



**Opening Statement of Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-NC), Chairwoman
Committee on Education and the Workforce**

**Hearing: “Examining the Education Department’s Policies, Priorities, and FY
2023 Financial Audit Failure”**

May 7, 2024

(As prepared for delivery)

I was truly excited that a person with your personal and educational background was named Secretary of Education. However, you have not lived up to your potential.

Secretary Cardona, this is the fourth—and hopefully final—time you testify before the Committee regarding President Biden’s yearly budget request.

It feels long ago, but I remember our first COVID remote hearing, in which you gave me a commitment to work collaboratively on improving outcomes for all students.

If only I had known then how empty those words would become and how the next four years would unfold. You have presided over the greatest decline of educational attainment and institutional legitimacy in the history of our nation. Moreover, your refusal to work with this Committee during this utter collapse has been inexcusable.

The educational decline was not without warning. Upon your confirmation, I issued a press release saying: “The teachers’ unions and left-wing special interest groups are keeping our schools closed, despite the serious consequences for students’ academic success and mental health.”

“Serious consequences” may have been the understatement of the century.

Since the last time you testified, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) released its 2022 Math and Reading scores. The results were disturbing. Reading scores plummeted to the lowest level in the history of NAEP testing. Across

all subjects, American K-12 students saw a steep drop in educational attainment thanks in large part to the Biden administration's lockdown policies. The negative consequences of learning loss for this generation's future employment and earnings will be devastating.

If I were to grade your tenure based on the state of K-12 schools, I'd give you an F.

Failing NAEP scores are not the only negative development in education since our last oversight hearing. Over the past seven months, colleges across the nation have seen an unprecedented regression in moral and institutional legitimacy as antisemitism and pro-Hamas protests have engulfed campuses. Turn on the news and universities such as Columbia and UCLA look like unrecognizable war zones.

From the beginning, I've urged a firm hand in dealing with the explosion of antisemitism on campus, and I've led by example. You, on the other hand, refused to even say that the "From the River to the Sea" chant is antisemitic.

I saw this as a failure of moral clarity deeming you unfit for public office and called for your resignation in February. With the outbreak of campus riots, I am only more resolute, so I will say it again: you must resign.

If I were to grade your time as secretary based on the state of postsecondary education, I would also give you an F.

My final report card grade is based on your tenure as an administrator.

Again, I warned of the potential pitfalls of mismanaging programs such as the FAFSA rollout and the student loan return to repayment, but the Department managed to bungle both.

FAFSA simplification has been the law for the entirety of your administration, but last year was filled with delays and excuses. In March of 2023, after months of refusing to communicate a FAFSA release date, the Department announced that it would push the implementation of the FAFSA Simplification Act back from October 1st to what ended up being December 30, 2023. The October deadline should have come as no

surprise. Congress had already granted the Department an additional year and you still couldn't get the job done.

Then, the December 30 "soft launch" was filled with glitches. Prospective college students fought through random crashes and lengthy waiting rooms to submit their completed FAFSA application, only to be met with uncertainty.

For the applications that did make it through, large percentages contained errors, were unable to be corrected, or both. In some cases, these errors took months to be fixed. A financial aid administrators' survey of schools just last week found that over 30 percent of schools have still not even begun to package aid offers, thanks to your delays.

The delays and uncertainty have crushed students and universities. FAFSA completion rates have fallen 30 percent nationally, with declines likely even higher among low-income students. Universities are expecting decreases in enrollment in the fall that could be even worse than the pandemic.

Attending college is one of the most consequential choices that some may ever make. For many students with very limited means who depend on the FAFSA, that choice has been denied to them. Some will inevitably put education on the backburner for life. That's what troubles me the most about this. May 1 should have been college decision day, but instead students are still stuck waiting for financial information, paralyzed by your ineptitude.

FAFSA should have been a top priority. Instead, your actions proved time and again that it wasn't.

When the Department should have been pouring time and resources into FAFSA, it was pouring time and resources into the latest student loan debt scheme. The newest scheme, the IDR Save Plan, adds to your Department's actions that could cost taxpayers up to \$1 trillion. For perspective, these actions are more expensive than all postsecondary education spending before 2020. The *Higher Education Act* passed in 1965, yet you are projected to spend more on just the Biden student loan debt scheme than all other secretaries of Education spent since 1965 combined.

I have completely lost faith in this administration to govern. Your radicalism has alienated loan servicers and caused the administration to bungle the return to repayment. Nine million borrowers missed their first repayment.

I am not sure this administration ever wanted repayment. I think you see it as politically advantageous to kick the can down the road, so you did.

Therefore, if I were to grade your tenure as an administrator, I would give you an F.

On all the broad strokes, you have a failing grade, but there are plenty of other specific issues to discuss today. The Department has failed to protect young women with its Title IX rewrite, failed to return employees to the office to work in-person, and failed to pass its 2023 financial audit.

I see each of these failures as a result of the original failure—that the federal government inserted itself into education in the first place. There are good reasons why the word education does not appear in the Constitution. Education is done best when it is handled at the local level. The solution is not more of the same, which is what the president's budget represents, but less of what has sidetracked our country's educational system—the Department of Education itself.

As President Ronald Reagan once famously said, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government, and I'm here to help."