



Tax-Free Employer Reimbursement of Student Loan Repayments

January 2021

Background

Employers can provide employees up to \$5,250 annually in tax-free education assistance through an educational assistance program under IRC § 127. Historically, educational assistance programs were limited to payments for an employee's current educational expenses such as tuition, fees and textbooks. For 2020, the CARES Act expanded education assistance so that an educational assistance program could also cover payment or reimbursement of an employee's student loans. Unfortunately, this expansion was enacted when many employers were looking for ways to cut expenses, and not in a position to expand benefits.

What's New for 2021?

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, enacted on December 27, 2020, extends through 2025 the ability to treat reimbursement of student loan payments as tax-free under IRC § 127. As the economy rebounds, adding or expanding this benefit through an educational assistance program may be an attractive way to recruit and retain dedicated employees.

Potential Opportunities

- Some employers already offer taxable loan repayment assistance – for example, \$100 per month up to \$5,000 lifetime. These could be refashioned into a tax-free reimbursement.
- Employers without an existing educational assistance program could adopt one that is tailored to loan repayment for certain targeted employees.
 - For example, some employers might want to make loan repayment part of a sign-on bonus, particularly when recruiting out of university programs.
- Employers with an existing educational assistance program could expand their programs to add loan reimbursement.
 - Some participants could qualify for both tuition and loan reimbursement (subject to the \$5,250 annual limit).

What's Involved in Administering a § 127 Plan?

Maintaining an educational assistance program need not be complicated, but there are a few legal requirements. **See an overview on the next page.**

Contact us. If you have reactions or comments or would like more information, we would be happy to hear from you.

OVERVIEW OF LEGAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ADMINISTERING A § 127 EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE PLAN

Eligible Covered Tuition Expenses	<p>Tuition, fees, and textbook expenses for any educational course taken by the employee, regardless of whether it is related to the employee's job.</p> <p><i>Exclusions:</i> Reimbursements cannot cover education involving sports, games, or hobbies, nor can they cover meals, lodging, transportation, or any tools or supplies the employee may retain after completing a course.</p>
Eligible Covered Loan Repayments (2020-2025)	Principal or interest on any qualified education loan—a loan taken solely to pay qualified higher education expenses—incurred by the employee for education of the employee.
Alternative Benefits	Cannot provide employees with a choice between educational assistance and taxable compensation (i.e., cash).
Maximum Tax-Free Benefit	\$5,250 per year (combined between tuition and loan repayment expenses).
Eligibility	<p>Permitted to cover employees and independent contractors.</p> <p>Cannot discriminate in favor of highly compensated employees or their dependents. New hires are non-HCEs for this purpose.</p> <p>Cannot pay out more than 5% of the total amounts paid during the year to significant shareholders.</p>
Eligibility Conditions	Can impose reasonable conditions on reimbursements. It is not uncommon to require repayment if an employee terminates within a certain period after receiving reimbursement.
Disclosure	Must provide eligible employees reasonable notification of the availability and terms of the program.
ERISA	ERISA does not apply (no reporting or disclosure obligations; no fiduciary responsibilities, although an educational assistance program must be for the exclusive benefit of employees to provide educational assistance).
Plan Document	Must have written plan document.
Funding	No trust or funding obligation; amounts can be paid from employer general assets.