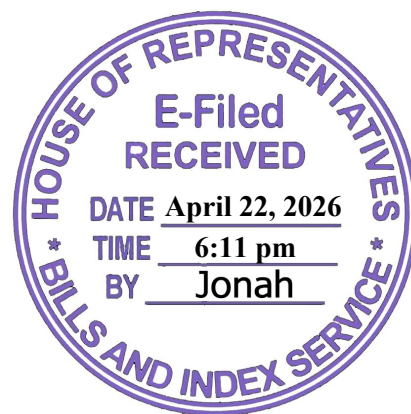


Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City, Metro Manila

TWENTIETH CONGRESS
First Regular Session

House Bill No. **8956**



Introduced by **Representative ERIC G. YAP**

EXPLANATORY NOTE

This bill seeks to promote access to quality legal education by providing free tuition and other school fees to qualified Filipino students enrolled in law programs in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), thereby removing financial barriers that hinder deserving individuals from pursuing a career in the legal profession.

Despite the critical role that lawyers play in upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, and ensuring access to justice, legal education in the Philippines remains largely inaccessible to many due to its high cost. This has resulted in a limited and uneven distribution of legal practitioners, particularly in underserved and remote areas where legal services are most needed. By institutionalizing a Free Legal Education Program, the State affirms its commitment to democratizing access to the legal profession and addressing the persistent shortage of lawyers in public service.

The measure not only covers tuition but also other essential school fees, including bar examination and licensure expenses to provide comprehensive financial support to law students. At the same time, the bill also integrates a mandatory return service component, requiring beneficiaries to serve in government agencies or the Public Attorney's Office, thereby directly contributing to the delivery of legal services to marginalized and indigent sectors.

The proposed measure aligns with existing frameworks such as the Unified Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education (UniFAST) and strengthens clinical legal education by encouraging student participation in legal aid programs. By investing in legal education, the State invests in a more equitable justice system and empowers future legal professionals.

In view of the foregoing, the immediate passage of this bill is earnestly sought.


HON. ERIC G. YAP

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TWENTIETH CONGRESS
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House Bill No. **8956**

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AN ACT
PROMOTING ACCESS TO QUALITY LEGAL EDUCATION BY PROVIDING
FOR FREE TUITION AND OTHER SCHOOL FEES IN STATE UNIVERSITIES
AND COLLEGES, AND APPROPRIATING FUNDS THEREFOR

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

Section 1. *Short Title.* – This Act shall be known as the “*Free Legal Education Act*”.

SEC. 2. *Declaration of Policy.* – It is hereby declared the policy of the State to provide appropriate legal measures for the protection of human rights of all persons within the Philippines, as well as Filipinos residing abroad; offer economic assistance to the underprivileged and marginalized sectors; deliver free legal services to indigent litigants, and address the lack of and unavailability of legal practitioners in the different government agencies in the country.

Likewise, the State hereby recognizes the invaluable role of lawyers and the legal education out of which they are molded, in the attainment of societal progress. Towards this end, the State shall encourage the youth to pursue a career in legal education and thereafter, provide them with opportunities for employment in the legal field through which they could better serve their countrymen.

SEC. 3. *Definition of Terms.* – As used in this Act:

a. Legal Education refers the totality of various academic programs in higher education designed for the training of prospective lawyers, allied professionals and legal scholars. It shall encompass the basic and graduate law programs, and other legal studies programs;

b. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) refers to an educational institution, private or public, undertaking operations of higher education program/s with an organized group of students pursuing defined studies in higher education, receiving instructions from teachers, usually located in a

building or group of buildings in a particular site specifically intended for educational purposes. The following are the classifications of Higher Education Institutions:

- i. Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) are institutions incorporated as stock or non-stock corporations and supervised and regulated by the Commission on Higher Education, except for the law program;
- ii. State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) are those created by special laws or charters, governed by their respective board of regents or board of trustees, chaired by the CHED Chairperson according to Republic Act (RA) No. 8292, otherwise known as the "*Higher Education Modernization Act of 1997*"; and
- iii. Legal Education Institutions (LEIs) refers to all higher education institutions accredited by the Legal Education Board to offer basic and/or graduate law programs, allied legal studies programs and/or other legal studies programs and recognized by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), when applicable.

SEC. 4. *Establishment of Free Legal Education Program in SUCs.* – There shall be established a Free Legal Education Program for deserving students in SUCs. All qualified Filipino students who are either currently enrolled in the Juris Doctor Program offered in SUCs at the time of the effectivity of this Act, or shall enroll at any time thereafter, after passing the entrance examination and other admission and retention requirements of the said SUCs, shall be exempt from paying tuition and other school fees for units enrolled in.

All SUCs with a Law Program duly accredited by the Legal Education Board shall be qualified to implement this Act insofar as beneficial to their *bona fide* law students.

The SUCs shall create a mechanism, which will ensure that the beneficial provisions of this Act, relative to tuition and other school fees subsidy, need not apply to students with the financial capacity to pay for their education.

SEC. 5. *Qualifications and Requirements.* – In order to be qualified for the Free Legal Education Program, a law student must comply with the following requirements:

- a. Must be a Filipino Citizen residing in the Philippines;
- b. Must be a student taking up Juris Doctor degree in an SUC;
- c. Must sign an agreement stating the terms and conditions of the scholarship on a form that shall be prescribed by the LEB;

d. Must carry full load of subjects prescribed per semester by the SUC, and shall not, under any circumstance, drop a course which will result in underloading;

e. Must finish the entire Juris Doctor degree within the prescribed time frame of the SUC where the scholar is enrolled in, subject to the retention policies of the SUC; *Provided*, That a scholar who is already enrolled, may be allowed, for valid and justifiable reasons, to file a leave of absence;

f. Must take the bar examination within a maximum period of one (1) year after completion of the Juris Doctor degree; and

g. Must render return service as provided under Section 14 of this Act.

SEC. 6. *Coverage.* – The Free Legal Education Program shall cover the following:

a. Tuition fees at the rate approved by the SUC governing board as of date of passage of this Act;

b. Government-mandated bar examination and licensure fees; and

c. Other school fees including but not limited to:

i. Fees for prescribed books, on a reimbursement basis, as determined by the LEB, upon consultation with its stakeholders;

ii. Student registration fees; and

iii. Library fees.

SEC. 7. *Ineligibility.* – The following students are ineligible to avail of the Free Legal Education:

a. Students who have already attained a Bachelor of Laws or a Juris Doctor degree from any legal education or institution;

b. Students who fail to comply with the admission and retention policies of SUCs; and

c. Students who fail to complete their Juris Doctor degree within the period prescribed in the program.

Students who are ineligible to avail of the Free Legal Education Program shall be charged the tuition and other school fees as determined by the governing Board of the SUCs.

SEC. 8. *Harmonization with the Clinical Legal Education Program.* – Pursuant to Section 5(5), Article VIII of the 1987 Constitution, the Supreme Court is empowered to adopt and promulgate rules through the amendment of the provisions of Rule 138-A or the Revised Law Student Practice Rule of the Rules of Court.

The Legal Education Board shall adopt the policy on the Revised Law Student Practice Rule, ensure that law students participate in the clinical legal education programs in all legal education institutions, define the scope of service to be rendered by law students in the said program, contribute to access to justice of the marginalized sectors, enhance learning opportunities of law students, instill among them social responsibility and awareness, and prepare them for the practice of law.

SEC. 9. *Harmonization with the UniFAST Act.* – Pursuant to RA No. 10687, otherwise known as the “*Unified Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education (UniFAST) Act*”, the UniFAST is the existing system to unify and harmonize all publicly-funded national government programs for Student Financial Assistance Programs, including but not limited to scholarships, grants-in-aid, and student loans for tertiary education.

As the repository of all government-funded modalities of Student Financial Assistance Programs for tertiary education in both public and private institutions, the UniFAST is mandated by law to implement the disbursement of student financial grants including the Free Legal Education Program, the latter in coordination with the LEB, which shall provide UniFAST with validating data or information on the currently enrolled registered law students per semester.

SEC. 10. *Prohibited Acts.* – Upon effectivity of this Act, it shall be unlawful for any SUC, or any person or entity representing an SUC, to collect tuition and other school fees from qualified law students during the registration or enrollment period: *Provided*, That this provision shall not apply to law students who voluntarily opt out of the subsidy or are otherwise ineligible to avail of the provisions of this Act.

SEC. 11. *Penalties.* – A commission of any prohibited act defined under the next preceding section shall subject the SUC to an administrative case under the jurisdiction of the LEB, and shall result in the imposition of the appropriate administrative sanction, including but not limited to: (a) downgrading of the government recognition; (b) phase-out of the law program; and (c) termination of the law program.

This is without prejudice to the civil or criminal liability of the party responsible therefor.

SEC. 12. *Reporting Requirements.* – All SUCs shall submit to the UniFAST and the LEB, within five (5) days after the last day of registration for each semester, a report detailing the names of law students eligible for free tuition and other school fees of the institution, under this Act.

SUCs shall submit a report to the LEB and UniFAST before the start of an academic year on the projected number of enrollees for each academic year set by the respective governing boards of SUCs. Before the start of each academic year, the SUCs shall submit a report to the LEB and UniFAST on their projected number of enrollees as determined by their respective governing boards for the purpose of implementing the disbursement of student financial grants.

SEC. 13. *Appropriations.* – The amount necessary to carry out the implementation of this Act shall be included in the current year's appropriation of the UniFAST.

Thereafter, the amount necessary for the continuous implementation of the Free Legal Education Program provided under this Act shall be included in the UniFAST appropriations in the annual General Appropriations Act.

SEC. 14. *Mandatory Return Service.* – Within four (4) years upon passing the bar examinations and conferment of the license to practice the legal profession, a scholar shall render mandatory return service for two (2) years in the Public Attorney's Office or any government agency lacking lawyers as may be determined by the LEB; *Provided*, That the lawyer shall receive appropriate salaries and other benefits for service rendered under the mandatory return service.

Any scholar who fails or refuses to comply with the mandatory return service the service obligation imposed under this Act shall be required to reimburse the Government the full cost of scholarship, including other benefits and expenses received under this Act.

SEC. 15. *Implementing Rules and Regulations.* – Within one hundred twenty (120) days from the effectivity of this Act, the LEB as lead, in coordination with the CHED, UniFAST, DBM, Philippine Association of State Universities and Colleges (PASUC), Association of Local Colleges and University (ALCU), Philippine Association of Law Schools (PALS), Association of Law Students (ALSP), shall formulate and issue the rules and regulations to fully implement the provisions of this Act.

SEC. 16. *Separability Clause.* – Should any part or provision of this Act be determined to be unconstitutional or invalid, the other parts or provisions not affected thereby shall remain in full force and effect.

SEC. 17. *Repealing Clause.* – All laws, decrees, executive orders, rules and regulations and other issuances or parts thereof inconsistent with the provisions of this Act are hereby repealed or modified accordingly.

SEC. 18. *Effectivity.* – This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after its publication in the *Official Gazette* or in a newspaper of general circulation.

Approved,