

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 4, 2024

The Honorable Dr. Miguel A. Cardona
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona,

We write today to convey our support for the Department of Education’s (the Department’s) previous work to address problems with the implementation of the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), including the just-announced “full-scale review” of the Federal Student Aid (FSA)’s management and operational challenges,¹ recent steps advancing the FAFSA Student Support Strategy (Strategy) and new guidance for students from mixed-status families released on May 20, 2024.²

We also would like to bring the Department’s attention to numerous serious remaining issues and obstacles that students, states and higher education institutions are experiencing with the rollout of the 2024-2025 FAFSA form. Like you, we continue to have significant concerns—starting with the 15.5 percent drop in FAFSA completion nationwide—which require the Department’s continued attention and urgent action in accord with the Strategy.³

We commend the Department’s Strategy and the April 30 and May 20 technical fixes addressing barriers for students whose parents or spouses do not have a Social Security Number (SSN), but we continue to be concerned that this guidance may prove difficult for students to understand and utilize. In addition, students and their family members are understandably hesitant to submit sensitive identity verification documents to the provided FSA email address and have reported that such documents have been requested multiple times when they have contacted the Department for assistance with their FSA ID.

We are concerned that these students and their families will remain caught in a frustrating limbo while attempting to navigate the intricate steps outlined by this latest technical fix. Many of these students are the first in their family to apply to college and have overcome a lifetime of obstacles to reach this moment. We’ve seen many reports of students struggling with this issue,

¹ <https://blog.ed.gov/2024/05/secretary-cardona-outlines-steps-modernized-fsa/>

² <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-launches-next-phase-fafsa-support-strategy-boost-completion-rate-among-high-school-students>.

³ <https://www.ncan.org/page/FAFSATracker>.

such as one who secured a promised spot on the roster of his college's soccer team, while another who has been attempting to re-enroll in classes for his junior year.⁴ We are also especially concerned about the students who resorted to submitting the paper FAFSA when they could not access the online form. Many of these students report that their paper forms still have not been processed, a month after the May 1 college decision deadline. State higher education agencies have relayed that they are expecting a wave of backlogged FAFSA applications, including paper FAFSA forms, that they are unable to process in a timely manner. While many states delayed their application deadlines to accommodate the new FAFSA's timeline, this has only added to the uncertainty that many students are experiencing.

To prevent similar delays from occurring in the future, we urge the Department to create an online portal before the 2025-2026 award year that allows students and their families to upload identity verification documents securely and conveniently. Such a portal will reduce the administrative delays and burdens that students have been experiencing with the 2024-2025 FAFSA.

Meantime, many students have reported that they are unable to obtain meaningful assistance through the Department's Federal Student Aid Information Center (FSAIC). We have received reports of students and parents experiencing multiple hangups while attempting to seek technical support. We encourage the Department to promptly share tailored and regularly updated resources on assisting students from mixed-status families with FSAIC call center operators so that they can receive prompt and effective assistance, no matter who they connect with on the other end of the line.

Weeks after the college decision deadline has passed, students across the country fear that they may need to delay their academic career. As you know, many of these students are especially vulnerable to disruptions in their education and may never again be in the financial and personal position to attend college, especially considering that many states distribute financial assistance on a first-come, first-served basis.⁵ We understand the Department is working with limited resources, but we remain gravely concerned about these students' access to higher education, and we urge the Department to consider innovative solutions to connect students buffeted by these obstacles with additional financial resources.

In addition to the creation of an online identity verification portal and FSAIC call menu, we ask that the Department identify individuals who have been unable to obtain their FSA ID and immediately assist them with accessing the May 20 technical fix. We further ask that the Department:

- Make every effort under its existing programs and authority to connect students with resources that can help make up for the aid they may have missed in states that award financial aid on a first-come, first-serve basis;

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/04/18/fafsa-first-generation-immigrant-college-financial-aid/>.

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2024/04/26/fafsa-problems-students-dc-area/>.

- Issue resources and guidance to state education agencies and institutions to assist them in processing FAFSA backlogs, with particular attention to ensuring that students who submitted paper FAFSA forms receive the full measure of financial aid that they are entitled to; and
- Provide the average wait time for students when contacting FSAIC since January 1, 2024, and identify any additional flexibility and resources needed to address long wait times.

We also ask that you convene a briefing for Members of Congress and our staff to update us on the Department's progress in achieving the above actions.

Thank you for your attention to this important and urgent matter. We appreciate the Department's commitment to bringing down the staggering costs of higher education. We understand that the Department has had to implement multiple priorities with less funding than originally anticipated. We wholeheartedly support your mission, and we look forward to working with you to connect as many students as possible with the resources they need to attend college.

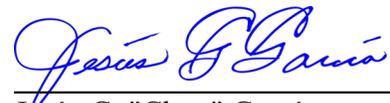
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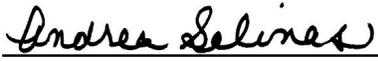
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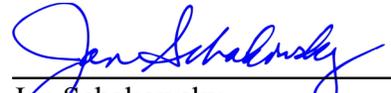
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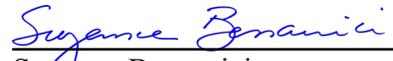
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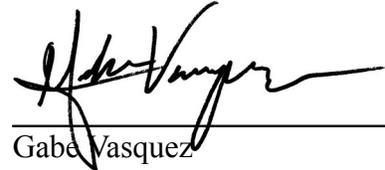
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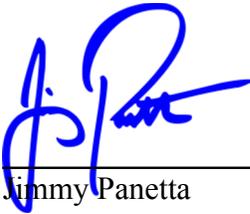
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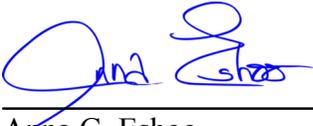
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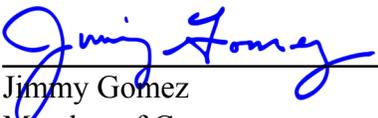
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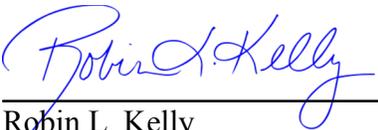
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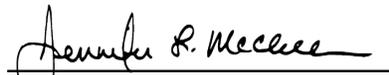
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