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Date: 3/30/2018 9:35:08 AM
Subject: [ED_REVIEW] ED Review (03/30/18)



March 30, 2018

SCHOOL SAFETY COMMISSION

On March 28, Secretary DeVos hosted the first [organizational meeting](#) of the Federal Commission on School Safety. The commission has been charged with quickly providing meaningful and actionable recommendations to keep students safe at school. Accordingly, the commission is made up of Cabinet officials whose agencies have jurisdiction over key school safety issues: Secretary DeVos (chairwoman), Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar, and Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen.

During the meeting, the leaders discussed staffing, the scope of and timeline for the commission's work, future meeting locations, coordination with state and local partners, and topics for field hearings ([video](#)).

Input from and meetings with students, parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, school safety personnel, law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, security specialists, and other related stakeholders will be critical to the commission's work. Additional information on stakeholder engagement both in Washington, D.C., and across the country will be available soon. In the meantime, members of the public with recommendations on how to improve school safety may submit them via safety@ed.gov.

In related news, the White House issued a statement on the rallies held across the country on March 24. "We applaud the many courageous young Americans exercising their First Amendment rights today," White House Deputy Press Secretary Lindsay Walters said. "Keeping our children safe is a top priority of the President's, which is why he urged Congress to pass the *Fix NICS* and *STOP School Violence* acts and signed them into law. Additionally, on Friday [March 23], the Department of Justice issued the rule to ban bump stocks, following through on the President's commitment to ban devices that turn legal weapons into illegal machine guns."

Also of note, Secretary DeVos penned two op-eds: "[On school safety, inaction is not an option](#)" and "[How the omnibus spending law makes schools safer](#)."

Separately, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the Department of Education and the Bureau of Justice Statistics at the Department of Justice issued "[Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2017](#)," the 20th in a series of annual publications. The report covers topics such as victimization, school conditions, discipline problems, disciplinary actions, safety and security measures at schools, and criminal incidents. This year's report also includes topics related to security staff at schools, teacher training on school safety and discipline, and an examination of the school environment from an international perspective.

Among the findings: the percentages of public schools recording incidents of crime and reporting incidents to the police were lower in 2015-16 than in every prior survey year, and the number of on-campus crimes reported in 2015 was lower than the number reported in 2001 for nearly every category.

"While there are positive trends in the annual report on crime and school safety, we know -- and tragically have been reminded in recent weeks -- there is much more we must do to keep our nation's students and teachers safe at school," Secretary DeVos responded in a [statement](#). "The Federal Commission on School Safety is committed to working quickly to identify and highlight best practices and solutions that state and local leaders can implement to improve school safety."

DISASTER RELIEF AID

Last week, the Secretary released the [application](#) for state educational agencies (SEAs) to apply for initial funding under the [Immediate Aid to Restart School Operations program](#). The release follows the Department's announcement of \$2.7 billion in [federal aid](#) to assist schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education in meeting the educational needs of students affected by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria and the 2017 California wildfires. The Restart program is one of five relief programs authorized by the *Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018*.

Under Restart, the Department may award federal funding to Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. These SEAs, in turn, will provide assistance or services to local education agencies (LEAs), charter schools, and private schools to help defray expenses related to the restart of operations in, the reopening of, and the re-enrollment of students in elementary and secondary schools that serve an area affected by a covered disaster or emergency. The Department will determine the total amount to allocate to the Restart program based on information provided by SEAs in their applications for the Restart program and the still-to-be-released Emergency Impact Aid program.

Meanwhile, the Secretary announced California will receive \$2 million in [Project School Emergency Response to Violence \(SERV\) funds](#) to support its recovery efforts from the 2017 wildfires. According to state education officials, the grant will specifically help to fund portable classrooms, substitute teachers, mental health services, transportation for displaced students, and substitute bus drivers. In general, Project SERV funds may be used for activities that help an impacted LEA manage practical problems caused by a traumatic event, help an LEA and its schools provide a sense of safety and security, and address the needs of individuals directly affected by an event.

EDUCATION APPROPRIATIONS

Also last week, President Trump [signed into law](#) the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018*, providing funding for most federal agencies for the remainder of Fiscal Year 2018. The bill increases the [Department of Education's discretionary funding](#) by \$2.6 billion from FY 2017. Among the programs receiving large increases: *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) Title I grants to school districts (up \$300 million, to \$15.8 billion); ESEA Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants (up \$700 million, to \$1.1 billion); special education grants to states (up \$275 million, to \$12.3 billion); Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (up \$107 million, to \$840 million), and Federal Work Study (up \$140 million, to \$1.13 billion).

Further, the bill boosts the maximum Pell Grant award by \$175 to \$6,095 for the 2018-19 academic year, as well as covers forgiving up to \$500 million for borrowers who otherwise would not be eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness due to payments being made under non-qualifying repayment plans.

As Congress was finalizing FY 2018 appropriations, Secretary DeVos [testified](#) before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies on the President's FY 2019 budget request. "This budget sharpens and hones the focus of our mission: serving students by meeting their needs," she said. "When the Department was created, it was charged to 'prohibit federal control of education.' I take that charge seriously. Accordingly, President Trump is committed to reducing the federal

footprint in education, and that is reflected in this budget.”

ESSA UPDATE

The Secretary recently announced the approval of several consolidated state plans under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). [Texas \(press release\)](#) and [Idaho, Mississippi, and Rhode Island \(press release\)](#) were among the 34 states and Puerto Rico to submit their state plans by the final deadline of September 18, 2017. “The state plans met ESSA’s standards, and I am pleased to approve them,” she stated. “I look forward to seeing how these states dive deeper into the flexibility afforded by ESSA to innovate on behalf of their students.”

To date, the Secretary has approved plans for 37 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. All remaining states have received [feedback](#) and are working on revisions.

Moreover, [four LEAs and the Puerto Rico Department of Education](#) applied for ESSA’s [student-centered funding pilot](#) by the March 12 deadline. The pilot would allow districts to combine eligible federal funds with state and local funding in order to allocate resources to schools based on the number of students and the corresponding level of need.

OPIOID INITIATIVE

On March 19, in New Hampshire, President Trump issued his “[Initiative to Stop Opioid Abuse and Reduce Drug Supply and Demand](#).” The plan confronts the factors fueling the opioid crisis by reducing demand through education, awareness, and prevention of over-prescription; cutting off the flow of illicit drugs across our borders and within communities; and expanding opportunities for proven treatments for opioid and other addictions. “Every day, 116 Americans die from an opioid-related overdose,” he underscored in his [remarks](#). “Defeating this epidemic will require the commitment of every state, local, and federal agency.”

The omnibus spending bill supports the President’s initiative with nearly \$4 billion in funding ([fact sheet](#)).

On March 26, Secretary DeVos traveled to Pennsylvania to visit [Johnstown Elementary School](#). There, she discussed local and federal solutions to the opioid epidemic. She also observed the Greater Johnstown School District’s early learning program, designed to strengthen drug abuse prevention efforts while also tackling contributing social, emotional, and environmental factors that can lead to drug abuse and violence.

ODDS AND ENDS

- First Lady Melania Trump met with top leaders of companies and associations on March 20 to discuss the [positive and negative effects technology can have on children](#).
- On March 27, Secretary DeVos participated in a [Close Up Washington event](#) with approximately 300 high school students and 40 teachers.
- Last week, some [70 students from four states](#) visited the Department, sharing their successes and challenges with senior staff to improve the U.S. education system.
- Earlier this month, Oakton High School (Fairfax, Virginia) students presented their [Advanced Placement \(AP\) Capstone Project](#), on how well the American education system prepares students for post-college success. They concluded that “adaptable skills” must be added into all students’ education.
- A Homeroom blog spotlights [Arkansas students using self-directed learning](#) to serve their community.
- Negotiators failed to reach consensus on new language for both [Borrower Defense to Repayment](#) and [Gainful Employment](#) regulations. Consequently, the Department will issue its own proposed rules (building upon negotiated rulemaking) for public comment.
- The Department’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) is in the process of redesigning its

[ED Data Express](#) web site, which provides the public access to state-level education data collected by the agency. It requests participation in a [short survey](#) to ensure that user feedback and perspectives are duly considered.

- The U.S. Senate [confirmed Mark Schneider](#) as Director of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).
- NCES released a new [Data Point report](#) examining rates at which working adults have attained either a postsecondary degree or other credential.
- The Department named Penny Taylor, director of the Florida Department of Education's Office of Healthy Students, as the recipient of the 2018 U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools [Director's Award](#).

QUOTE TO NOTE

"Across our great nation, vocational-technical schools prepare Americans for careers in critical sectors of our economy, including manufacturing, construction, and technology fields. These industries are essential to our nation's prosperity and security, as well as to our success in the competitive global marketplace. During Vocational-Technical Education Week, we highlight the important role that vocational and technical education plays in lifting up our communities and putting millions of Americans on the road to success.... My Administration recognizes the importance of increasing access to education, which is why my infrastructure proposal includes important reforms that will make it easier for Americans to access affordable, relevant, and high-quality education that leads to full-time work and long-term careers. It also includes initiatives related to workforce development.... American strength and prosperity truly rely upon the educational advancement opportunities we make available to our nation's youth."

-- President Donald Trump (3/16/18), in a [proclamation](#) on Vocational-Technical Education Week (March 18-24)

UPCOMING EVENTS

On April 3, from 8:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. Eastern Time, the Department's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African-Americans will honor [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Drum Major Legacy](#). On the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, this event will signal innovative pathways to success by recognizing volunteers who perform extraordinary acts of service through faith-based and community organizations.

On April 6, from 12 to 1:30 p.m. ET, the Department will host the sixth-annual Jazz Informance, produced by the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, featuring student musicians from the Duke Ellington School of the Arts (Washington, D.C.) and Newark (New Jersey) Arts High School and Grammy Award-winning jazz recording artist and educator [Wayne Escoffery](#) (performing a "lesson" in how jazz represents the values of a perfect democracy). To RSVP to attend or learn more about the agency's arts programming, please contact [Jacquelyn.Zimmermann@ed.gov](#).

There is still time to register for [ParentCamp: Informed Parents Thrive -- Preventing the Summer Slide](#) on April 23 at the Department. Parents, students, educators, and faith-based and community leaders are invited to share their experiences, concerns, and solutions in order to make informed decisions about their children's education in a series of workshop sessions facilitated by agency staff and invited guests.

ED Review is a product of the U.S. Department of Education Office of Communications and Outreach, State and Local Engagement

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