

Durbin, Duckworth Join Colleagues To Urge Department Of Education To Address FAFSA Rollout Issues

February 16 2024 9:55 AM



WASHINGTON – As the traditional May 1st “college decision day” approaches, U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) joined U.S. Senators Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Patty Murray (D-WA), along with more than 100 of their congressional colleagues, in writing to Secretary Miguel Cardona of

the U.S. Department of Education (Department) to call on the Department to urgently address the operational issues with the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form that impacts millions of students across the country.

The members wrote: “We are supportive of the Department’s decision to make these adjustments in the updated form, but were disappointed to hear these adjustments would lead to even further delays in this year’s FAFSA processing...We write today to ask for more clarity on how the Department plans to communicate any further delays in FAFSA processing, and how the Department intends to minimize the potential impact on students and families so they can make the most informed decision possible about their futures, including through providing prompt, clear timelines.”

They continued, “Any delays in financial aid processing will most impact the students that need aid most, including many students of color, students from mixed status families, students from rural backgrounds, students experiencing homelessness or in foster care, first-generation students, and students from underserved communities. For institutions to support students’ ability to make informed decisions about their future, they need clear guidance and resources from the Department immediately on any and all next steps.”

Every year, about 17 million students fill out the FAFSA form as a first step to accessing the financial aid needed to cover the skyrocketing costs of higher education. In 2020, Congress passed the bipartisan *FAFSA Simplification Act* to make the federal student financial aid process more efficient and straightforward. The *FAFSA Simplification Act* directed the Department to streamline the application form and make long overdue updates to the formulas that assess a students’ financial need. According to the Department, as a result of this law, the 2024-2025 FAFSA form will ensure 610,000 more students from low-income backgrounds, including an additional 21,917 Illinois students, will be eligible to receive a federal Pell Grant, and 1.5 million more students, including an additional 52,902 Illinois students, will be eligible to receive a maximum Pell award.

However, implementation of these changes was a significant undertaking, one that the Department has had to do with less funding than it anticipated. As a result, operational glitches and delays in the rollout of this new version of the FAFSA form has left students and colleges in limbo, and locked many families out of the process altogether.

“The recent announcements from the Department were a welcome first step in addressing the many challenges students, counselors, aid administrators, and relevant stakeholders are facing in accessing, submitting, and processing the new FAFSA form.

But now, it is imperative that we all work together to ensure no student falls through the cracks or faces unnecessary challenges in accessing the aid they are due,” the Senators wrote.

Joining Durbin, Duckworth, Sanders, and Murray on the letter were 34 additional Senators, including U.S. Senators Alex Padilla (D-CA), Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Michael Bennet (D-CO), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Bob Casey (D-PA), Catherine Cortez-Masto (D-NV), John Fetterman (D-PA), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Maggie Hassan (D-NH), John Hickenlooper (D-CO), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Tim Kaine (D-VA), Mark Kelly (D-AZ), Angus King (I-ME), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Ed Markey (D-MA), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Jon Ossoff (D-GA), Gary Peters (D-MI), Jack Reed (D-RI), Jacky Rosen (D-NV), Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Tina Smith (D-MN), Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Mark Warner (D-VA), Raphael Warnock (D-GA), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Peter Welch (D-VT), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), and Ron Wyden (D-OR).