

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY



November 15, 2019

As this Administration continues to focus on improving student achievement, I would like to note the Department's accomplishments this past fiscal year and plans for the next year. We continue our focus on putting students' needs first. All students are unique and deserve access to personalized education opportunities which help them achieve their full potential. By keeping students at the center of all we do, we are able to better execute the Department of Education's mission to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence.

I'd like to highlight a few ways in which we've empowered students and their families as well as state and local leaders and invite you to learn more about the Department's annual operations in this report. This year, the Department unveiled our Education Freedom Scholarships (EFS) proposal. This historic investment in America's students would establish a \$5 billion federal tax credit to encourage voluntary donations to state law-based scholarship granting organizations for elementary and secondary students. Students receiving scholarships would be empowered to choose the learning environment and style that best meets their unique needs. The policy would not rely on any funds currently allocated to public education, nor would it create a new federal education program. Participation would be voluntary for students, schools, and states. Education Freedom Scholarships will

finally give students the opportunity to learn in places and grow in ways that have too often been denied to them.

Students and their unique needs are also at the heart of the Department's implementation of the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. ESSA is an acknowledgment that the federal government doesn't know best when it comes to educating our nation's students. Our focus is on returning power where it belongs, to those closest to students: parents, states, and local leaders. The flexibilities included in ESSA are wide-ranging, and we continue to encourage state and local leaders to embrace them to better serve students.

We believe teachers need flexibility and autonomy as well. That's why in the President's proposed budget for fiscal year 2020 we included an innovative approach to empowering teachers with greater freedom to chart professional development journeys of their own choosing. These "teacher vouchers" would free teachers to improve and innovate for their students on their own terms, funded by a proposed \$300 million investment in Education Innovation and Research Grants. Additionally, our proposed \$200 million investment in Teacher and School Leaders Incentive Grants would help ensure teachers have access to high-quality mentoring and residency programs.

As a part of our effort to rethink higher education and encourage students of all ages to find the right education fit for them, we proposed reforms related to accreditation, distance education and innovation, Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grants, and faith-based institutions. Our proposed accreditation reform modernizes the Department's standards and eliminates the artificial divide between regional and national accreditors—a divide which harms students, limits opportunities, and misleads students about academic quality. The distance education regulation clarifies requirements for technologies that enable personalized learning and ensures that college credits mean the same thing from one institution to the next. It does so while allowing space for nontraditional technologies to measure learning in ways not strictly tied to time spent behind a desk.

We've also proposed changes to the TEACH Grant Program. These changes would simplify program requirements and minimize the number of grants that are inadvertently converted to loans, helping to ensure that TEACH Grant recipients who go on to teach in high-need fields at low-income schools get the credit they deserve for their service.

In addition, our rulemaking effort for faith-based institutions will help ensure institutions are not forced to abandon the tenets of their faith to receive federal support.

Over the past year, our Office of Federal Student Aid has worked diligently to transform the delivery of financial aid to millions of students and their families through our Next Generation (Next Gen) Financial Services Environment. Upon completion, this major transformation will modernize technology and operational components that support federal student aid programs—from application to repayment. We launched the *myStudentAid* app, which allows students and parents to easily complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®). We also improved the College Scorecard to include information on 2,100 certificate-granting institutions in addition to 3,700 degree-granting institutions. The Scorecard now contains preliminary information on student loan debt by field of study. And, in support of our veterans, the President signed a memorandum to automatically forgive federal student loan debt for those veterans who are totally and permanently disabled.

In rethinking career, technical, and adult education, we focused on expanding the Second Chance Pell experiment by allowing new higher education institutions to participate. This important experiment has already provided many students with new opportunities that prepare them for success upon reentry, and adding additional students and institutions to the experiment will help to improve the Department's ability to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

We've also made a concerted effort to engage more closely with state and local leaders by launching a State Education Leadership Conference series. This initiative gave Department leaders the opportunity to engage firsthand with state and local officials who are on the front lines of education decision making in their respective states. We held productive sessions with officials from Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

Finally, we launched the Federal Commission on School Safety website, which features the final report of the Commission along with recommendations for keeping students, teachers, and faculty safe at school. The website also includes a Frequently Asked Questions page that consolidates previously issued guidance and technical assistance into a single resource to help raise schools' and districts' awareness of supports available to them. Further,

to carry out one of the key recommendations of the final report, the Departments of Education, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, and Justice, will launch a much-anticipated school safety clearinghouse website—a useful resource to state and local school officials, law enforcement authorities, mental health professionals, and others to help keep students safe.

Sound stewardship of taxpayer funds is a priority for our Department, and I have been assured that the financial data included in this *Agency Financial Report* are complete and reliable in accordance with federal requirements. The financial report includes information and assurances about the Department's financial management systems and controls as well as control and compliance challenges noted by the Department. Similarly, the Department's related *Annual Performance Report and Annual Performance Plan (Report and Plan)* provides information on the overall performance of the Department as a federal agency. Each year this Report and Plan accompanies the Department's annual budget submission and links performance goals with resources for achieving targeted levels of performance.

This year, the Department received an unmodified or “clean” opinion on its FY 2019 financial statements. Last year, the internal control report identified one material weakness, “Controls over the Reliability of Information Used in the Modeling Activities Need Improvement,” for which the Department has developed corrective action plans that have been implemented over the past year. Nonetheless, a material weakness for this area was again included in this year's audit report. The Department remains committed to addressing this material weakness.

None of these during the past year would be possible without the hard work and dedication of Department staff. Together, we have made significant strides in promoting student achievement and preparing students for success.



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