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TRANSFORMING STUDENT AID

Last week, the Department took the next step in fulfilling the promise of Secretary DeVos to transform delivery of financial aid to millions of students and their families. Before an audience of more than 5,000 financial aid professionals assembled for the [Federal Student Aid \(FSA\) Training Conference](#), FSA Chief Operating Officer Dr. Wayne Johnson announced the [Next Generation Financial Services Environment](#), which will modernize the technology and operational components that support federal student aid programs from application through repayment. Students, parents, and borrowers will begin seeing meaningful improvements in the customer experience in early 2018, with significant technology and operational infrastructure changes throughout 2019.

Here are the highlights of the planned improvements:

- Spring 2018 -- FSA will launch its mobile platform to allow students and parents to complete and submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form on a mobile device.
- Fall 2018 -- FAFSA.gov will be integrated into StudentAid.gov, making it easier than ever to apply for financial aid directly from FSA's leading web site; this integration will let FAFSA applicants switch seamlessly between mobile and web while filling out the application, enabling students and parents to apply for financial aid from anywhere and on a device of their choosing.
- TBD -- FSA will consolidate all its customer-facing web sites into a single, user-friendly hub to complement the new mobile platform and provide a seamless experience from beginning to end.

Furthermore, to address future loan servicing needs, FSA is researching how world-class financial services organizations design and operationalize their customer engagement practices, as well as web and mobile, middleware, data processing, analytics, storage, and hosting capabilities.

“This overhaul is long overdue,” the Secretary emphasized in her [keynote address](#) at the conference. “Students should be able to complete their FAFSA easily on their phones and in one sitting. They should receive expert, tailored advice about their options. It’s called ‘student aid,’ after all. And, throughout the life of their loans, students should be able to communicate directly -- by texting or chatting or whatever the most current method is -- with professionals whose primary duty is to them.”

Separately, the White House detailed *Higher Education Act* (HEA) reauthorization [principles](#); Republicans on the House Education and the Workforce Committee introduced an HEA [reauthorization bill](#); and the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee held a [hearing](#) on simplifying the FAFSA (see [Secretary's statement](#)).

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

In addition to addressing the FSA Training Conference in Orlando, Secretary DeVos traveled across the southeastern U.S. last week.

First, she joined U.S. Representative Francis Rooney in [southwest Florida](#), visiting two schools -- Florida Southwestern Collegiate High School in Fort Myers and Lake Park Elementary School in Naples -- and holding a roundtable discussion with students and staff. The school tours focused on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), career and technical education (CTE), and parental empowerment.

Next, she visited [Georgia State University](#) in Atlanta to speak with a group of students and faculty about the institution's innovative approach to college completion (using "predictive analytics") and FSA's impending improvements in service.

Then, she visited [Oakland High School](#) in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, to learn more about the school's successful CTE program. Students showcased the school's health, automotive, and mechatronics programs.

The Secretary concluded her trip by delivering [keynote remarks](#) at the Foundation for Excellence in Education's National Summit on Education Reform in Nashville. "We are a nation still at risk," she noted, referencing the 1983 landmark report "A Nation at Risk." "We are a nation at greater risk. This is unacceptable. This is unexcusable. And this is truly un-American. We can -- we must -- do better.... Unfortunately, knowing and doing, especially when it comes to really reforming education, prove to be two very different things. Amidst the data, the numbers, the international comparisons, the debate and the vitriolic rancor from sycophants of the system, it's really easy to lose sight of what -- of whom -- we're really talking.... America is far too great a country to deny any parent or any student the chance at their dream -- the chance a great education affords them."

ESSA UPDATE

Secretary DeVos recently announced the approval of [Michigan's](#) consolidated state plan under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) ([press release](#)). The Great Lakes State was among the 16 states and District of Columbia that submitted their plans by the early deadline of April 13.

"While the plan meets the statutory requirements, Michigan must not view this as a ceiling, but rather as a baseline upon which to build, strengthen, and expand," she said. "All Michigan students deserve an education that prepares them for success in the 21st century. "I urge Michigan's leaders to continue to find new and innovative ways to help students succeed."

Meanwhile, the Department is close to issuing initial feedback to the remaining [34 states and Puerto Rico](#) that submitted plans in September. States will receive notes from external, independent peer reviewers, as well as specific information from Department staff about changes needed to ensure they are meeting the requirements under the statute. Providing such feedback is an opportunity for the agency to work with states and offer technical assistance to help improve outcomes for students.

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

This week, the Department released a [question-and-answer document](#) supporting the U.S. Supreme Court opinion on the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA)-related case *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, clarifying the scope of a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

"The Supreme Court sent a strong and unanimous message: all children must be given an opportunity to make real progress in their learning environment; they cannot simply be passed along from year to year without meaningful improvement," Secretary DeVos stated. "For too long, too many students offered IEPs were denied that chance. I firmly believe all children, especially those with disabilities, must be provided the support needed

to empower them to grow and achieve ambitious goals.”

The document provides parents, educators, and other stakeholders information on the issues addressed in *Endrew F.* and the impact of the Supreme Court’s decision. It explains the case and summarizes the final decision and prior case law on the FAPE standard. It also explains how FAPE is currently defined, clarifies the standard for determining FAPE, and addresses how this ruling can support children with disabilities.

WHITE HOUSE NOMINATIONS

President Trump announced his [intent to nominate](#) Dr. Mark Schneider to be Director of the Department’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Dr. Schneider is currently Vice President and an Institute Fellow at the American Institutes for Research and President of College Measures. He is also a Visiting Scholar with the American Enterprise Institute and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of political science at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook. He previously served as Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), part of IES, from 2005 to 2008. Dr. Schneider is a pioneer in measuring the return on investment for students and taxpayers in pursuing higher education. He has been working on increasing institutions’ accountability by making data on college productivity and the labor market success of college graduates more publicly available.

Also, the Senate HELP Committee held a hearing ([video](#)) on the nominations of [Kenneth Marcus](#) to be the Department’s Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights and [Johnny Collett](#) to be the Department’s Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

Moreover, the Department announced [Holly Ham](#) as Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islands (AAPIs). In this capacity, she is responsible for advising senior leadership on the implementation and coordination of federal programs as they relate to AAPIs across executive agencies. The Initiative works with these agencies to improve the quality of life and opportunities for AAPIs through increased access to, and participation in, federal programs. Ham has been at the Department since January, serving as Assistant Secretary for Management. Prior to joining the agency, she had an extensive career in private enterprise, focused on increasing organizations’ productivity via technology.

ODDS AND ENDS

- A new [NCES report](#) on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) compares the performance of U.S. fourth-grade students in reading to their peers in 57 other education systems. The U.S. average overall score declined between 2011 and 2016, while average overall scores increased in 10 other systems. The U.S. average overall score is now lower than the averages for 12 other systems and not significantly different from the averages for 15 other systems.
- NCES also released [national and state-level high school graduation rates](#) for the 2015-16 school year. The national high school graduation rate increased to 84.1%, a new all-time high and the fifth straight year of improvement (see [longitudinal data](#)). Notably, all subgroups of students showed improvement, although sizable gaps remain between groups.
- In a [blog post](#), School Ambassador Fellow Elmer Harris reflects on his journey into the classroom through the Troops to Teachers program and describes the unique needs of his military-connected students in Colorado.
- Another [blog post](#) recaps the opening of a powerful art exhibit from the Department of VSA and Accessibility of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, featuring works by people with disabilities from five countries -- Argentina, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and the United States.
- The Department’s Office of Educational Technology (OET) is soliciting [statements of interest](#) from non-profit organizations interested in partnering to expand the [#GoOpen Network](#) by January 16, 2018.
- The Department’s What Works Clearinghouse released new resources ([1](#) and [2](#)) to help educators put into action recommendations from its “Teaching Elementary School Students to be Effective Writers” [practice guide](#).

- The Department's Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center has developed [fact sheets](#) for schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education on cyber safety and cybersecurity.
- A [mobile application](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) allows parents and other caregivers to track a child's milestones from age two months to five years with illustrated checklists; get tips for encouraging a child's development; and learn what to do when concerned about how a child is developing.

QUOTE TO NOTE

"Millions of kids today -- right now -- are trapped in schools that are failing them. Millions more are stuck in schools that are not meeting their individual needs. Their parents have no options, no choices, no way out. Nearly 30 kids have dropped out of school while I've been talking; that's nearly 1,500 students a day, 521,000 this year, and more than two million in my term as Secretary. More than the total number of students in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago school districts combined. Or in the entire State of Tennessee -- twice.... These aren't just numbers. These are precious young lives, full of promise and potential; kids who don't have time to wait until next year, or until next session, or until after the next elections. They don't even have time to wait until tomorrow. Now is the time to act."

-- Secretary Betsy DeVos (11/30/17), in [keynote remarks](#) at the Foundation for Excellence in Education's National Summit on Education Reform

UPCOMING EVENTS

President Trump will deliver his first State of the Union address on January 30, 2018.

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