

Congress of the United States

Washington, D.C. 20515

July 10, 2024

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Sandra D. Bruce
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Inspector General Bruce:

We understand that your office is conducting oversight of the Department of Education's (Department) implementation of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Your oversight is necessary and consistent with the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) mandate "to conduct, supervise, and coordinate audits and investigations relating to the programs and operations of the [Department]." ¹ We strongly urge you to continue to focus on this critical matter and to share your findings with Congress and the American people. Students and families who need federal student aid to access postsecondary education deserve our best efforts to ensure that the Department successfully executes the laws enacted by Congress to make student aid easily accessible.

Efforts to implement the revised FAFSA have faced a series of setbacks. During the first implementation year of FAFSA simplification, errors in the 2024-2025 application presented usability issues for students, delayed ordinary timelines by months, and required the Department to reprocess millions of forms. Enrollment for the upcoming 2024-2025 school year has been frustrating and disappointing for students and institutions. Experts currently expect a 10 percent drop in FAFSA applications filed by 2024 graduating high school seniors. ²

On May 7, 2024, we and other Senators and House members (not signatories today) sent Secretary Miguel Cardona (Secretary) a letter to express our concerns about the Department's

¹ 5 U.S.C. § 404(a)(1).

² Bill DeBaun, How to Offer Summer Supports to Students to Drive FAFSA, Combat Melt, NATIONAL COLLEGE ACCESS NETWORK (May 7, 2024), <https://www.ncan.org/news/671885/How-to-Offer-Summer-Supports-to-Students-to-Drive-FAFSA-Combat-Melt.html>.

ongoing challenges to implement the new FAFSA.³ We requested the Secretary provide us full transparency into the planned launch of FAFSA for the 2025-2026 year. While the Department has not provided us transparency into the launch, on May 30 the Secretary did announce an internal review of the Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA).⁴ The announcement stated the Department would solicit input from your office to address “ongoing management and operational challenges.”⁵ We urge you to complete the review the Secretary requested and fully disclose your findings.

The letter to Secretary Cardona also requested weekly updates from the Department on its timeline, planned consumer testing, and “fixes” for the launch of the 2025-2026 FAFSA.⁶ However, on June 7, 2024, the Department missed the first deadline we established for the updates.⁷ In addition, the Department decided not to publish a draft FAFSA for comment, which typically occurs in the preceding February or March. Instead, the Department has chosen to issue a Request for Information on the 2025-2026 FAFSA at a non-specific future date “this summer,” leaving little time to incorporate changes from the field.⁸

Congress urgently requests the OIG complete its evaluation of the status of the development of the 2025-2026 FAFSA and make recommendations to the Department for correcting any deficiencies found in its FAFSA development and launch processes. The OIG should complete: (1) a quick and thorough evaluation of the Department’s Student Aid and Borrower Eligibility Reform (SABER) initiative, addressing the Department’s implementation of the Future Act and the FAFSA Simplification Act;⁹ and (2) full written reports on how any management challenges

³Letter from Robert B. Aderholt, Chair, U.S. House Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, and 10 other members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, to Miguel Cardona, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education (May 7, 2024), https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/bipartisan_bicameral_fafsa_25_26_finalpdf.pdf.

⁴Press Release, U.S. Dep’t of Educ., Sec’y Cardona Outlines Steps to Modernizing the Off. of Fed. Student Aid (May 30, 2024), <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/secretary-cardona-outlines-steps-modernizing-office-federal-student-aid>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Letter from Robert B. Aderholt, Chair, U.S. House Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, et al, to Miguel Cardona, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education (May 7, 2024), https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/bipartisan_bicameral_fafsa_25_26_finalpdf.pdf.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ U.S. Dep’t of Educ., (GENERAL-24-72) Details Related to the 2025-26 FAFSA Form Launch, Opportunities for Engagement, and Additional Activities for the 2024-25 Cycle (June 17, 2024), <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/electronic-announcements/2024-06-17/details-related-2025-26-fafsa-form-launch-opportunities-engagement-and-additional-activities-2024-25-cycle>.

⁹ The OIG stated that it plans to complete such a review in its 2023 and 2024 annual plans. *See* U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC. OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL, FY 2023 ANNUAL REPORT (2022), <https://oig.ed.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2024-06/Annual-Plan-Final-FY-2024-Signed.pdf>; U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General, FY 2023 Annual Report, December 6, 2023, <https://oig.ed.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2024-06/Annual-Plan-Final-FY-2024-Signed.pdf>; U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General, FY 2023 Annual Report, December 12, 2022, <https://oig.ed.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2024-06/FY23Annual-Plan-FY2023020724v100SECURED.pdf>.

within the Department, or FSA systems' challenges, contributed to the botched rollout of the 2024-2025 FAFSA.

In addition, we ask that you keep us fully and timely informed of all related problems and deficiencies related to the FAFSA application and FAFSA simplification process and provide the following to us no later than July 25, 2024:

1. A briefing regarding the OIG's ability to evaluate the status of the development process for the 2025-2026 FAFSA;
2. The OIG's timeline for completing its evaluation and report on the SABER initiative; and
3. The OIG's timeline for evaluating management challenges at the Department and FSA systems' issues.

Please contact Daniel Parker at Daniel_Parker@help.senate.gov or 202-224-5375 to schedule the requested briefing.

Sincerely,



Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor, and Pensions



Virginia Foxx
Chairwoman
U.S. House Committee on
Education and the Workforce



Susan M. Collins
Vice Chair
U.S. Senate Committee on
Appropriations



Robert B. Aderholt
Chair
U.S. House Subcommittee on
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Shelley Moore Capito
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Subcommittee on
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