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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
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WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

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January 12, 2024

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

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

Dear Secretary Cardona:

I write to you concerned about the impact the delayed Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) rollout will have on low-income students, including many first-generation college students experiencing the financial aid process for the first time. The Department of Education (ED) has had over three years to prepare and yet students are still not able to use their completed applications to secure federal, state, and campus-based financial aid. Unfortunately, ED seems to have prioritized its multiple student loan schemes over performing the tasks mandated by Congress. After failing on return to repayment, this poor quality of work is a pattern at ED. The purpose of the FAFSA Simplification Act was to make financial aid more accessible for all students, by simplifying the application process. Instead, the current rollout has made navigating the financial aid system far more difficult for students with greater uncertainty.

The statutory deadline of January 1, 2024, was already three months later than the annual October 1 availability of the FAFSA. According to your staff, the application was only available for approximately 30 minutes on December 30th, and for about an hour on December 31st as part of a “soft launch.” This limited availability is not what Congress intended.

This is unacceptable and does not appear to be consistent with industry standards for website development and launch. After the failure of Healthcare.gov over ten years ago, the government made improvements in how it builds and launches websites. This is one of the primary reasons why the United States Digital Services (USDS) was created. There are resources dedicated to this issue and yet there is still a failure at ED.

As of the January 9 update provided to Congress, ED has only received 1 million completed applications. For the 2021-2022 application cycle, over 17.5 million applications were submitted. The botched rollout means students will be forced to make financial aid decisions with less time and less information than in the past. Where to go to college, and how to finance it, is one of the most important financial decisions a person will make in their lifetime. ED needs to be making that decision easier, not harder.

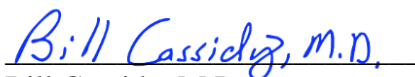
In addition, this failure suggests that ED and the Office of Student Aid cannot handle the important responsibility of administering financial aid. Again, the FAFSA is the backbone of our nation's entire financial aid system from federal grants to campus-based aid. This failure means the entire system came to a complete halt.

Given the urgency needed to jumpstart the financial aid process, please reply within five business days of receiving this letter with the answers to the following questions:

- Have any of the previously announced implementation timelines shifted, such as the end of January expectation to provide information to schools? If not, how does ED plan to make up for lost time while processing over 17 million students through the system to meet these previously established timelines when you have failed to meet previous deadlines?
- How does the project management timeline for this rollout meet IT industry standards?
- Was the plan to always meet the statutory deadline with only 30 minutes of availability?
 - Please describe beta testing and monthly deliverables for this project, both expected and actual, in the 24 months prior to December 30, 2023.
- What was the communication plan pre- and post- December 30, 2023, for financial aid administrators and students?
- How is ED communicating with students and families to take responsibility for this failure and assuage their concerns about the abbreviated process?

Unfortunately for students, this rollout has not gone well, and my hope is that you will be more forthcoming about how you plan to remedy the situation than you have been about the return to repayment. I look forward to your reply. Millions of students and families are depending on it.

Sincerely,



Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Ranking Member

U.S. Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor, and Pensions