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HURRICANES HARVEY, IRMA, AND MARIA

Last week, as part of its ongoing work to aid hurricane relief efforts, the Department released new, [non-regulatory guidance](#) to help federal grantees and program participants remove barriers to restoring teaching and learning environments and expedite the recovery process for those impacted by the disasters. “For children of affected families, returning to school can provide stability in a time of upheaval, as they reconstruct their lives,” Secretary DeVos emphasized in a [letter to Chief State School Officers](#) in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands on the guidance. “The Department stands ready to provide whatever flexibility and support it can to help ensure all children, particularly those in the hurricane-impacted areas, receive a quality education.”

The guidance provides support to state and local education agencies, charter schools, non-public schools, Bureau of Indian Education-funded schools, postsecondary institutions, and other federal grantees and program participants in a variety of ways, while also covering program-specific topics. Examples of such support include flexibility on reporting deadlines, timelines for grant-funded activities, and maintenance of fiscal effort or matching requirements; potential alternatives and strategies for supplying program services after disruption; and suggested methods for ensuring continuity of services and communication.

Also, affected parties are encouraged to [contact the Department](#) with any requests for assistance beyond the scope of the guidance. The agency is committed to collaborating with stakeholders, as well as other federal, state, and local agencies, to respond to and recover from the impacts of Harvey, Irma, and Maria.

Want to learn more? The Department’s Office of Safe and Healthy Students (OSHS) will host a webinar to discuss the guidance on October 5 from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. Eastern Time. To register, go [here](#); after registering, participants will receive a message confirming registration and providing log-in information.

Note: the Department continues to add resources to its [Hurricane Help web site](#), in English and Spanish.

BLUE RIBBON SCHOOLS

This week, via [video](#), Secretary DeVos announced 342 schools as 2017 [National Blue Ribbon Schools](#). This program honors public and private elementary, middle, and high schools where students perform at the highest levels or where progress is being made on closing achievement gaps among student subgroups. Chief State School Officers nominate public schools. The Council for American Private Education nominates private schools. All schools will be honored at a ceremony in Washington, D.C., November 6 and 7. In its 35-year history, the program has bestowed this coveted award on more than 8,500 schools. (Note: School profiles and applications are posted [here](#).)

FEDERAL STUDENT AID

The 2018-19 [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#) (FAFSA) will be available starting October 1. Both new and returning students who plan to attend college between July 1, 2018, and June 30, 2019, should complete the FAFSA as soon as possible. To assist students and parents in the process, the Department's Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) has penned many informative blogs: "[12 Common FAFSA Mistakes](#)," "[8 Steps to Filling Out the FAFSA Form](#)," "[The Parents Guide to Filling Out the FAFSA Form](#)," "[5 Things to Do After Filing Your FAFSA Form](#)," and "[How to Fill Out the FAFSA When You Have More Than One Child in College](#)."

The [IRS Data Retrieval Tool](#) returns with the 2018-19 FAFSA, with added security and privacy protections. This tool allows students to import tax information directly into the FAFSA form.

Also, the last Wednesday of each month, FSA holds office hours [@FAFSA](#) from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. ET. Participants can submit questions using [#AskFAFSA](#), and subject matter experts will answer questions live during the event. The schedule of dates and topics is [here](#), and previous office hours are captured [here](#).

Looking for innovative ideas to get students and parents excited about completing the 2018-19 FAFSA? Check out the FSA [Partner Spotlight](#) and see how the office's partners in schools, school districts, and organizations across the country are planning programs, hosting events, and creating key initiatives to promote financial aid awareness and FAFSA completion.

In related news, FSA released [new reports](#) to highlight the characteristics of federal student aid customers, adding them to the [FSA Data Center](#), while the Department released the latest [federal student loan cohort default rate](#), which increased slightly (from 11.3% to 11.5%) for students who entered repayment between fiscal years 2013 and 2014.

TITLE IX ENFORCEMENT

On September 22, building on her earlier [remarks](#) regarding the Department's commitment to protecting all students from discrimination, Secretary DeVos announced new, interim guidance for schools on how to investigate and adjudicate allegations of campus sexual misconduct under federal law. "This interim guidance will help schools as they work to combat sexual misconduct and will treat all students fairly," the Secretary stated. "Schools must continue to confront these horrific crimes and behaviors -- head-on. There will be no more sweeping them under the rug. But the process also must be fair and impartial, giving everyone more confidence in its outcomes" ([press release](#)).

In the coming months, the Department will engage in rulemaking on Title IX responsibilities arising from complaints of sexual misconduct. The agency will solicit comments from stakeholders and the public during the rulemaking process. In the meantime, the "[Q&A on Campus Sexual Misconduct](#)" explains the Department's expectations of schools under Title IX regarding sexual misconduct. The agency will also continue to rely on its "[Revised Sexual Harassment Guidance](#)," which was informed by a public comment process and issued in 2001, and its "[Dear Colleague Letter on Sexual Harassment](#)," issued in 2006.

The Department is [withdrawing](#) its "Dear Colleague Letter on Sexual Violence" issued on April 4, 2011, as well as the "Q&A on Title IX Sexual Violence" issued on April 29, 2014.

ESSA UPDATE

The Secretary recently announced the approval of [Massachusetts'](#) consolidated state plan under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) ([press release](#)). The Bay State was among the 16 states and the District of Columbia that submitted their plans by the early deadline of April 3.

The following are some of the unique elements from the state's approved plan:

- Massachusetts champions strategies to help transform the lowest-performing schools and districts, including developing state and local partnerships, empowering school and district innovation, and authorizing bold intervention.
- Massachusetts also measures the percentage of high school juniors and seniors completing broad and challenging coursework -- including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and other honors classes -- in order to incentivize participation in and reduce equity gaps among student subgroups enrolled in advanced courses.

Meanwhile, with the exception of Alabama and South Carolina which received hurricane-related extensions, all remaining states and Puerto Rico have submitted their [state plans](#) to the Department. The plans, once found complete, will proceed onto the staff and peer review process, through which experts and stakeholders examine them to ensure they comply with ESSA's statutory provisions.

STEM AND COMPUTER SCIENCE

On September 25, recognizing the important roles that science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and computer science education play in developing a new generation of American workers, President Trump signed a [Presidential Memorandum](#) directing the Secretary of Education to establish high-quality STEM education, with a particular focus on computer science, as one of the Department's priorities; establish a goal of devoting at least \$200 million a year in grant funding toward this priority; and explore administrative actions that will add or increase focus on computer science in existing K-12 and postsecondary programs ([fact sheet](#)). Secretary DeVos joined students for the special signing ceremony in the Oval Office ([President's remarks](#) and [video](#)). Ivanka Trump subsequently participated in an event in Detroit with national business leaders pledging \$300 million in private sector funds ([press release](#)).

ODDS AND ENDS

- *Education Week's* Alyson Klein [interviewed Secretary DeVos](#) on the final day of her "Rethink School" tour, covering a wide range of topics.
- The Secretary announced [additional staff](#) hires: Dr. Michael Wooten as Deputy Assistant Secretary and Acting Assistant Secretary for Career, Technical, and Adult Education and Dr. Leonard Haynes as Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary of Education.
- Speaking of hiring, the White House announced technology entrepreneur Jonathan Holifield will lead the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Holifield was there to greet attendees at the recent HBCU Week Summit. He also welcomed the latest class of [HBCU All-Stars](#), 62 college students who will serve for one year as ambassadors of the initiative.
- Also, the Secretary appointed [six leaders](#) to the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), which helps set policy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).
- The Department announced some \$253 million in new grants to fund the creation and expansion of [public charter schools](#).
- In recognition of National Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15-October 15), among other actions, President Trump issued a [proclamation](#), Secretary DeVos recorded a [video](#), and the Department is sponsoring special events.
- The Department, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and ASCD held the fourteenth Teach to Lead [Teacher Leadership Summit](#) this past weekend in Austin, Texas. Attendees included 29 teams of teachers working with other key stakeholders, such as principals, community leaders, and state agency staff, from 14 states. Each team was chosen by teachers based on the ideas they had submitted for teacher-led efforts designed to improve schooling on behalf of students; Teach to Lead provides access to resources, opportunity and time for collaboration, and professional consultation.
- The Department's [Office of Migrant Education](#) recognizes the challenges that migrant families face,

overseeing two competitive grants that provide high school and college opportunity for migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

- The What Works Clearinghouse released a new [Practice Guide](#) that offers research-based recommendations for reducing dropout rates in secondary schools ([blog post](#)).
- In the class of 2017, 46% of students who took the [new SAT](#) met or exceeded the college- and career-readiness benchmarks, showing they are ready to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses.
- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released a new [First Look report](#) with information about various aspects of parent involvement in education, such as help with homework, family activities, and parent involvement at school ([blog post](#) focused on homeschooling data).
- Additional NCES reports compare average literacy and numeracy [assessment scores for adults](#) at different levels of education attainment in 22 nations, including the U.S., and summarize findings from the 2016 [Adult Training and Education Survey](#) ([blog post](#)).

QUOTE TO NOTE

“I’ve been called the ‘school choice Secretary’ by some. I think it’s meant as an insult, but I wear it as a badge of honor!.... We can rethink school. And, I posit, we do that by embracing the future of education as one that fully integrates choice into every decision we make. Not choice translated as [school] vouchers or charter schools or private schools or any other specified delivery mechanism. No. Choice translated as giving every parent in this great land more control, more of a say in their child’s future.... The future of choice lies in trusting and empowering parents -- all parents -- not just those who have the power, prestige, or financial wherewithal to make choices.... The future of choice lies in recognizing America -- the greatest country in the history of mankind -- can, and must, do better for our students -- all of them.”

-- Secretary Betsy DeVos (9/28/17), in [remarks](#) on the future of school choice at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government ([video](#))

UPCOMING EVENTS

Among other education-related observations, October is [Learning Disabilities/Dyslexia/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\) Awareness Month](#), [National Disability Employment Awareness Month](#), [Down Syndrome Awareness Month](#), [Depression Education and Awareness Month](#), and [National Bullying Prevention Awareness Month](#).

On October 19, more than two million people around the world will read the same book on the same day, as part of Jumpstart’s “[Read for the Record](#)” campaign.

Since 2003, the annual [Speak Up survey](#) (open October 16, 2017, through January 19, 2018) has collected data from students, educators, and parents about how to leverage technology in schools to promote learning.

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