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

Dear Secretary Cardona:

I write today with concerns regarding the Department of Education's (the Department) implementation of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form.

I first learned of the FAFSA form's complexity and bureaucracy when I was superintendent of the Denver Public Schools. The dedicated students, parents, and educators for whom I worked spent weeks filling out these forms. A 66-page manual accompanied a finely-printed ten page application form. One can only speculate how many millions of students across our country, otherwise eligible for financial aid, never attended college because they were defeated by the complexity of a form most college graduates would have difficulty completing.¹

In 2015, former Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and I set out to mitigate this problem by introducing the bipartisan Financial Aid Simplification and Transparency (FAST) Act. In its original form, the FAST Act proposed increasing access to college by reducing the number of FAFSA questions from 108 to 2, streamlining federal grant and loan programs, permitting year-round Pell grants, and simplifying repayment programs. In 2020, Congress passed the *FAFSA Simplification Act*, which incorporated many of our FAST Act provisions, including reducing the number of FAFSA questions by more than half. We passed that bill to cut bureaucracy in the college application process, not to add to its unforgiving red tape.

Unfortunately, the Department's actions have cruelly compounded the American people's difficulty. The Department released the new FAFSA form three months later than the public anticipated. When the application finally opened, many families could not access the online form. Some experienced glitches and others were booted off the website altogether. Students whose parents did not have Social Security numbers (SSN) learned they could not complete their applications online.² Students who lived on farms discovered they could be penalized for their families' businesses.³ Parents who already had children in college discovered they might have to

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/your-money/students-college-grants-fafsa.html>

² <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/12/1230396481/yet-another-fafsa-problem-non-citizens-cant-fill-it-out>

³ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2024/03/05/does-new-fafsa-hurt-farm-families/72494251007/>

pay more than they anticipated.⁴ When applicants tried to inquire to address these issues, the Department refused to answer their calls.⁵

The Department's application-processing delays forced families to wait months for their financial aid packages. These delays hurt those who require financial assistance the most, especially students of color, students from mixed status families, students from rural communities, first-generation students, and students from underserved communities. Without receiving their financial aid packages in a timely manner, their families cannot make informed decisions about which school their child might attend.

The Department's bureaucratic catastrophe has heaped immense stress on students, parents, and school administrators. As you know, today's high school seniors have already experienced extraordinary hardship over the last four years. The COVID-19 pandemic hit during their final year of middle school, and schools closed across the country. During that time, many students saw their parents lose jobs or struggle financially. As states enacted social distancing measures, the same children could not see their friends for months. They spent their first year of high school logging into lessons online, cut off from their classmates. Through no fault of their own, many fell behind in their education. They have suffered an epidemic of loneliness, anxiety, and depression – and for many of them, college finally presents an opportunity to grow, earn the skills to graduate with a good job, and make a living wage.

This is not just a minor bureaucratic failure by the federal government. It represents gross mismanagement with catastrophic consequences. One school counselor from Carbondale, Colorado put it to me this way:

“My students are stressed, anxious, and in some cases, resigned to an uncertain future. Meanwhile, they continue to watch their more affluent classmates, who do not need financial aid, achieve their college dreams. Students from marginalized backgrounds have had a ridiculous amount of obstacles thrown in their way since the pandemic when it comes to furthering their education-they are the last ones who need to suffer the most because of a bureaucratic oversight.”

I am certain you would agree that America's students would be far better off spending their time choosing the college of their dreams, than navigating this bureaucratic disaster. I am deeply concerned this disaster will discourage many students from pursuing higher education altogether.

I would like to understand the Department's plan to assist the families who are trapped in this nightmare. To that end, I request a response to the following questions related to the Department's FAFSA implementation:

- Students and parents have experienced difficulty reaching a real person to ask questions and clarify information needed on the FAFSA form. What is your plan to ensure that students and parents can receive clear information in the coming days?

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/03/your-money/multiple-kids-college-fafsa.html>

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/12/1230396481/yet-another-fafsa-problem-non-citizens-cant-fill-it-out>

- The Department has now made technical updates to enable students with contributors without an SSN to submit the form. However, Coloradans have reported that the FSA ID verification process for these individuals takes an additional week. This delay, in turn, further slows the Department’s notification of students regarding their financial aid packages. As a consequence, students from mixed-status families are at an even greater disadvantage than others who have suffered somewhat more quickly through this process.
 - What is the size of the FSA ID verification backlog? How does the Department plan to relieve this backlog and by when?
 - How will the Department notify students, parents, and college financial aid administrators about the status of parents who have submitted an “Attestation and Validation of Identity” form and ID documents to verify their StudentAid.gov account, but have yet to receive any notification about whether their identity has been successfully verified?
 - When will the Department provide additional information about what contributors without SSNs should do if they have not received any notification that their identity has been verified?
- Last month, the Department announced that it would provide additional resources and deploy support from the office of Federal Student Aid and nonprofit organizations to assist lower-resourced colleges as part of its FAFSA College Support Strategy.
 - Has the Department determined which colleges will receive additional resources and support staff?
 - How will the Department determine which lower-resourced colleges will receive resources and support staff?
 - Will the Department prioritize the allocation of resources and support staff to rural colleges, Hispanic-Serving Institutions and other Minority-Serving Institutions, and to colleges that serve a large percentage of students eligible to receive Pell grants?
- When will the Department complete processing FAFSA forms and submit the data to higher education institutions?

Thank you for continued attention to this important matter. I look forward to hearing the Department’s plans to ensure students and their families receive the necessary information to make key decisions about their futures.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator