Pell Grant Preservation & Expansion Act of 2026

Sponsored by Senator Mazie K. Hirono (D-HI),
Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), Senator Jack Reed (D-RI),
Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), Representative Mark Pocan (D-WI),
and Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA)

"Go back and say to your children and to your grandchildren, and those who come after you and follow you—tell them that we have made a promise to them. Tell them that the truth is here for them to seek. And tell them that we have opened the road and we have pulled the gates down and the way is open, and we expect them to travel it."

President Lyndon B. Johnson, Remarks upon Signing the *Higher Education Act of 1965*

More than 60 years ago, the *Higher Education Act (HEA)* was signed into law to broaden access to higher education and provide students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to share in equitable economic growth. This groundbreaking federal law established a federal student aid program that would later become the Pell Grant. Today, the Pell Grant is the cornerstone of federal student aid – serving 7 million undergraduate students, or nearly one-third of all students.

However, as college prices have risen dramatically in recent decades, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant has reached a historic low. As the cost of college continues to rise, students and families are falling further behind. At its peak, the Pell Grant maximum award covered more than three-quarters of the price of attending a four-year public college. Today, it covers less than one-third the price. State disinvestments from higher education have further exacerbated the problem.

As the American economy bears uncertainty in the face of rising prices, we must solidify this investment in students and families and advance a more equitable economic future.

Building on bipartisan action to expand Pell Grants in recent years, the *Pell Grant Preservation and Expansion Act (PGPEA)* would:

- **Double the Pell Grant maximum award to restore its purchasing power:**
  The scheduled Pell Grant maximum award is $7,395 for Award Year 2026-2027 (AY2026-2027). PGPEA would immediately increase the maximum award to $10,000 for AY2026-2027, and then double the maximum Pell Grant over a period of five years thereafter to $15,000, restoring the purchasing power of the Pell Grant. It would then index the award for inflation to make sure its purchasing power remains strong in future years.

- **Shift the Pell Grant program to fully mandatory funding:**
  In recent years, the Pell Grant program has faced significant budget shortfalls that have threatened its stability. By making the program fully mandatory funding, PGPEA ensures that students can count on their awards being fully funded now and into the future, while protecting the program from future shortfalls, which have previously led to eligibility restrictions and other changes that have reduced access for students. Shifting to mandatory funding will also ensure that the program remains stable even during tough economic times.

- **Allow DREAMers to afford college:**
  Under current law, undocumented students are unfairly restricted from accessing federal student aid. PGPEA would address this issue by extending Pell Grant eligibility to DREAMers, helping these students continue their education, while allowing our diverse country to benefit from the enormous talent and potential of these students.

- **Reform "Satisfactory Academic Progress" (SAP) requirements**:
  Approximately 40 percent of first-year Pell Grant recipients risk losing access to Pell Grants due to confusing SAP requirements. Under current law, these penalties have become increasingly strict and disproportionately harmful to students of color. The consequences are also permanent, denying students with low incomes the opportunity to succeed in higher education. PGPEA promotes student success by providing academic progress warnings to students before they lose financial aid eligibility and resetting financial aid eligibility two years after a student is enrolled at an institution of higher education.

- **Support students and families with low incomes:**
  PGPEA builds on recent improvements to financial aid formulas by allowing students and families who participate in federal benefits programs like Medicaid and SNAP to automatically qualify for the Pell Grant maximum award, and to receive an additional award of up to $1,500 beyond the maximum award ($16,500 in total).

- **Reinstate lifetime eligibility to 18 semesters:**
  Too many students exhaust their Pell Grant lifetime eligibility before they can complete their programs, often because their credits did not transfer or because they had to care for themselves or a loved one. PGPEA extends lifetime eligibility from the current 12 semesters back to 18 semesters as it existed before 2011 eligibility cuts related to a funding shortfall.

- **Broaden access for part-time students:**
  PGPEA sets the minimum award level at 5 percent of the maximum award, rather than the current 10 percent, to ensure part-time students, such as returning adults who may only be able to take a few classes at a time, are able to retain access to aid as the maximum award grows. This change also prevents the creation of a cliff effect, as the current-law minimum award threshold would otherwise deny aid to any student eligible for less than $1,500 once the maximum award is fully doubled. Under this bill, as the maximum award increases to $15,000, students will be able to receive a minimum award of $750 to support their education.

- **Repeal prohibition on Pell Grants for students with full-time scholarships:**
  Lastly, PGPEA repeals a needlessly complicated provision in Republicans' "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" (H.R. 1) that has made it more difficult for schools to determine federal student aid by making students ineligible for awards if their total student aid exceeds the cost of attendance.