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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,  
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

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<http://help.senate.gov>

November 29, 2017

The Honorable Betsy DeVos  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

I write to request information about the U.S. Department of Education's ("Department") hurricane response efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). Over the past few months, Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria have ravaged many of the nation's coastal states and island territories. The hurricanes have seriously disrupted students' education across these regions' P-12 schools and institutions of higher education.

While every state impacted by one of these natural disasters faces recovery challenges, Hurricane Maria had a particularly devastating impact on school infrastructure across Puerto Rico and the USVI. The majority of schools remained closed weeks into the school year, and schools are still struggling to reopen. There are 1,877 public and private P-12 schools in Puerto Rico, with 1,757 still closed as of November 3, 2017. Similarly, there are 244 HEA Title IV-participating postsecondary institutions in Puerto Rico, 71 of which remain closed. Many of the schools slated to reopen over the next few weeks will do so without electricity, the ability to consistently communicate with students and families, or the ability to distribute critical resources and financial aid. Some P-12 schools that reopen will serve students from multiple schools, and a guide sent by the Department told school leaders to prepare for classrooms filled with students of different ages and different grades.

Schools will also face a multitude of challenges as they seek to address students' educational, social, and emotional needs in the aftermath of these devastating natural disasters. Students and teachers may lack safe and stable places to live and study, access to healthy food and water, and reliable transportation to school every day. Students and teachers may have moved away from their homes into temporary housing. And many students, teachers, and families are grappling with the emotional impact of the destruction waged by the hurricanes and will likely continue to need both short- and long-term mental health support. The cumulative impact of these hurricanes has stretched resources thin, and poses a significant challenge to the Department to support students, parents, teachers and other staff, members of school communities, and student loan borrowers.

While I appreciate the Department's \$2 million grant through the Project School Emergency Response to Violence program, which will help schools in Puerto Rico to address some immediate hurricane-related needs, I am alarmed by President Trump's suggestion that he may withdraw resources from the hurricane response in Puerto Rico, and I seek to understand how the Department will ensure that federal government resources remain available as long as students in Puerto Rico and the USVI—where the situation is most dire—face critical educational and non-academic needs.

To help me better understand the Department's ongoing hurricane response efforts, please respond to the following questions no later than December 13, 2017:

1. What has the Department done, either independently or in collaboration with other agencies, to ensure that institutions across the P-12 and postsecondary spectrum in Puerto Rico and the USVI have access to resources to immediately meet basic infrastructure needs in order to resume courses of study and/or general operations as soon as possible?
2. Who is the point person at the Department for coordinating all hurricane-related disaster response for these recent disasters? Is it their full-time position?
3. What resources is the Department providing to ensure that a thorough assessment is completed to determine the level of damage and need for assistance/repairs in *all* schools at *all* levels in both Puerto Rico and the USVI?
4. What is the Department's plan to support P-12 and postsecondary students who have been displaced from the USVI or Puerto Rico onto the United States mainland?
5. What is the Department's plan to support P-12 and postsecondary students who are homeless as a result of one of these disasters?
6. How is the Department planning to assist local educational agencies that have enrolled displaced students in the aftermath of the hurricanes?
7. What resources is the Department providing in order to assist local educational agencies enrolling displaced students in accessing student information for displaced students, including student transcripts?
8. How is the Department coordinating with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to ensure Head Start and other early childhood education programs are able to reopen as soon as possible?
9. How is the Department working to ensure that students with disabilities who have been displaced from their school of origin have access to a comparable setting with respect to their previously identified least restrictive environment, as identified in their existing IEP or 504 plan?

10. How is the Department supporting local educational agencies enrolling displaced students who may need additional language supports?
11. What resources has the Department made available to address the trauma and mental health needs of students and families affected by these disasters?
12. How is the Department assisting colleges and universities that have accepted students affected by the hurricanes for temporary enrollment?
13. Has the Department exercised all authority available to waive requirements for students impacted by the hurricanes to repay their balance of Pell Grant awards?
14. What is the Department's plan to assist student loan borrowers who are impacted by the hurricane beyond the previously announced period of forbearance of 90 days, particularly if Puerto Rico and the USVI are still experiencing significant disruptions?
15. Is the Department ensuring that interest that may accumulate for a student loan borrower utilizing a temporary administrative forbearance does not capitalize on their loan?
16. Has the Department directed student loan servicers to assist student loan borrowers with enrolling in income-driven repayment plans as a means of providing financial relief?
17. Will the Department allow student loan servicers to extend or suspend deadlines for borrowers' student loan documentation, such as annual recertification of their income for income-driven repayment plans?

I share your commitment to a rapid, effective hurricane response as this crisis unfolds. If you or your staff have any questions, please contact Amanda Beaumont or Carly Rush with the HELP Committee at 202-224-0767. Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Patty Murray  
United States Senator  
Ranking Member, Senate Health, Education,  
Labor, and Pensions Committee