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August 9, 2023

**VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION**

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

Dear Secretary Cardona:

I write today to express my deep concerns about the content of the speech you delivered to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) TEACH Conference on Friday, July 21, 2023. Near the conclusion of your remarks, you stated, “It’s our turn to drive the action. It’s our turn to reclaim the narrative. It’s our turn to turn up the heat!”<sup>1</sup> That was quickly followed by, “We need to make clear, man, that if you poke the bear, if you threaten the great equalizer, if you undermine an institution so vital to the survival of democracy and the future of our nation, then there’s going to be an equal and opposite reaction!”<sup>2</sup>

It is undeniable that American students are still suffering from significant learning loss caused by the extended school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic—school closures that were advocated for by the very audience to whom you were giving your speech. According to a recent study from NWEA, in nearly all grades, “achievement gains during 2022-23 fell short of prepandemic trends,” and the average student will need the equivalent of 4.1 additional months of schooling to catch up in reading and 4.5 months in math.<sup>3</sup> Despite widespread evidence of the harmful effects of school closures on children, AFT continually fought tooth and nail to keep schools closed as long as possible. In response to re-opening efforts in July of 2020, AFT President Randi Weingarten blamed the administration for “wanting to create chaos,” and accused it of being “reckless” and “cruel.”<sup>4</sup> Not willing to stop at mere comments, Ms. Weingarten improperly coordinated with the

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<sup>1</sup> AFTHQ, *TEACH Conference Opening Session: What Kids, Teachers and Communities Need*, YOUTUBE (July 21, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERp1aqlp1rA>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Karyn Lewis & Megan Kuhfeld, *Education’s long COVID: 2022-23 achievement data reveal stalled progress toward pandemic recovery 2* (2023), [https://www.nwea.org/uploads/Educations-long-covid-2022-23-achievement-data-reveal-stalled-progress-toward-pandemic-recovery\\_NWEA\\_Research-brief.pdf](https://www.nwea.org/uploads/Educations-long-covid-2022-23-achievement-data-reveal-stalled-progress-toward-pandemic-recovery_NWEA_Research-brief.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Jessica Glenza, *‘Reckless, callous, cruel’: teachers’ chief denounces Trump plan to reopen schools*, THE GUARDIAN (July 17, 2020, 3:00 PM), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/17/trump-teachers-reopening-schools-coronavirus-randi-weingarten>.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to influence its school reopening guidance with the goal of keeping schools closed longer than necessary.<sup>5</sup>

During the extended school closures, parents had a unique insight into their children’s schooling. According to one survey, 78 percent of parents said they became more involved in their child’s education because of what they saw of their children’s education during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> However, this increased involvement by parents in their children’s education was met with a strong pushback by teachers’ unions, and even by the Biden administration, whose Department of Justice targeted parents at school board meetings who were “voicing concerns about controversial curricula and education-related policies.”<sup>7</sup> As parent concern and involvement grew, so did the coordinated efforts by the Biden administration to censor the rights of parents.

This continued pattern of intimidating parents and silencing ideas that are at odds to those endorsed by this administration and the teachers’ unions makes your choice of words at this speech especially concerning. As Secretary of Education, you should be making it crystal clear that parents have the right to advocate for their children and play a role in their education without the constant fear of governmental intimidation. Parents know what is best for their children, not the teachers’ unions, and certainly not the federal government.

Given the incendiary nature of your comments to the AFT conference, it is incumbent upon you as Secretary of Education to clarify the language you used and further explain the actions you were advocating for. Based on the audience for this speech, and the posture this administration has taken toward increased parental involvement in schools, it is reasonable to assume that you were advocating for teachers’ unions to reclaim the message from parents, to turn up the heat on parents who try to get involved, and to intimidate any parents who dare to speak out about shortcomings they observe in our schools or improvements they want to see made. As parents and students prepare to return to school imminently, I request that you answer the following questions, **on a question-by-question basis, by August 23, 2023**.

1. Please define the role parents should play in their children’s education.
2. Should parents be able to voice concerns about controversial curricula in their children’s school?
3. Who is the “our” in: “It’s our turn to reclaim the narrative?” What should “the narrative” be?

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<sup>5</sup> Press Release, H. Comm. on Oversight & Accountability, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten Testifies to Uncommon Influence Over CDC School Reopening Guidance (Apr. 27, 2023), <https://oversight.house.gov/release/american-federation-of-teachers-president-randi-weingarten-testifies-to-uncommon-influence-over-cdc-school-reopening-guidance/>.

<sup>6</sup> National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, *Never Going Back An Analysis of Parent Sentiment in Education* 12 (2022), <https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2022-08/NAPCS-HarrisPoll-20220823-V4.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> STAFF OF H. COMM. ON THE JUDICIARY & SELECT SUBCOMM. ON THE WEAPONIZATION OF THE FED. GOV’T, INTERIM STAFF REP. ON A “MANUFACTURED” ISSUE AND “MISAPPLIED” PRIORITIES: SUBPOENAED DOCUMENTS SHOW NO LEGITIMATE BASIS FOR THE ATTORNEY GENERAL’S ANTI-PARENT MEMO (Comm. Print 2023), <https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2023-03-21-school-board-documents-interim-report.pdf>.

4. What does, “It’s our turn to turn up the heat,” refer to? What actions should be taken to “turn up the heat?” Who will the “heat” be turned up against?

The following questions refer to the part of the speech which states, “We need to make clear, man, that if you poke the bear, if you threaten the great equalizer, if you undermine an institution so vital to the survival of democracy and the future of our nation, then there’s going to be an equal and opposite reaction!”

5. Who or what is “the bear?” Who was “pok[ing] the bear?” What does it mean to “poke the bear?”
6. What is “the great equalizer?” Who, specifically, is threatening “the great equalizer?” How are they threatening it?
7. What “institution” does the above quotation refer to? Who is undermining it? How are they undermining it?
8. What is the “equal and opposite reaction?” Who will be taking this action? What will this reaction entail? Who will the reaction be against? What will the reaction be equal to?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

*Bill Cassidy, M.D.*

Bill Cassidy  
Ranking Member  
Senate HELP Committee