

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 12, 2024

The Honorable Miguel Cardona, Secretary  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Ave, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

We write regarding the Department of Education's (the Department) implementation of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form update. FAFSA is the key for helping millions of students and families unlock financial aid in order to bring higher education within reach.

In 2020, Congress passed the *FAFSA Simplification Act* to streamline the FAFSA form that students and their families must complete each year. The law also made the financial aid formula more generous so students and families could qualify for additional aid, while also extending the maximum Federal Pell Grant to millions more students.

These changes were long overdue and have required extensive coordination among agencies and stakeholders. Indeed, the Department collaborated closely with the Internal Revenue Service to implement "back end" improvements that will reduce burdens on families and make the process more efficient for institutions. This work will pay dividends for years to come.

Today, however, this progress is threatened by technical glitches and persistent delays in processing the 2024-2025 FAFSA. Students and families are understandably concerned.

We have heard from Rhode Island financial aid professionals and guidance counselors that these delays are putting low-income and first-generation students at risk of not enrolling in college this fall. These are the students that the FAFSA changes were intended to help the most. In fact, data from the National College Attainment Network shows that Rhode Island high school seniors have submitted 33% fewer FAFSA forms compared to the year before.

The Department's recently announced FAFSA College Support Strategy was a positive step in righting the ship and helping students and institutions as they navigate this difficult rollout under tight timelines. But more must be done to address the issues our constituents continue to encounter.

With this in mind, we request the Department's response to the following questions:

1. The Department has discovered that an unusual number of students have chosen only to apply for unsubsidized loans when completing their FAFSA. This suggests an irregularity in the form, which the Department is working to rectify by the time it sends FAFSA forms to schools in mid-March. However, the solution proposed by the Department will require colleges and universities to conduct outreach to potentially affected students.

- a. How many students are affected by this issue?
  - b. How will the Department inform these students?
  - c. What guidance will the Department offer these students and the institutions that will be assisting them?
  - d. What is the Department's plan for institutions and students to resubmit their FAFSA if they so choose?
2. Recognizing that the Department will only *begin* to send FAFSA forms to institutions by mid-March, when can institutions expect the Department to clear the backlog of FAFSA forms, which now stands at nearly five million?
3. To help institutions plan for the batches of FAFSA forms they will receive, can the Department share more information about what type of forms these batches will include, the cadence and target dates they will be sent to institutions and how many FAFSA forms will be in each batch?
  - a. To support high schools in tracking student progress on FAFSA completion, the Department committed to sharing data by high school on their students' 2024–25 FAFSA submissions. Recognizing that colleges and universities also play an important role in conducting outreach to students on FAFSA completion, can the Department share the database of applications by college and university with relevant institutions?
4. While the Department has developed an interim process for students from mixed status families who have been prevented from completing a FAFSA, we remain concerned that this complex workaround may further confuse and discourage these applicants.
  - a. By what date will the Department implement a permanent fix for family members without a Social Security Number (SSN) to set up an FSA ID and correct the electronic FAFSA submission for contributors without an SSN?
  - b. What is the Department's plan to communicate directly with affected students who use the interim workaround to notify them when the permanent fix is enacted so that they may resubmit their FAFSA?
5. As a result of the delays and glitches in the FAFSA form this year, many students may choose to complete a paper version of the FAFSA. However, the Department has stated that paper forms will be processed after online applications, meaning these students' forms will be farther back in the processing line.
  - a. What is the Department's timeline for processing all paper FAFSA forms, and how will it ensure that the delay does not further disadvantage this group of students?

6. While the Department's announcement of a new concierge service to provide institutions direct contact with financial aid experts is a welcome step, many Rhode Island institutions are hearing from students struggling to successfully complete the FSA ID process or submit a FAFSA. Does the Department have a plan to support a similar real-time concierge service for students and families completing the FAFSA this cycle?
7. The Department's plan to surge resources and personnel to institutions and to support their work processing FAFSA forms this cycle was a positive step. As the Department builds on the lessons of this year's award cycle, we would like to see this level of support extended to high school guidance counselors and community-based college outreach programs that are on the front lines of helping students and families navigate the college application and financial aid processes. Rhode Island has announced a new statewide initiative with the long-term goal of improving student learning outcomes by increasing three key metrics, including FAFSA completion rates. As more states move to incorporate FAFSA completion rates in their K-12 accountability systems, what guidance and resources does the Department offer to support these efforts?
8. The new Financial Value Transparency and Gainful Employment (GE) reporting are due to the Department this July, yet the Department will not publish data or require student warnings or acknowledgments for GE and Financial Value Transparency until July 1, 2026. This reporting requirement falls primarily on financial aid offices while they will be working through the backlog of FAFSA forms and supporting students who experienced FAFSA delays.
  - a. Is the Department considering offering flexibility in the timeline for these reporting requirements while still maintaining the publication date of July 1, 2026?
  - b. What guidance will the Department provide to institutions?

Thank you for your attention to this request. We look forward to your prompt response and to continuing to partner with the Department in this matter.

Sincerely,



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Sheldon Whitehouse  
United States Senator



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Jack Reed  
United States Senator



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Seth Magaziner  
Member of Congress



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Gabe Amo  
Member of Congress