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Chairman Muñoz and Honorable Senate Finance Committee Members,

New Mexico Voices for Children strongly supports the Opportunity Scholarship Act (SB 140) because it streamlines college scholarships and puts higher education in reach for many families and students who would otherwise be unable to afford a college degree, allowing more New Mexico youth to thrive and reach their full potential. By offering critical financial aid to returning adult learners and recent high school graduates, the state can increase the lifetime earnings of New Mexicans – ultimately taking in more income tax revenue and saving in public assistance expenses.

The Opportunity Scholarship has already made a difference for many students looking to improve their lives by pursuing higher education. Increases in college tuition have far outpaced increases to financial aid programs, often making it difficult for students to complete degree or certificate programs. And while New Mexico's colleges and universities have relatively low tuition, it is often other costs of attendance – like books, housing, child care, and food – or lack of financial aid that cause students to drop out before they graduate.

By covering any remaining tuition costs, the Scholarship offers students flexibility to cover living expenses with financial aid, supporting their ability to attend college and graduate. And by offering financial aid for part-time enrollment, the Opportunity Scholarship removes more barriers for students who have family responsibilities and still need to work to cover their expenses beyond tuition.

We encourage policymakers to join us in supporting SB 140, which will allow every New Mexican the opportunity to pursue education or career training and help the state establish a well-educated workforce that will support our future economy. This bill will create a comprehensive financial aid package allowing recent high school graduates, veterans, adult learners, part-time students, and those who are ineligible for the Lottery Scholarship to attend college tuition-free. We also support the bill's intent to provide financial aid to up to 35,000 students whether they are pursuing a certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree, since all can lead to higher-paying careers in industries seeking highly qualified employees.

Both adults and recent high school graduates need secure and substantial financial aid to successfully graduate with a college degree, and tens of thousands of New Mexicans have already benefitted from receiving the Opportunity and Lottery Scholarships. We fully support SB 140 and the Opportunity Scholarship, and we ask the members of the committee to pass and fund this important legislation as an investment in our students and New Mexico's future.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amber Wallin".

Amber Wallin, MPA
Executive Director
New Mexico Voices for Children

