

Legislative Background for Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship

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INTRODUCTION

This brief is part of a series produced by a University of Kentucky research team examining the effects of the Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship (WRKS).¹ Like numerous states, Kentucky has set a statewide postsecondary educational achievement goal, aiming to “accelerate job creation, grow the economy, and expand our tax base.”² Concurrently, the state has championed policies that attempt to narrow the gap between skill development that has traditionally been considered either “higher education” or “job training.” A prominent example is the Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship (WRKS), which provides “last-dollar” financial assistance for students who enroll in targeted workforce-linked sub-baccalaureate credential programs and first became available to students starting in the 2017-2018 academic year. WRKS is part of an emerging national trend in workforce-aligned aid policies that are typically designed with a focus on promoting certifiable skills in high-demand industry sectors. These programs aim to create career pathways to high-wage and high-demand occupations and to increase the supply of workers who can fill local industry needs.

In this current brief, we provide background details of WRKS, including its policy evolution and eligibility requirements.

KEY POINTS

1. After extended negotiations between state legislators and then Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin, Kentucky’s Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship (WRKS) was codified into state law through Senate Bill 98 on June 27, 2019.
2. Governor Andy Beshear signed Senate Bill 94 in 2022 to expand WRKS eligibility to include students with intellectual disabilities enrolled in comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs.
3. Students qualify for the financial assistance by meeting specific eligibility criteria, including enrollment at an eligible postsecondary institution in an approved program that leads to an industry-recognized credential in high-demand sectors. As of the 2025-2026 academic year, the eligible fields are construction, education, healthcare, manufacturing and logistics, and professional, scientific, and technical services.

¹ The full collection of briefs is available at: <https://martin.uky.edu/research/understanding-impact-work-ready-kentucky-scholarships>.

² 2016-2021 Strategic Agenda for Postsecondary and Adult Education. Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

After Governor Matt Bevin was elected in 2015, as a centerpiece of his budget, he proposed issuing a \$100 million bond for workforce development programs.³ Additionally, he proposed diverting approximately \$60 million from state need-based aid to workforce development scholarships.

With this budget priority in mind, the Kentucky Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 626 in April 2016, which established WRKS.⁴ HB 626 aimed to allow students to pursue certificates or associate degrees at any college (including Kentucky Community and Technical College System and four-year institutions) by fully funding tuition and mandatory fees. HB 626 also stipulated that the amount awarded to eligible students would be the amount of tuition remaining after all federal and state grants and scholarships are subtracted—i.e., “last dollar” financial assistance. Finally, HB 626 mandated that the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority (KHEAA) administer the program.

However, later that month, Governor Bevin vetoed the bill, stating that it “did not permit funding to be targeted based on true need” and “may leave behind those students with the greatest need.”⁵ He cut \$9.4 million of funding for WRKS from the budget bill for the 2016-2017 academic year, but preserved \$15.9 million for the 2017-2018 academic year.⁶

Later, in December 2016, Governor Bevin signed an executive order (Order #2016-912), which limited WRKS to students pursuing industry-recognized

certificates in five high-demand workforce sectors identified by the Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board and the Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet.⁷ Starting from the 2017-2018 academic year, these sectors were: advanced manufacturing, business and information technology, construction, healthcare, and transportation/logistics.

In July 2018, Governor Bevin issued another executive order (Order #2018-571), which expanded WRKS to include associate of applied science degrees starting from the 2018-2019 academic year.⁸ It also extended eligibility to high school students taking dual-credit career and technical education courses through the newly created Work Ready Dual Credit scholarship. Finally, on June 27, 2019, WRKS was codified into state law through Senate Bill 98 (KRS 164.787).⁹

Over time, a few other changes were introduced. For instance, on March 29, 2022, Governor Andy Beshear signed Senate Bill 94, expanding WRKS eligibility to include students with intellectual disabilities enrolled in comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs beginning Fall 2022.¹⁰

More recently, in 2025, a legislative amendment was introduced that would have limited eligibility to students with an adjusted gross income less than 250% of the median household income in Kentucky.¹¹ However, this amendment was never adopted.

Beginning in the 2025-2026 academic year, the eligible WRKS fields were updated to include: construction, education, healthcare, manufacturing and logistics, and professional, scientific, and technical services.

³ See: <https://www.kentucky.com/news/local/education/article63562877.html>.

⁴ See: <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/record/16rs/hb626.html>.

⁵ See: <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/record/16rs/hb626/veto.pdf>.

⁶ See: <https://www.whas11.com/article/news/governor-bevin-delays-funding-for-work-ready-kentucky-scholarship-bill/417-157387119>.

⁷ See: <https://web.sos.ky.gov/execjournalimages/2016-MISC-2016-0912-247765.pdf>.

⁸ See: <https://web.sos.ky.gov/execjournalimages/2018-MISC-2018-0571-256366.pdf>.

⁹ See: <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/record/19rs/sb98.html> and <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/law/statutes/statute.aspx?id=56153>.

¹⁰ See: <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/record/22rs/sb94.html>.

¹¹ See: <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/record/25rs/hb529.html>.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

In administering WRKS, as of September 1, 2025, KHEAA has set the following requirements for eligibility:¹²

Eligibility Requirement

Citizenship	Be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident.
Residency	Be a Kentucky resident.
Education Level	Be a high school graduate or be enrolled in or have completed a General Educational Development (GED) Program.
Degree Status	Have not earned an associate or higher degree.
Enrollment	Be enrolled, or accepted for enrollment, at an eligible postsecondary institution in an approved program of study that leads to an industry-recognized certificate or diploma or an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree in a high-demand workforce sector or a comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program.
Qualifying Areas as of 2025-2026 Academic Year	Construction, Education, Healthcare, Manufacturing and Logistics, and Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services.
Excluded Programs	Cannot be enrolled in an ineligible degree program, such as a bachelor or other associate program, at the same or any other institution.
Academic Progress	Maintain satisfactory academic progress as determined by the eligible postsecondary institution.
Financial Standing	Not be in default on any Title IV program or KHEAA-administered financial aid.

ELIGIBILITY LIMITS

KHEAA has also set eligibility limits. More specifically, eligibility expires when the first of the following conditions is met: (1) Receipt of scholarship funding for 60 credit hours of enrollment, or (2) Receipt of a first associate degree.

¹² See: <https://www.kheaa.com/web/scholarships-grants.faces>.