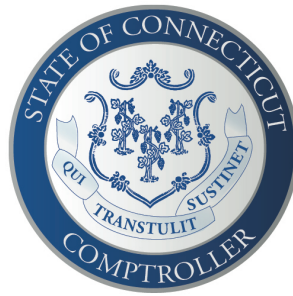


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**Written Testimony
Comptroller Kevin Lembo
March 8, 2018**

**Concerning
H.B. 5371: AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE FREE 2 START SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM AND THE FREE
2 FINISH SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM.**

Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Haddad, Senator Linares, Representative Staneski, and Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee:

I write today to support House Bill 5371: An Act Establishing the Free 2 Start Scholarship Program and the Free 2 Finish Scholarship Program.

This legislation is a creative proposal that will help accelerate our state economy, provide skilled workers for Connecticut businesses and give our young people reason to remain in state to receive their education.

The financial benefits of attaining an Associate's Degree are well documented for both the student and state government. According to a 2013 study by the American Association of Community Colleges, the average person with an associate's degree earns \$10,700 more per year than a peer with only a high school diploma, and that difference nears \$500,000 over a working lifetime.

Meanwhile, worker productivity and business output increases throughout the local economy and government spending on public assistance decreases. This plan makes smart financial sense and is the exact type of smart investment that we should be making in the people of Connecticut.

I particularly admire the provision of this legislation that offers mentoring to students. Dropouts are a major cost driver and keeping students in school through graduation is critical.

I urge the committee to examine additional ways to help students maximize federal financial aid. Many families require assistance to properly fill out paperwork. This problem is exacerbated in single parent and non-English speaking homes. Establishing a committee, possibly within the Office of Higher Education, to guide families through the process would

generate a worthwhile return on investment as every dollar in federal aid is one fewer asked of Connecticut taxpayers.

It is also worth mentioning that for these programs to maximize their success, government must renew its commitment to our institutions of higher education, including our community college system. Education has always been a hallmark of Connecticut – a point of pride in our state but also the engine that propels our economy. At the same time that we are investing in the next generation of Connecticut students, we must make smart investments in the colleges and universities that we are tasking with educating them.

I appreciate the work of the committee and thank you for your consideration of this important legislation.