

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

January 27, 2023

Dr. Miguel Cardona
Secretary of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona,

We write to express our continued concerns about the Department of Education's handling of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate (GEAR UP) Program. GEAR UP was created to strengthen low-income students' opportunities to attend college and succeed in their studies. But, in recent years, the program has faced a poorly executed competition, putting at risk students' opportunities—especially rural students.

Last year, in a January 18 letter, the Iowa delegation outlined our concerns regarding several problems with the 2021 application process. Specifically, the letter noted reports that 52 out of the 100+ partnership applicants received a perfect score, defeating the point of a score meant to find the most deserving programs. We noted that the cause seemed to be a lack of proper training and oversight of reviewers, coupled with a lack of clear standards. States were then faced with no opportunity to appeal scores and statutory mandates of the geographic distribution of awards were not followed, with almost half of awards going to just five states. These issues ultimately left several state applicants, including GEAR UP Iowa, at a significant disadvantage. Iowa was not alone in these concerns, as the Maine congressional delegation sent a letter raising similar issues. However, despite our advocacy for the department to hold a new competition in 2022 or otherwise straighten out these issues, the flawed slate was instead funded down from 2021.

Failure to hold a new competition also runs directly contrary to congressional intent. In the 2022 fiscal year appropriations package, the department was specifically instructed to “ensure that not less than 33 percent of the new award funds are allocated to State awards, and that not less than 33 percent of the new award funds are allocated to Partnerships awards.” The most recent appropriations package affirmed that stance, as Congress increased GEAR UP's funding by \$10 million “to use the increase for a new fiscal year 2023 grant competition.” With this increase in funding, it is projected that there may be between \$30 million to \$35 million available for new awards.

We are aware of reports that the department is hesitant to host a new competition due to the tight turnaround. However, we believe such a competition is well worth the effort. In addition to going against congressional intent, the status quo would further lock in the ill effects of the previous competition.

GEAR UP Iowa deserves a fair shot at funding. Prior to the dysfunctional 2021 competition, ACT completion rates in GEAR UP Iowa schools shot up from below the average to almost 20% above it. FAFSA completion rates in these schools increased even as others dropped during the pandemic. The post-secondary enrollment gap was cut by almost 50%. Moreover, while most states applied for a scholarship waiver in order to dedicate more funding to programming, Iowa has successfully maintained the scholarship as an essential part of its program, thereby stretching federal dollars further under the same grant. And yet, despite these proven results, these impacts were not reflected in the flawed application review process.

Without a new competition, fewer kids in Iowa—especially rural Iowa—will have access to the opportunity this program is designed to promote. We urge the department to follow congressional intent and hold a new competition in 2023. Please respond to the below questions by March 31, 2023, and please number your responses.

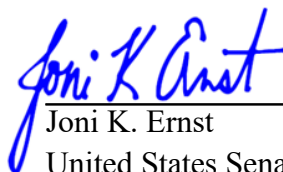
1. Given lawmakers' intent with the latest increase in GEAR UP funding, will the Department of Education commit to holding an open funding competition for fiscal year 2023?
2. If no competition is held in 2023, how does the Department of Education plan to rectify the issues with the previous competition?

We look forward to your response and to working with you to ensure that GEAR UP is well administered and that grants are given to the most deserving organizations.

Sincerely,



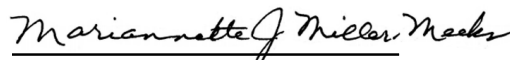
Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator



Ashley Hinson
Member of Congress



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Member of Congress



Zach Nunn
Member of Congress



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