

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 10, 2019

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

Dear Secretary DeVos:

We are troubled by the U.S. Department of Education's ("Department") response to a recent Government Accountability Office's (GAO) report on student parents in higher education.ⁱ The Department's rejection of all of GAO's recommendations to provide additional support to student parents is not based on research, and it threatens to reinforce the many barriers that these 4.3 million students face in college and workforce training due to the high costs of child care. We urge the Department to reconsider GAO's recommendations and take concrete steps to support this growing population through federal grant programs and student financial aid.

The *Higher Education Act* is clear that students are entitled to an allowance for dependent care expenses within the cost of attendance used by colleges and universities to calculate federal financial aid eligibility. GAO estimates that more than half of student parents (2.6 million students in total) could be eligible for such an allowance that would increase their ability to take out federal student loans to pay for child care. However, GAO finds that colleges and universities frequently fail to make information about the dependent care allowance available to students. Given its findings, GAO offered three recommendations to the Department to better communicate to student parents about the availability of the dependent child care allowance and to improve data collection and metrics of outcomes for student parents.

It is disheartening that the Department disagrees with GAO's recommendation to encourage institutions of higher education to provide more information on the dependent care allowance process. We cannot keep students in the dark about their financial resources.

The Department objected to GAO's recommendation for the dependent care allowance on the basis that it does not want students to borrow more. The underlying assumption that student parents are unable to assess their financial situation and make competent financial decisions on their own is insulting to these students. The GAO report does not encourage all student parents to take out more loans, but instead suggests that colleges and universities could provide students with all of their options so student parents may make fully informed decisions. The Department could appropriately craft this type of guidance to institutions of higher education.

For students facing acute financial needs that are not covered by grant aid, borrowing is often the right decision by allowing students to focus on their coursework instead of taking on additional work hours. Research confirms that students who receive more information about their ability to borrow—just as GAO suggests be done for student parents—perform better academically, earn more credits, have higher earnings, and are therefore less likely to default on their loans.ⁱⁱ Access to federal student loans has also been shown to reduce the risk of dropping out and narrow

persistence gaps for nontraditional students at community colleges who are most likely to benefit from the dependent care allowance.ⁱⁱⁱ GAO also found that colleges that had decided to include dependent care allowances in student financial aid calculations saw that student parents “may, in some cases, receive additional grants from the state or school” to help with child care.^{iv} Unfortunately, the Department inaccurately claims that student parents “are at a high risk for noncompletion and student loan default,” while ignoring the fact that additional financial support would help student parents be more successful in higher education.^v

The Department claims that “numerous Federal, State, local, and private options” are available to subsidize child care for student parents. Yet, student parents do not have nearly enough resources available to cover the rising costs of child care. GAO found that students paying for child care are shouldering a financial burden of \$490 per month (nearly \$6,000 per year) on average and that “in 28 states and the District of Columbia, the annual cost for center-based infant care exceeded the cost of in-state tuition at a four-year public university.”^{vi} The only federal program designated specifically to assist student parents in higher education, the Child Care Access Means Parents In School (CCAMPIS) program, remains chronically underfunded even after our recently successful efforts to increase funding for this program. GAO found that the number of children on waiting lists at CCAMPIS grantees exceeds the number of children served.^{vii}

Again, the Department’s dismissal of student parents’ needs contradicts the evidence. GAO examined some of the other resources that the Department claims are available for student parents and found that existing state and federal child care programs are not widely accessible to student parents. In addition to significant demand for CCAMPIS funding, just one in six eligible families receive child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF),^{viii} and states have other eligibility requirements that further limit access to subsidies for student parents. GAO also found that Temporary Assistance for Needy Families helps just four percent of undergraduate student parents,^{ix} and that “at many Head Start programs... services are only available on a part day or part week basis, which may not align with a student’s school or work schedules.”^x The alternative resources the Department claims are available do not consider the barriers student parents face in accessing quality, affordable child care and in enrolling and graduating from higher education.

In addition to the Department’s rejection of GAO’s recommendation that increased awareness of the dependent care allowance would support student parents, the Department also rejects GAO’s recommendation to fix its calculations with CCAMPIS persistence and graduation rates and cost-per-persisting. Accurate data and calculations are crucial in order to measure the benefit that student parents receive from the CCAMPIS program.

GAO suggested numerous ways the Department can assist student parents. The Department claims it is committed to the “participation of low-income parents in post-secondary education” but the Department’s rejection of the GAO recommendations and other actions taken by this Administration to jeopardize support for student parents contradict this statement. In fact, the Administration proposed to cut CCAMPIS funding by 70 percent in its FY 2020 budget proposal, not long after proposing to eliminate the program entirely in its FY 2018 budget proposal. Thankfully, Congress soundly rejected the earlier cut, and we intend to work with our colleagues to do the same in FY 2020.

In addition to rejecting GAO's recommendations, the Department has taken other actions that are harmful to student parents. The Department recently inserted its school privatization agenda into the CCAMPIS program by favoring grantees that dilute their services, thereby disadvantaging the vast majority of CCAMPIS grantees that focus on developing on-campus resources that allow student parents to have child care near their classroom. We have stated our clear objections to this harmful competitive priority.^{xi}

The Department then dismissed these concerns and revealed how this push for privatization will negatively impact students and institutions that try to expand services for CCAMPIS.^{xii} Of the 99 CCAMPIS applications that were funded last year, 75 were solely to provide services at the institution's on-campus child care center; eight were solely to provide services at child care providers that were off-campus; and 16 were designed to provide services at both on-campus and off-campus providers.^{xiii} Based on this trend, the Department decided to put the funding for more than four out of every five applicants at risk within the nation's only federal grant program for student parents unless these applicants agreed to pursue a privatization agenda. Additionally, the Department denied—without explanation—our request to provide colleges and universities more time to prepare their applications for CCAMPIS.

It is time for the Department to abandon its attacks on student parents and the federal programs that support them. There are numerous barriers in place for student parents working hard to succeed in their educational pursuits while caring for their children, and the Department must do more to support, not hinder, their success. We urge the Department to take the following actions:

1. Reverse course and accept GAO's recommendations in the student parents report, including making information about the dependent care allowance widely available through federal guidance to institutions of higher education and revising CCAMPIS performance metric calculations;
2. Work to support and expand funding for the CCAMPIS program, instead of proposing to cut it, in future Administration budget proposals;
3. Abandon the privatization agenda for CCAMPIS with an unfounded "educational choice" priority and commit that no such priority will be included in the FY 2020 competition;
4. Provide a minimum of 90 days for the CCAMPIS application window in FY 2020; and
5. Connect student parents with other local, state, and federal benefit programs that support student parents and their families using the Secretary's authority to enact secure data-sharing agreements with Free Application for Federal Student Aid pursuant to the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018* and Congressional directives.^{xiv}

We urge the Department to move forward with these changes to help student parents succeed in higher education. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



PATTY MURRAY
United States Senator



TAMMY DUCKWORTH
United States Senator

ⁱ U.S. Government Accountability Office. “Higher Education: More Information Could Help Student Parents Access Additional Federal Student Aid.” September 12, 2019. <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-522>

ⁱⁱ Marx, B. and Turner, J. “Student Loan Nudges: Experimental Evidence on Borrowing and Educational Attainment.” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 11 (2): 108-41. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24060>

ⁱⁱⁱ Chen, J. and Hossler, D. “The Effects of Financial Aid on College Success of Two-Year Beginning Nontraditional Students.” *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 58, no. 1 (2017): pp. 40-76. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1126758>

^{iv} *Supra*, see note i. Page 30.

^v *Supra*, see note i. Page 53.

^{vi} *Supra*, see note i. Page 6.

^{vii} *Supra*, see note i. Page 14.

^{viii} U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Factsheet: Estimates of Child Care Eligibility & Receipt for Fiscal Year 2015. January 2019. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/factsheet-estimates-child-care-eligibility-and-receipt-fiscal-year-2015>

^{ix} *Supra*, see note i. Page 25.

^x *Supra*, see note i. Page 26.

^{xi} Letter from Senator Patty Murray, Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies, to the Honorable Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education, regarding the CCAMPIS program. May 8, 2019. <https://go.usa.gov/xVM5X>

^{xii} Letter from the Honorable Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education, to Senator Patty Murray, Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies, regarding the CCAMPIS educational choice priority. June 19, 2019. <https://go.usa.gov/xVMNE>

^{xiii} *Supra*, see note xii, Page 1.

^{xiv} S. Rept. 115-289 – Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriation Bill, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/115th-congress/house-report/952/1>