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

Dear Secretary Cardona:

We write to thank you for your work as the U.S. Department of Education (“Department”) prepares for the launch of the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and to urge you to provide ample guidance and communication to students and families, educators, college access counselors, schools, and the financial aid community throughout the rollout process.

In recent years, Congress has taken important steps to streamline the complex and burdensome FAFSA process through the passage of the Fostering Undergraduate Talent by Unlocking Resources for Education (FUTURE) Act and the FAFSA Simplification Act. Prior to these efforts, it was estimated that students left anywhere from $2 to $3.5 billion in federal Pell Grants on the table annually by not completing the FAFSA. Now, due to Congressional and Administrative efforts on FAFSA simplification, the Department has estimated that over 610,000 new students from low-income backgrounds will receive Pell Grants, and nearly 1.5 million more students will receive the maximum Pell Grant award.

We understand that overhauling the current application and reconfiguring the federal student aid system requires significant time, preparation, and resources. However, despite a one-year delay in the implementation process, the Department recently announced the new FAFSA will be available to students by December 31, 2023, with no indication of an actual date. This is a considerable departure from the traditional launch date of October 1. Further, the Department’s latest announcement also revealed that processing delays will take place in the first few months of 2024, meaning that schools will not be able to generate financial aid offers for their students in a timely fashion.

While the simplified FAFSA is meant to provide more students with federal student aid, we fear the most vulnerable students will be negatively impacted by these delays. FAFSA delays can be

particularly burdensome for students who lack reliable broadband access, students in foster care, students experiencing homelessness, first-generation students, students experiencing financial insecurity, and so many more. That is why we ask that you work with schools, financial aid administrators, college access organizations, and other key stakeholders to do the following:

1. Provide clear communication to applicants upon submission of their FAFSA by giving realistic timelines and detailed next steps.
2. Ensure increased availability and adequate staffing of help centers for students and financial aid offices, including the availability of bi- or multi-lingual staff and weekend and evening hours in January and February.
4. Ensure that FAFSA instructions clearly inform applicants that their primary residence should not be included in evaluating the value of a for-profit farm or small business for asset reporting purposes on the FAFSA.
5. Allow parents without Social Security Numbers, who are unable to verify their identities online, to securely upload their documentation to expedite the process of getting them a Federal Student Aid ID.
6. Encourage institutions of higher education (IHE) to push back their financial aid deadlines to March 1st, at the earliest, so that students, families, and counselors have adequate time to complete the form.
7. Allow IHEs to accept electronic copies of verification materials, including electronic signatures.
8. Partner with key stakeholders to strongly encourage students to complete the FAFSA through trusted sources.
9. Offer IHEs timely updates on progress and provide them the resources to address student’s questions, concerns, or challenges.
10. Share timely FAFSA completion data with the field to monitor progress.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator

Patty Murray
United States Senator

https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/25251/Difficulty_Lack_of_Support_Cited_as_Biggest_Obstacles_for_FAFSA_Completion_Among_Low-Income_Students_Survey_Finds
John Hickenlooper  
United States Senator

Tina Smith  
United States Senator

Joni K. Ernst  
United States Senator

Angus S. King, Jr.  
United States Senator

Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator

Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator

Jack Reed  
United States Senator

Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator

Robert Menendez  
United States Senator

Ben Ray Lujan  
United States Senator
Jon Ossoff
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

John Hickenlooper
United States Senator

CC: Richard Cordray, Chief Operating Officer, Federal Student Aid