

Message From the Secretary



November 19, 2021

Fiscal year (FY) 2021, while challenging, was also a year in which the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) redoubled our efforts to ensure that the nation’s students receive an education that unlocks their potential—no matter their background or circumstance. With a great education, children can do and become anything they choose. That is the American dream so many of us have experienced, and I am committed to making sure that all our students can achieve *their* dreams. I see this Department as a service agency, devoted to that goal.

Our priorities for FY 2021 were to: reopen schools safely for students, educators, and school staff amid the evolving COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the vital importance of in-person learning; reinvest in the supports and resources students need to thrive; and reimagine our education system so that it truly serves all students well. The current public health and resulting economic crises have revealed needs and yielded lessons that must inform our work with states and communities as, together, we strive to advance excellence and equity for the nation’s diverse learners. We can heal, restore, and rebuild—creating a U.S. education system that is better than ever before.

I spent much of this year traveling to multiple states and territories, talking directly to educators, parents, and students; touring classrooms; visiting enriching and engaging summer programs; attending college vaccination clinics; and observing school buildings in desperate need

of upgrade. I have seen firsthand the opportunities and challenges in education. I also have seen the incredible resilience of our communities and the immense care our educators have for their students. These experiences have given me an invaluable perspective and reinforced my passion for advancing the goals of President Biden’s Build Back Better agenda.

This is America’s moment to ensure that we reopen our schools safely while we deliver on education’s potential to be the “great equalizer”—the force that can open the doors of opportunity for every child. Simply going back to how things were before the pandemic would mean returning to a system in which too many students, particularly students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and students with disabilities, would continue to be underserved. The potential of every child is limitless, but we know that educational opportunity—access to outstanding educators; safe, welcoming schools; rigorous coursework, and other critical support—is not distributed equally, which negatively impacts student outcomes. This Administration has made equity—making sure *every* child receives what they need to succeed in school—a core priority. It is why we studied the disparate impacts of the pandemic on America’s students and made sure that schools had the resources they needed to reopen for in-person instruction and to support students’ academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs.

This is America’s moment to reinvest in public education. That’s why the *American Rescue Plan Act of 2021* (ARP) provides unprecedented resources to help schools meet the needs of students most affected by COVID-19—often the same students furthest from opportunity before the pandemic. Importantly, there is \$122 billion in ARP Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds and \$40 billion in ARP funds for emergency relief for colleges and universities. The Biden administration also has proposed historic investments in education, from preschool through college, via the Build Back Better agenda.

To support students during the pandemic, safely reopen schools, and begin the transformation of our education system, we, at the Department, have taken important steps.

In March, we hosted the National Safe School Reopening Summit where panels of students, educators, school district leaders, and other partners engaged in productive

conversations about the pandemic's impact, strategies to reopen schools, and ways to rebuild. We embarked on a listening tour to assess the needs of our local communities. We released three COVID-19 handbooks to help prekindergarten through grade 12 schools, as well as colleges and universities, address the pandemic's impacts, and launched the Safer Schools and Campuses Best Practices Clearinghouse to share promising practices for reopening. We partnered with the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to create the Summer Learning and Enrichment Collaborative to help states and school districts use their ARP funds to address lost instructional and extracurricular time. We paused student loan payments, helping borrowers burdened by debt during the COVID-19 emergency. We expanded the Second Chance Pell experiment, which provides Pell Grants to incarcerated students, so they may pursue postsecondary education and better their lives and the lives of their families. Finally, we partnered closely with experts at the federal, state, and local levels in shaping responsive policies and resources; provided continuous assistance and guidance to educators, students, and parents; and engaged thousands of stakeholders in our nationwide efforts.

This is America's moment to reimagine education, in ways that are more innovative and inclusive, and fairer than ever. Toward that end, the Department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) published back-to-school resource collections designed to assist schools with planning for a successful and equitable return to pre-K-12 schools and college campuses. The two collections include fact sheets, Q&As, letters to educators, and other materials explaining the obligations that elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools have under the federal civil rights laws enforced by OCR to provide educational environments free from discrimination. In June, OCR issued a Notice of Interpretation, explaining that it will enforce Title IX's prohibition on discrimination on the basis of sex, to include discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In addition, the administration took action to help borrowers receive student loan discharges due to total and permanent disability and provided relief for tens of thousands of student loan borrowers whose postsecondary institutions engaged in misconduct.

As we reimagine teaching and learning, we must do more to level the playing field, including providing a strong foundation from birth, improving the diversity of our teacher workforce, and creating learning pathways that work for all students. Our FY 2022 budget request

includes nearly \$103 billion for Department programs, a 41% increase over the FY 2021 appropriation. The request would address disparities between under-resourced schools and their wealthier counterparts, expand access to quality preschool, increase the availability of wraparound services in underserved schools, provide greater funding for the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, significantly increase Pell Grants, and offer two years of free community college to first-time college students.

The Department continues to make stewardship of taxpayer funds a priority. I have been assured that the financial and performance data included and assessed 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 accompany 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 2021 financial statements. The preceding year (FY 2020), the internal control report identified one material weakness, "Controls over the Reliability of Underlying Data Used in Credit Reform Re-estimates Need Improvement" for which the Department has developed corrective action plans that have been implemented over the past year. Nonetheless, this material weakness is included again in this year's audit report. The Department remains committed to evaluating its internal controls for improvement opportunities.

There is a great sense of urgency about this work. Generations of inequity have left far too many students without high-quality, inclusive learning opportunities. A great education has the power to transform lives, uplift whole communities, and strengthen our democratic society—if we prioritize and invest in what works for students. The U.S. Department of Education has done so this year and will do so in the coming year and beyond.



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