

# GPA Requirements for A+ Scholarships



## Executive Summary

The Missouri A+ Schools Program includes both school improvement (A+ school designations) and college access (A+ scholarships) components ([RSMo 160.545](#)). One requirement for A+ scholarship eligibility is graduating from an A+ high school with at least a 2.5 grade point average. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected student mental health, learning and college enrollment behaviors. House Bills [1067](#) & [1141](#) would change the GPA eligibility requirements for the A+ Scholarship program so that students can use their highest available GPA from 2019-20 or 2020-21 to meet the 2.5 eligibility standard.

## Highlights

- In March 2020, the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development (DHEWD) issued temporary flexibility for the GPA eligibility requirement, but this guidance was not renewed for the fall 2020 semester.
- Remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic is associated with learning losses, especially for younger students. Negative mental health outcomes have increased among adolescents in response to COVID-19, which may also impact academic performance.
- Enrollment in public, two-year colleges has significantly decreased between fall 2019 and 2020. Historically, A+ scholarships have increased enrollment at two-year institutions.

## Limitations

- Grade point average is only one component of A+ student eligibility. This note does not discuss the impacts of other eligibility criteria (algebra, attendance, mentoring/tutoring) which have also been influenced by COVID-19.
- It is difficult to measure the extent of learning loss in the absence of comparative assessments and GPAs. Most existing studies look at learning loss for K-8 students.

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## Research Background

### A+ Scholarships in Missouri

Missouri's A+ Schools Program started with 26 A+ designed high schools and has since grown to over 600 A+ designated schools (534 public; 84 private), which serve a majority of Missouri's high school students.<sup>1</sup> Only a subset of these students, however, are eligible for the A+ scholarship. A+ eligibility for high school seniors requires that students:

- (1) be a US citizen or permanent resident,
- (2) attend an A+ school for at least two years, and graduate from an A+ school,

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- (3) make a written agreement with their school prior to graduation,
- (4) have a 95% overall student attendance record,
- (5) complete fifty hours of unpaid tutoring or mentoring,
- (6) avoid the unlawful use of drugs and alcohol,
- (7) score proficient or advanced in the algebra I end of course exam, or equivalent ACT/GPA requirement, and
- (8) graduate with an unweighted grade point average of at least 2.5 on a 4.0 scale.<sup>2</sup>

A+ scholarship funds can only be used at two-year institutions and are distributed by DHEWD only after all applicable federal aid has been applied to tuition and fees. In FY19, 13,039 students received A+ scholarship payments. Most first-time, full-time degree-seeking A+ recipients use these funds at public, two-year institutions (community colleges) in Missouri.<sup>3</sup>

Program efficacy: There is evidence that the A+ program has increased enrollment and completion at two-year colleges, as well as higher transfer rates to four-year institutions.<sup>3-5</sup> However, the program is also associated with decreased four year enrollment, suggesting that the scholarship both reaches students who would not have otherwise attended college and also diverts some away from four-year institutions.<sup>5</sup> Forty-one percent of Missouri jobs require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree.<sup>6</sup> While some of these careers can be lucrative, more education is associated with higher earnings on average.<sup>7</sup> Although the program has achieved its intended outcomes to some degree, there has been some concern that the eligibility requirements may restrict the students with the highest financial need who would benefit most from the program.

Program changes during COVID-19: When schools started closing in response to COVID-19 in March 2020, DHEWD issued temporary guidance that 2020 seniors could satisfy the GPA requirement if they had a 2.5 cumulative GPA at the end of either the fall 2019 or spring 2020 semester.<sup>8</sup> Updated guidance issued in October 2020 reverted back to the original 2.5 GPA upon graduation requirement, citing that schools have had time to adjust to alternate instructional models at this point.<sup>9</sup> In response to COVID-19, more students than projected have used the A+ scholarship program and \$10 million of CARES Act funding has been designated for the A+ program in 2021.<sup>10</sup>

### **Impacts of COVID-19 on high school students**

Mental Health: Traumatic events/disasters and prolonged periods of social isolation and loneliness in children and adolescents increases the risk of depression and anxiety.<sup>11,12</sup> Consistent with this, COVID-19-related social conditions have increased reports of negative mental health outcomes and substance abuse.<sup>13</sup> In a national survey of high school students in the United States, 29% of students reported feeling disconnected from school adults, and slightly fewer reported feeling disconnected from their classmates (23%) or school community (22%). Around 30% of

respondents reported feeling more unhappy or depressed.<sup>14</sup> Depression, and the potential associated behavioral responses (e.g., substance abuse, delinquency), are associated with decreased academic achievement in children and adolescents.<sup>15,16</sup>

Learning: To date, most research has assessed learning loss in younger children between kindergarten and eighth grade and observed that learning loss is greater in math than reading.<sup>17</sup> There is also evidence that these learning losses disproportionately affect low-income and minoritized students who already are impacted by an achievement gap.<sup>18,19</sup> Missouri did not complete state-level testing in spring 2020 but does plan to resume testing this year.

College enrollment: In fall 2020, college enrollment at public, two-year institutions decreased by 9.5-10.1% in the United States and by 4% in Missouri. In contrast, public four-year institutions increased enrollment by 0.2% nationally (up from -1.2% in fall 2019) and private, for-profit, four-year enrollment increased by 5.3%.<sup>20,21</sup> Additional surveys, especially of high school seniors, will be important to identify what factors contributed most to changes in college enrollment decisions (e.g., financial concerns, health reasons, competing responsibilities) and how the A+ program influenced these decisions during COVID-19.

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