

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 24, 2024

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

Each year, almost 18 million students submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to determine their eligibility for federal grants, work-study, and loans. These students often depend on the FAFSA to determine if they can afford college and decide how they are going to pay for it. Congress passed the FAFSA Simplification Act in 2020 to streamline the application and calculations for federal student aid, reducing the number of questions from more than 100 to as few as 18 for many applicants.

However, repeated delays from the Department of Education (Education) in rolling out the new FAFSA have left students and schools in limbo for the upcoming school year. Although students have traditionally been able to start submitting a FAFSA each year on October 1st, Education was three months late launching the new application and it was not consistently available on Education's website until early January (after a "soft launch" on December 30th).

These delays have left many students uncertain about their educational future. For example, high school counselors have had to postpone financial aid information sessions and must now rush to connect with students and help them navigate through the new FAFSA process. Because of Education's delays, college administrators are also uncertain of when they will eventually receive information from students' FAFSAs that is essential for determining financial aid packages. Some colleges may be unable to meet their normal timelines for providing students with financial aid offers, which could leave students without time to compare offers and pick a school that is affordable. All these challenges and delays may cause some students—particularly low-income students who are most dependent on federal aid—to give up and not pursue postsecondary education.

Beyond the initial delays, it is also unclear whether Education is providing students and schools with sufficient information and guidance on the new FAFSA form and process. The goal of FAFSA simplification was in part to make the whole process easier for students and their families. This is possible only if Education is providing students with clear communications on how to navigate the new application. Similarly, schools need guidance on the new process so they can adjust their own financial aid systems to account for the FAFSA changes. However,


initial feedback from students and schools indicates that Education's current outreach efforts are falling short.


Given these concerns, we request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine the following issues:


1. To what extent, if at all, did students and schools face challenges applying for and administering federal student aid during the initial award cycle for the new FAFSA?
2. What steps has Education taken to identify and address these challenges, if any, in preparation for next year's award cycle?
3. To what extent has Education provided students with sufficient information on how to complete the new FAFSA and navigate the application process?
4. To what extent has Education provided schools with sufficient guidance and communications for incorporating the FAFSA changes into their own financial aid award processes?

Thank you for your assistance in this matter. Please contact Patrick Fox of Ranking Member Cassidy's staff at patrick_fox@help.senate.gov and Gabriella Pistone of Chairman Foxx's staff at gabriella.pistone@mail.house.gov with any questions.


Sincerely,

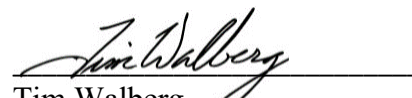

Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor, and Pensions



Virginia Foxx
Chairwoman
House Committee on Education
and the Workforce

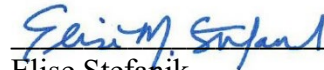

Susan M. Collins
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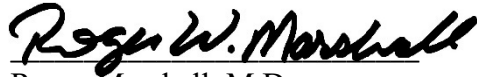

G.T. Thompson
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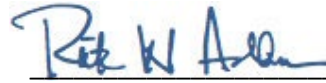

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Elise Stefanik
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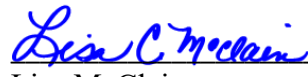

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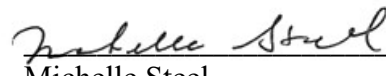

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U.S. Senator

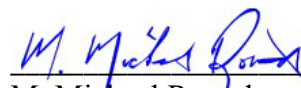

Burgess Owens
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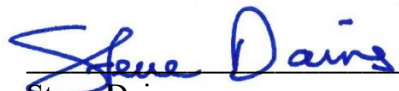

Lisa McClain
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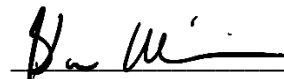

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Michelle Steel
Member of Congress

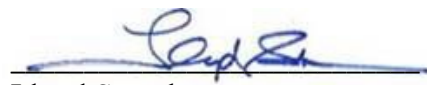

M. Michael Rounds
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Erin Houchin
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Steve Daines
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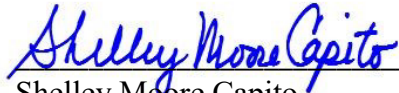

Brandon Williams
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Mike Braun
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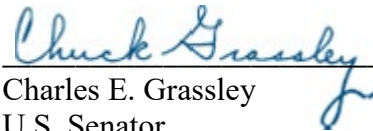

Lloyd Smucker
Member of Congress



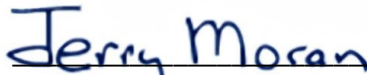
JD Vance
U.S. Senator



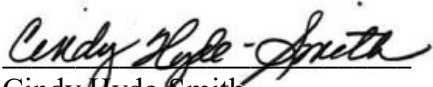
Shelley Moore Capito
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Charles E. Grassley
U.S. Senator



Jerry Moran
U.S. Senator



Cindy Hyde-Smith
U.S. Senator



Deb Fischer
U.S. Senator