private schools enrolling participating students shall ensure that all participating
241 students are annually administered a nationally norm-referenced test identified by the
242 commission or a state-wide assessment administered pursuant to Code Section 20-2-281,
243 which shall be made available by the resident school system.

244 (3) The commission shall develop a process for the annual administration of a nationally
245 norm-referenced test or a state-wide assessment and the collection of results for
246 participating students not enrolled full time in a private school.

247 (b) The results of such norm-referenced tests or state-wide assessments shall be provided
248 to and collected by the commission or an organization chosen by the commission on an
249 annual basis.

250 (c) Student information shall be reported and collected in a manner that allows the state
251 to aggregate data by grade level, gender, and race.

252 (d) The commission or an organization chosen by the commission shall collect information
253 regarding the high school graduation rate of all participating students.

254 20-2B-9.

255 (a) The commission shall provide the General Assembly not later than December 1 of each
256 year with a report regarding the program for the previous fiscal year. Such report shall also
257 be posted on the commission's website.

258 (b) The report shall include, but not be limited to, numbers and demographics of
259 participating students and numbers of participating schools. The report shall also include:

260 (1) Participating student performance on nationally norm-referenced tests or state-wide
261 assessments, including aggregate information on long-term performance gains;

262 (2) The level of satisfaction with the program from parents of participating students;

263 (3) The percentage of funds used for each type of qualified education expense included
264 in paragraph (11) of Code Section 20-2B-2; and

265 (4) The fiscal impact to the state and resident school systems of the program, taking into
266 consideration both the impact on revenue and the impact on expenses. The fiscal savings
267 associated with students departing public schools shall be explicitly quantified, even if
268 the public school losing the student or students does not reduce its spending.

269 (c) The report shall apply appropriate analytical and behavioral science methodologies to
270 ensure public confidence in such report.

271 (d) The report shall protect the identity of participating students through whatever means
272 the commission deems appropriate, including, but not limited to, by keeping anonymous

273 all disaggregated data and complying with state and federal guidelines for student privacy.
274 The names of participating schools and the number of participating students at each such
275 school shall be included in the report.

276 (e) The Department of Audits and Accounts shall audit the program annually. Audit
277 reports, including, but not limited to, any findings and recommendations by the Department
278 of Audits and Accounts, shall be included in the first annual report submitted by the
279 commission pursuant to this Code section following completion of each audit of the
280 program by the Department of Audits and Accounts. Nothing in this subsection shall be
281 construed to limit the authority of the Department of Audits and Accounts to conduct an
282 audit at any time.

283 20-2B-10.

284 (a) In the annual report required by paragraph (2) of subsection (a) of Code
285 Section 20-14-27, the Office of Student Achievement shall include a separate list of public
286 schools that performed in the lowest 25 percent of all public schools based on individual
287 school ratings as provided for in subsection (d) of Code Section 20-14-33, provided that
288 in the event of a tied rating, the public school with the lower performance in student
289 achievement shall be prioritized.

290 (b) By December 1 of each year, the Office of Student Achievement shall publish the list
291 provided for in subsection (a) of this Code section on its website."

292 **SECTION 2.**

293 Said title is amended further in Code Section 20-3-231, relating to legislative findings and
294 purposes of commission, by revising subsection (b) as follows:

295 **"(b) Purpose of commission.** The purpose of the commission shall be to help improve the
296 higher educational opportunities of citizens and persons in this state by serving as an
297 agency and budget unit within the executive branch of state government for the purpose of
298 carrying out and effectuating the powers, duties, and functions set forth in this part and in
299 Chapter 2B of this title."

300

SECTION 3.

301 This Act shall become effective only if the "Quality Basic Education Act," as provided for
302 in Article 6 of Chapter 2 of Title 20, is fully funded in an appropriations Act making specific
303 reference to the full funding of the "Quality Basic Education Act" and shall become effective
304 when funds so appointed become available for expenditure.

305

SECTION 4.

306 All laws and parts of laws in conflict with this Act are repealed.