

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY



November 16, 2020

Education is an investment in individuals — that is, helping every student develop his or her abilities and preparing every student to pursue his or her passion. The education of each student is about his or her future, and it is ultimately about our nation's future. The Trump Administration's unwavering commitment to empowering families and expanding education freedom has shaped the U.S. Department of Education's (Department) accomplishments over the past fiscal year and informs our plans for fiscal year (FY) 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges, and in response, we put the immediate needs of students and families first. In addition to ensuring the prompt release of the financial support authorized by the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act*, we announced a streamlined process for states to submit waivers to opt out of federal testing requirements for the 2019-2020 school year, and we took steps to make the transition to virtual learning easier. In addition, we delivered timely information to support schools, educators, and families.

The *CARES Act* provided almost \$31 billion for states to do what's right for students and to ensure that learning could continue during the pandemic. In addition to the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (almost \$3 billion), the Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief Fund (more than \$13 billion), and the Higher Education Emergency

Relief Fund (\$14 billion), the legislation also provided relief for student loan borrowers and allowed K-12 schools to repurpose funds for technology infrastructure and training in distance learning.

The Department implemented the *CARES Act* according to its terms. We took action well before the congressionally required 30-day deadline to provide funding applications to the states and then approved funding requests within 30 days of receipt of the applications.

From the beginning, we insisted — and still do — that learning must continue for all students during our national emergency. Accordingly, we specifically chose not to waive any of the core tenets of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*.

With respect to our FY 2021 budget that was released in February 2020, the Administration proposed the return of power to the people, to those closest to students, and to students themselves. The budget consolidated nearly all federal K-12 programs into a single block grant, right-sizing the federal role in education and affording states needed flexibility to meet the unique needs of students in their respective states. The Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund authorized by the *CARES Act* actually included elements of our FY 2021 budget proposal.

The Administration again proposed Education Freedom Scholarships to expand options and choices for all families across America. The proposal provides five billion dollars in dollar-for-dollar federal tax credits for voluntary donations to state-identified, nonprofit organizations that give scholarships directly to students. Education Freedom Scholarships empower students and families to choose the educational setting that works best for them — regardless of where they live, who they know, how much they make, and how they learn. Families control the use of scholarships for their child's elementary and secondary education, which may include career and technical education, apprenticeships, and dual and concurrent enrollment.

In addition to Education Freedom Scholarships, the Department published in May of this year our Final Rule under Title IX of the *Education Amendments of 1972*. This rule strengthens protections for survivors of sexual misconduct and restores due process to ensure that students can pursue an education free from sexual discrimination. The regulation, effective on August 14, 2020, holds schools accountable for failing to respond equitably and promptly to sexual misconduct and ensures a more fair and reliable adjudication process. The regulation provides a consistent,

legally sound framework on which survivors, the accused, and schools can rely; protects K-12 students by requiring elementary and secondary schools to promptly respond to a notice of sexual harassment; and restores fairness on campuses by upholding all students' rights.

On the career and technical education front, over the past year the Trump Administration has continued to promote multiple pathways to career success and lifelong learning. We have worked closely with states as they have implemented the *Strengthening Career and Technical Education Act for the 21st Century Act* (Perkins V). These efforts have included offering flexibilities for career and technical education (CTE) leaders required to submit their state CTE plan for FY 2020-2023, enabling them to focus on serving students during the COVID-19 pandemic with high-quality, career-focused education that is tailored to each student's needs and strengths and that is responsive to 21st century realities.

With respect to innovation, Next Gen Federal Student Aid (FSA) provides a centralized hub for customers to retrieve student aid information and improves the ways in which students, parents, and borrowers can interact with and access benefits administered by FSA. In December 2019, the first major implementation of Next Gen kicked off with the consolidation of multiple websites into a single digital source, StudentAid.gov. Customers can learn about available types of student aid, find the right payment plan, complete loan counseling, and fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid® form.

Because we believe in the importance of investing in every student and helping students expand their knowledge and skills, the Department invited a new cohort of 67 schools to participate in our Second Chance Pell experiment in April, providing need-based Federal Pell Grants to individuals incarcerated in federal and state prisons. More than 4,000 credentials — including postsecondary certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees — have been awarded to Second Chance Pell students in three years.

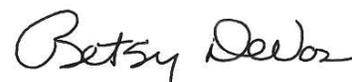
Achieving FSA's mission requires bold thinking. We have encouraged Congress to consider establishing FSA as a standalone government corporation, entirely separate from the Department and run by a professional, apolitical Board of Governors. This move would better position the agency to deliver world-class services to students and their families and to manage what has become the nation's largest consumer lender, with nearly \$1.6 trillion in outstanding loans.

We also updated and greatly improved the College Scorecard to help students find customized, accessible, and relevant data on potential debt one might incur attending certain schools and earnings that could be anticipated based on fields of study. The College Scorecard includes debt and earnings information for two-year, four-year, certificate, and some graduate programs as well as information on graduation rates and apprenticeships.

Apart from the Department's focus on individual students, education freedom, and regular program activities, the stewardship of taxpayer funds is, and has been, a priority for us. 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 2020 financial statements. The internal control report identified one material weakness, "Controls over the Reliability of Underlying Data Used in Credit Reform Re-estimates Need Improvement." The Department remains committed to evaluating its internal controls for improvement opportunities.

The Department's FY 2020 activities reflect the leadership of President Trump and the hard work of our staff to meet this decisive moment. It is time to unleash a new era of innovation in education. Every student must be able to pursue an education that aligns with his or her talents, interests, and values. We must invest in education that empowers states, communities, and families to transform learning and that provides students with opportunities that are more individualized and responsive than ever. If we each embrace the expansion of education freedom, this nation can meet any challenge and seize any opportunity.


Betsy DeVos