

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

January 18, 2022

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

Dear Secretary Cardona,

We would like to express our concerns about the latest funding cycle for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) and its impact on students in Iowa. This program has long helped low-income students in Iowa enter college and succeed in their studies. Unfortunately, this year's round of funding showed a number of problems with the application process and left GEAR UP Iowa high and dry. It is imperative that we do not waste tax dollars with an ineffective application review process, and that funding actually goes to the most deserving programs.

By all measures, GEAR UP Iowa fits this definition. ACT completion rates in GEAR UP Iowa schools have 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%. Further, while most states apply for a waiver to use less state funding, Iowa has always stretched federal dollars farther under the same grant. And yet, despite these proven results, federal funding has been cut off.

Specifically, many of our concerns with the most recent funding cycle stem from the issues it has revealed with the review system itself. We have heard reports that 52 out of the 100 + partnership applicants received a perfect score from reviewers. However, the resulting reduction in state awards to account for these review results still left nearly half of those applications unfunded. This defeats the entire purpose of such a score.

It also raises concerns about how reviews are conducted. In part, there seems to be an issue with the training of reviewers. While it is beneficial that peers are able to look over applications for funding, it is also vital that there be definitive standards. If reviewers give perfect score after perfect score, it becomes next to impossible to see which programs are actually most deserving. Even worse, standards appear to be constantly shifting, with very little oversight for these reviewers.

This lack of a consistent standard has meant that even requirements in statute appear to be ignored, including the requirement that programs pre-dating the 2008 enactment of GEAR UP – such as Iowa's – be considered over new programs. Further, the law requires that the Secretary take into account “(A) the geographic distribution of such grant awards; and (B) the distribution of such grant awards between urban and rural applicants.” However, currently, just five states have received 44% of all funding as of the 2021 funding cycle.


All of this has meant fewer kids in Iowa getting help. GEAR UP Iowa has been forced to limit its work to helping current students rather than accepting new ones. This is especially concerning because one major purpose of these grants was to help students in rural areas. As a result of the current haphazard application process, the rural kids being helped by GEAR UP Iowa are being left behind.

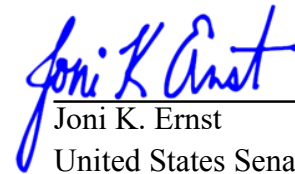
Consequently, we ask that you respond to the below questions by February 18, 2022 and please number your responses.


1. Is the Department of Education considering any changes to the review process, such as increased training for reviewers or definitive guidelines?
2. Even after decisions have been made, we have received reports that things do not appear to be any clearer. How are appeals to GEAR UP funding decisions handled?
 - a. How should the GEAR UP appeals process work under current Department of Education guidelines? Specifically, are applicants required to be notified of how the appeals process works before – rather than after – an application is denied?
3. How is the Department of Education fulfilling the statutory requirements that the Secretary take into account “(A) the geographic distribution of such grant awards; and (B) the distribution of such grant awards between urban and rural applicants”?
4. Given the issues with this latest funding round, is the Department considering holding an additional funding round to rectify these problems or continuing to fund down the existing slate?

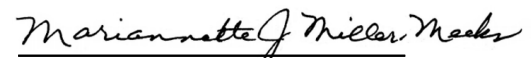
We look forward to your response and to working with you to ensure that GEAR UP is well administered and that grants are given to the most deserving institutions.


Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator


Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator


Ashley Hinson
Member of Congress


Mariannette Miller-Meeks, M.D.
Member of Congress


Cindy Axne
Member of Congress


Randy Feenstra
Member of Congress