



HEARING SUMMARY

HOUSE LABOR-HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES-EDUCATION APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE: FISCAL YEAR 2025 BUDGET REQUEST FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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April 11, 2024

On Wednesday, April 10, 2024, the House Labor-Health and Human Services-Education Appropriations Subcommittee had Secretary Cardona [testify](#) on the Department of [Education's fiscal year 2025 budget request](#). The Administration's fiscal year 2025 budget request adheres to the Fiscal Responsibility Act budget caps, and requests \$79.6 billion for the Department of Education, a \$500 million (0.63%) increase over fiscal year 2024 measure, approved in March.

There were heated exchanges on the proposed Title IX regulation. Secretary Cardona responded that the Department is working through over 150,000 comments, and that he cannot prematurely comment on the regulation. He stressed that the budget proposes a \$22 million increase for the Office of Civil Rights to complete the regulation and investigate claims of civil rights violations. He also stressed that as a life-long educator and father, he wants to ensure that all students feel safe, seen and welcomed.

Other questions members asked focused on the Administration's lack of support for charter schools, staff, and budgetary resources at the Federal Student Aid Administration (student debt relief vs. the failed FAFSA roll-out), campus safety and free speech, and recovery from the pandemic.

WITNESS AND WRITTEN TESTIMONY

- [The Honorable Miguel Cardona](#), Secretary, Department of Education

MEMBERS PRESENT

Subcommittee Chair Robert Aderholt (R-AL); Subcommittee Ranking Member Rosa DeLauro (D-CT); Rep. Andy Harris (R-MD); Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI); Rep. Julia Letlow (R-LA); Rep. Lois Frankel (D-FL); Rep. John Moolenaar (R-MI); Rep. Steny Hoyer (MD); Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA); Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI); Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ); Rep. Andrew Clyde (R-GA); Rep. Juan Ciscomani (R-AZ); Rep. Chuck Fleischmann (R-TN); Rep. Chuck Edwards (R-NC)

OPENING STATEMENTS

Chair Aderholt's opening comments referenced the Department of Education's forthcoming Title IX rules and highlighted many members' expressed concerns about transgender athletes during last year's budget hearing. He referenced statistics on how students continue to struggle after the pandemic: math and reading scores are at their lowest levels, about a third of low-income students are chronically absent, and the Department needs to regain the trust of parents. He asked why funding for charter schools was cut by \$40 million, but then noted concerns about proposed increases in the FY 2025 Education budget: \$25 million for pre-school and \$10 million for fostering diverse and inclusive schools. In addition, Chair Aderholt remarked on the Administration's efforts to provide student debt relief. He noted that the Congressional Budget Office estimated a \$260 billion cost over the next ten years, and that student debt relief is unfair to those that didn't attend college or those that repaid their loans. He questioned why the Department was asking for a \$600 million proposed increase for the Office of Federal Student Aid "to forgive student debt," despite the Supreme Court's ruling. His final comments concerned "cancel culture" in higher education and campus free speech: "terrorist rhetoric that has no place in our schools."

Ranking Member Rosa DeLauro opened her remarks by thanking Secretary Cardona for his lifetime of service to Connecticut and the nation, specifically improving the outcomes for our nation's youth. She acknowledged that learning loss and chronic absenteeism are on-going concerns and noted that the House Appropriations Committee--in partnership with the Biden Administration--has provided resources to schools to address national challenges. She rattled off a list of accomplishments including improving college affordability, investing in institutions that serve under-represented students, canceling student debt and investing in our global competitiveness. She's glad that the fiscal year 2024 LHHS Appropriations measure—passed in March—maintains the historic education investments of the Biden Administration, and that the Committee was able to eliminate poison pill policy riders and large cuts to key programs, such as Title I. She appreciates the Department prioritizing a \$180 million increase for Title I and IDEA, \$50 million for full-service community schools, and additional funding to shore-up Pell Grant funding. She closed her remarks by saying, "education is the great equalizer."

WITNESS STATEMENT

Secretary Cardona thanked the members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify on the Administration's fiscal year 2025 budget request. As a lifelong educator and a father, he was proud of the budget that the Department put together and noted that it reflected common ground he had heard from parents in red and blue states.

Extemporaneously (and not part of his [prepared remarks](#)), he said that education opens doors and is the great equalizer: "some may seek to *defund* education, I'm here to *defend* it—unapologetically--as the foundation for the American dream."

He pivoted to talk about responsible choices. The Department's education budget, is a responsible foundational investment for "opportunity in America, to raise the bar and secure our nation's future." The budget is a responsible choice to "sustain academic recovery from the pandemic by making \$82.4 billion in calculated investments to accelerate learning instead of minimizing support at a crucial time for our students." He argued that the Department's budget is a choice to provide a stronger future for all and to close achievement gaps, especially for low-income students through Title I, students with disabilities through IDEA and multi-lingual learners through Title

III, and to recruit, retain and develop great teachers. He continued that it is a “responsible choice” to invest in safer schools through investments in school counselors and school-based mental health programs. The budget is a responsible choice to give more young people access to the American dream by building more pathways to affordable higher education, including through free community college.

Concluding his remarks, he noted that the Administration made the “responsible choice” to invest in key priorities within the bipartisan agreement to cap discretionary spending and reduce the deficit. He requested that members of the committee work together again, much like they did during consideration of the fiscal year 2024 Labor-HHS Appropriations bill “to reject extreme policies and cuts proposed by some, that would have resulted in the loss of over 200,000 teacher jobs, at a time when those teachers are critical to recovering their students learning in reading and math.”

He noted that some seek to promote division in our schools and inflaming culture wars, but his concern was for the nation’s students. His final appeal was to prioritize “results, over rhetoric. We can raise the bar for our nation, together.”

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Chair Aderholt’s first question was on the Title IX regulation and how it may impact the safety of girls and women. He outlined the proposed regulation—the ability to participate on school sports teams based on gender identity--and asked for a timeline for when the Department may finalize the regulation. Cardona responded that they have received over 150,000 comments and continue to work on the regulation. Aderholt asked how the Department intends to protect biological girls. Secretary Cardona responded that safety for all is important to us, and that the Department is working on the regulation. He also asked for a \$22 million increase for the Office of Civil Rights to facilitate the work: writing the regulation as well as investigating violations of Title IX. Aderholt’s final question was on campus free-speech, and if the current status quo was acceptable to Secretary Cardona. Cardona responded that free speech should be allowed at institutions of learning, but campus should also be safe. The Department is working with college leaders and parents and has provided guidance and specific strategies to universities.

Ranking Member DeLauro’s first question was on chronic absenteeism post-pandemic. She noted that chronic absenteeism increased significantly, especially for high poverty schools and two-thirds of states use chronic absenteeism as an indicator for their statewide improvement plans. She asked for the Department’s level of satisfaction with state plans to address absenteeism and what the agency would like states to do to further address the issue. Cardona responded that the pandemic exacerbated absenteeism, and that states need to “raise the bar.” He’s seeing good progress by states, and the Department is providing technical assistance and best practice strategies to states. The Department has asked chief school officers to do more on the issue and are working with states struggling with the issue. He also noted that full-service community schools are a good model to address the multi-faceted issue of chronic absenteeism. DeLauro’s second question was on “scam-for-profit” institutions, and how “can we shut them down?” Cardona responded that President Biden told him in 2021 that the higher education system is broken, and that he wanted Cardona to look at ways to improve higher education. Cardona noted the Department’s work on borrower defense and closed school discharge, as well as post-secondary accountability measures.

Rank and file members of the House Labor-Health and Human Services-Education Appropriations Subcommittee asked a variety of questions over the two plus hour hearing. There were two rounds of questions, mainly focused on several core areas.

Title IX

Dr. Harris (R-MD) followed up Chair Aderholt's questions on Title IX by asking pointed questions on the pending regulation. He asked if Cardona agreed that Title IX was necessary to establish female sports, because women cannot be expected to compete with biological males. Secretary Cardona initially responded that he was very proud of women's sports and enjoyed watching the women's NCAA basketball tournament last week. Dr. Harris asked if Cardona was coordinating with the Department of Health and Human Services on the Title IX rule and quoted Secretary Becerra's testimony on the need for women's health research, specifically that "women's feet are different from men. Their arches are different, but yet, they have to wear professional athletic activity shoes that were designed for men." Dr. Harris asked Cardona if he believed women are physically different from men? Cardona responded that he saw where Dr. Harris wanted to go with this exchange, and Dr. Harris quickly followed-up that he felt it was an affront that Cardona was even considering a Title IX rule, given that Secretary Becerra had testified to biological differences between men and women. During his second round of questions, Dr. Harris noted the [National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics](#) (NAIA) statement on transgender athletes and asked if Cardona would "defund" colleges that adhered to the NAIA policy. Cardona responded that the Title IX regulation process is underway, and he cannot comment prematurely.

Rep. Clyde (R-GA) also asked pointed questions on "radical gender ideology" and asked Cardona to define what a woman is. Cardona responded that he was here to talk about the budget and how to support students in the Congressman's district. When pressed, Cardona deferred, saying that he "respects Congress, respects your role," but that he was there to talk about the budget and mentioned the \$22 million requested increase for the Office of Civil Rights. Cardona added that as a lifelong educator and father, he wants to make sure all students feel seen, welcome, and safe.

Rep. Frankel (D-FL) pushed back on the notion that transgender athletes are an affront to women and said efforts to ban abortion are an affront to women, and nothing can be more educationally disruptive than forcing 13-year-old girls to give birth. She congratulated the women's basketball team and noted that the viewership exceeded the men's tournament, including NBA games. She expressed concerns that the National Collegiate Athletic Association is providing more athletic opportunities to men, and asked the Secretary what the Department is doing to ensure that female athletes get the same level of investment.

Student Loan Debt

Rep. Watson-Coleman (D-NJ) thanked the Secretary for his efforts to address student loan debt and noted that many of her constituents would rather not have debt, but often it is the only way they can afford post-secondary education.

Rep. Aderholt (R-AL) inquired as to how many students are repaying their loans, given the amount of debt already forgiven and the one-year runway to resume repayment. Cardona said that students had three years of a payment "pause," and the Department wanted to give them time to

get back on their feet. For many students, it was their first time making a payment. The Department has focused on finding students, providing guidance, and communicating about repayment to reduce student loan defaults. Aderholt pressed the Secretary on mixed messaging and repeated promises of student debt relief, to which Cardona responded that the Department carefully communicates that borrowers must repay but recognizes that the process is broken.

Rep. DeLauro's (D-CT) second round question was on teacher shortages and what the Department is doing to streamline Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF). Cardona responded that his agency is working to streamline the process of certifying and applying for Public Service Loan Forgiveness, and that the Department "should be going to" teachers rather than having teachers "come to us." He noted that under the prior Administration, only 7000 borrowers received PLSF, but under the Biden Administration, that number is now 840,000.

Rep. Edwards (R-NC) asked Cardona to explain why student debt relief is fair to the "forgotten working class... with dirt and grease under their fingernails...the bricklayers, janitors, pipefitters." Cardona said that the four million borrowers that have received debt relief already are the working class. He then added that the Administration supports increases in Pell Grant funding for the working class, instead of tax breaks for millionaires. In addition, the Administration has successfully fought for initiatives that expand opportunity for the working class through infrastructure investments and promoting manufacturing through the CHIPS and Science Act. Moreover, the kids of the working class also deserve access to education and economic opportunities, which the Administration is committed to providing.

Campus Free-Speech and Safety

In addition to Rep. Aderholt's opening question on campus free speech, several other members asked related questions.

Rep. Pocan (D-WI) asked a question on campus safety, specifically how the proposed increase for the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) can address antisemitism and anti-Arab sentiments on-campus, also asked for the Secretary's commitment to support the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ students. Cardona committed to supporting all students and noted that 90 percent of the proposed increase for OCR will go to investigations.

Rep. Frankel (D-FL) asked about antisemitism on campus, and what budgetary shortfalls does the Department need to fill to address the issue? Cardona referenced his budget request for the Office of Civil Rights, which needs 86 new staff due to turn-over and retirements. Much of that staff will be hired to investigate civil rights violations: since October 7, the Office of Civil Rights has 134 open cases.

During his second round of questioning, **Dr. Harris** (R-MD) noted that the University of Maryland is considering a Boycott, Divestment, Sanction (BDS) regarding Israel, and asked Secretary Cardona if would limit funding to institutions that have BDS policies and if he thought BDS policies are antisemitic? Cardona responded that the Department takes claims of antisemitism and anti-Arab sentiments very seriously, and that since October 7th, the Office of Civil Rights has had many open investigations. He declined to comment on BDS sanctions without seeing a specific policy.

Charter Schools

Dr. Harris (R-MD) asked why the Department is prohibiting “for-profit charter schools” that improve outcomes for low-income students. Cardona responded that the budget provides funding for public charter schools, and he hopes that the subcommittee will increase Title I funding so that all students can have the opportunity to improve their education outcomes.

Rep. Ciscomani (R-AZ) stated that his kids attend charter schools, and that parents should have a choice in education options. He expressed frustration with the burdensome regulations that the Department has established on charter schools and asked why the budget is proposing a \$40 million cut. Cardona responded that demand for the program has diminished, and the Department wants to “raise the bar” and ensure accountability. Cardona offered to work together with Ciscomani on areas of “common ground.”

Rep. Edwards (R-NC) also asked the Secretary about charter schools, specifically the number of public K12 schools he visited (“dozens”) vs. the number of charter schools (“at least one, recently”). Cardona responded that public charter schools are an option for parents, and he values choice. Cardona gave the example that he went to a technical school rather than his local public high school, and that he is not in favor of public dollars going to private institutions that are not inclusive. Edwards’ final comment was on the application process, saying that the application to establish a charter school is 107 pages long with unworkable income thresholds.

FSA/FAFSA Roll-out

Rep. Letlow (R-LA) asked the Secretary about the botched FAFSA roll-out, when he knew there were problems and how many people at the Office of Federal Student Aid worked on the FAFSA vs. student debt forgiveness. Cardona responded that the Department is working around the clock to address Better FAFSA, and that the old form was 40 years old, too complicated and needed to be improved. With the Better FAFSA, 650,000 students will be eligible for aid and 1.7 million students will receive more aid. Within the Federal Student Aid Administration, there are 1,400 employees that focus on students returning to repayment, student loan servicing contracts and other student aid implementation issues, including FAFSA. **Rep. Moolenaar** (R-MI) asked if the Secretary diverted resources within FSA to work on debt cancellation. Cardona explained that two different divisions work on debt relief: the Office of the Under Secretary handles policy and the Federal Student Aid Administration implements the policy; the Department does not take staff from one division to the other. The Secretary also stressed that the higher education system is broken and needs to be reformed.

Pandemic Recovery?

Rep. DeLauro’s (D-CT) first and second round of questions addressed pandemic recovery. For her second round of questions, she asked about learning losses post-pandemic and what evidence the Department is seeing in terms of recovery. Cardona responded that the Department is seeing evidence of recovery, recovering about one-third of the learning losses in math and a quarter of the learning losses in reading; he stressed that the COVID Relief funding has helped recover learning losses and reduced achievement gaps.

Rep. Letlow (R-LA) inquired as to how the COVID Relief funding provided to the Department of Education has been spent, noting that some institutions have used it to improve athletic facilities. Cardona responded that when he was Commissioner of Education in Connecticut, COVID Relief dollars were critical to upgrading HVAC systems, and other deferred maintenance. Nearly all the CARES Act funding has been spent, and 68 percent of the American Rescue Plan funding has been spent. Letlow noted that her home state of Louisiana has spent 70 percent of the American Rescue Plan funding, and with so much funding available to address learning loss, why is the Administration requesting \$8 billion for an academic achievement grant? Cardona responded that much of the funding has been obligated by states and districts, just not spent. Students still have learning loss, and the funding will help with tutoring, afterschool, and reading support programs.

MISCELLANEOUS

Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI) asked about the purchasing power of Pell Grants and the forthcoming Pell shortfall in fiscal year 2026. Specifically, he asked how the Department intends to double the maximum Pell award by 2029 and if the agency foresees any changes to eligibility or reduced awards to address the Pell shortfall. Cardona responded that Pell is a lifeline for many students in obtaining post-secondary education, but that the higher education system is broken. In 1979, Pell grants covered 80 percent of public tuition and fees but today that percentage is 31 percent. Cardona said that the Department will continue to work on accountability for higher education but acknowledged that there will need to be funding increases to address the solvency of Pell.

Dr. Harris (R-MD) asked about the impact of sugary beverages and products on student learning. He asked Cardona if such food products should be an allowable expense of the supplemental nutrition assistance program. Cardona responded that he looked forward to reading the study and working on “common ground” issues with Dr. Harris.

Rep. Watson Coleman (D-NJ) stressed her support for mental health programs, and asked the Secretary how do these investments help? Cardona noted that schools that focused on mental health had a smoother time re-opening, and the country needs to transform how it looks at mental health. Students are six times more likely to receive mental health support in school rather than out of school, and the Department has provided guidance and shared best practices.

Rep. Lee (D-CA) asked about the Department’s efforts to coordinate food and nutrition insecurity with the Departments of Health and Human Services and Labor. She also thanked the Department for its efforts to improve teaching. In her second round of questions, she thanked the Department for its support for building out the infrastructure of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and plugged her bipartisan “Computer Science for All” bill and asked what the Department is doing to provide access to STEM opportunities to underserved communities. Cardona thanked the Congresswoman for her work and agreed that we must meet the moment to address the needs of under-served communities, especially after decades of under-investment. He also noted that high schools need to evolve to better align with jobs that do not require a college degree, including having STEM classes connected to job opportunities.

Rep. Fleischman (R-TN) asked about efforts to reduce the cost of school textbooks; the Secretary promised to follow-up.

Rep. Frankel (D-FL) asked about book bans, noting that her home state of Florida (along with Texas) lead the nation in banning over 4,200 books, many of which address topics around LGBTQ+ and communities of color. Cardona responded that the Department does not dictate curriculum but has provided trainings for schools, libraries, and other education stakeholders on laws.

Rep. Moolenaar (R-MI) asked about research security from [Memo 33](#), including how the Department is monitoring foreign gifts to universities, and if the Department is sharing information with the FBI. Cardona responded that the Department follows the law, written by Congress, and has worked with the FBI and other authorities. Data from the Department shows that universities received \$21.4 billion in gifts from foreign countries and promised to follow-up with Moolenaar's concerns.

CLOSING STATEMENTS

Ranking Member DeLauro quoted Cardona: “We must *defend* public education, not *defund* public education.” She noted on-going challenges related to the pandemic--chronic absenteeism, learning loss, and mental health. She was dismayed by the comments from the FY 2025 budget hearing as well as comments from FY 2024 budget hearings. She noted that 50 million students attend public schools and there are 3.6 million teachers, yet “Republicans think we need to defund public education.” She reminded her colleagues that last year's bill cut Title I by 80 percent and would have laid off over 200,000 teachers. She continued: “Education should be the great equalizer, to help those bricklayers, those pipefitters, and their kids,” before concluding the need to support public education.

Chair Aderholt thanked the Department for its testimony. He noted that the questions Cardona received today were reflective of the concerns of constituents and looked forward to the Department's follow-up.

The hearing can be viewed [here](#).