

February 23, 2018

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington D.C. 20202

Dear Madam Secretary,

In a recent interview marking your first year as U.S. Secretary of Education, you stated that providing access to Pell Grants for incarcerated students is a “very good and interesting possibility,” as reported by *Politico*.ⁱ The 38 undersigned research, advocacy and justice organizations and professionals share your interest in examining the federal policy barriers that prohibit the use of Pell Grants by students incarcerated in federal and state penal institutions.

But beyond mere interest, we know that access to high-quality postsecondary education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students turns their lives around—it eases their re-entry to society by improving educational and employment odds, strengthens communities, reunites families, and saves taxpayer dollars.

Reinstating Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students is a sound investment, while maintaining the ban will cost taxpayers more in the long term. In 1994, the Institute for Higher Education Policy found that the amount of Pell Grant funds awarded to incarcerated students was less than one percent of the program’s entire funding.ⁱⁱ Moreover, according to the RAND Corporation, when incarcerated students participate in education programs, recidivism rates drop by 43 percent, meaning every dollar invested in prison education saves at least four to five dollars on re-imprisonment costs for the public.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ensuring that all students can access affordable postsecondary educational opportunities should be a national priority. Federal lawmakers can expand these opportunities to thousands more students by ensuring that individuals who were convicted of drug-related offenses are not discouraged from applying for federal financial aid. A 2015 study by the Center for Community Alternatives focused on the State University of New York found that nearly two out of every three undergraduate applicants who disclosed a felony conviction never completed their applications. This chilling effect may be felt by federal student aid applicants as well. Question 23 on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) asks if applicants have been convicted of drug-related offenses. As federal lawmakers work to simplify the FAFSA for all applicants, they can advance these efforts by removing Question 23 and allowing federal aid to be awarded to students seeking to reach their full potential by pursuing a postsecondary education.

We urge you to leverage the unparalleled opportunity that your secretarial bully pulpit provides and encourage federal policymakers to help this often-forgotten population access the transformative benefits of postsecondary education in two ways:

- Reinstating Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students; and
- Eliminating Question 23 on the FAFSA (drug conviction question) and removing consideration of drug offenses from the financial aid process to ensure that no student is discouraged from applying for federal aid.

We recognize the U.S. Department of Education's important role in affirming and uplifting national educational priorities. We hope we can count on your continued advocacy for these often-marginalized students who are simply seeking to reach their full potential.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Julie Ajinkya, vice president of applied research, at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) by email at ajinkya@ihep.org or by phone at (202) 861-8245.

Sincerely,

- Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD)
- American Prison Writing Archive
- Ashland University
- Association of State and Federal Directors of Correctional Education
- Calvin Theological Seminary, Rev. Julius T. Medenblik, President; Sidney J. Jansma, Chair of Board of Trustees
- Center for American Progress
- Chillon Project, Life University
- Civil Rights Project, UCLA
- CLASP
- Community College Research Center (CCRC)
- Correctional Education Association
- CURE National
- Education Trust
- Eric Bettinger, Professor of Education, Stanford Graduate School of Education
- Estela Mara Bensimon, Dean's Professor in Educational Equity & Director, Center for Urban Education, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California
- Excelencia in Education
- From Prison Cells to PhD
- Higher Learning Advocates
- Jackson College
- Karol Dean, Dean of the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Mercy College
- Lindsay C. Page, Assistant Professor, University of Pittsburgh School of Education
- Marybeth Gasman, Judy & Howard Berkowitz Professor Education, University of Pennsylvania, Director, Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions
- NASPA
- New America
- NYU Prison Education Program
- Operation Restoration
- Paul Attewell, Professor of Sociology, Graduate Center, CUNY
- Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education of the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE)
- Robert Kelchen, Assistant Professor, Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy, Seton Hall University
- Sara Goldrick-Rab, Professor of Higher Education Policy & Sociology, Temple University

- State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO)
- The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS)
- The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)
- Third Way
- Tressie McMillan Cottom, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Virginia Commonwealth University
- University Beyond Bars, Board of Directors
- Vera Institute of Justice
- Young Invincibles

ⁱ Wermund, Benjamin. (February 8, 2018). "DeVos Strikes a Softer Tone." Retrieved from: <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/morning-education/2018/02/08/devos-strikes-a-softer-tone-096814>.

ⁱⁱ Institute for Higher Education Policy (1994). "Pell Grants: Are Prisoners the Program's Biggest Problem?" Retrieved from: http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pell_grants_-_are_prisoners_the_programs_biggest_problem.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ Davis, Lois M., Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy N. V. Miles. (2013) "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults." Retrieved from: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html.