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Acting Comptroller General
of the United States

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July 1, 2026

The Honorable Linda McMahon
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Priority Open Recommendations: Department of Education

Dear Secretary McMahon:

The purpose of this letter is to call your personal attention to three areas where open recommendations to the Department of Education (Education) should be given high priority.

In January 2026, we reported that, on a government-wide basis, 77 percent of our recommendations made 5 years ago were implemented.¹ Education's recommendation implementation rate was 100 percent. As of June 2026, Education has 111 open recommendations, including 10 priority recommendations.² Since our May 2025 letter, Education has implemented one priority recommendation.³ Fully implementing the remaining open priority recommendations could significantly improve Education's operations.

We are highlighting the following areas that warrant your timely and focused attention:

¹GAO, *Performance and Accountability Report, Fiscal Year 2025*, [GAO-26-900644](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 29, 2026).

²GAO considers a recommendation to be a priority if when implemented, it may significantly improve government operations, for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high-risk or duplication issue.

³GAO, *Priority Open Recommendations: Department of Education*, Washington, D.C.: May 6, 2025). In this letter, we identified 8 priority recommendations. Since then, in addition to the one priority recommendation that was implemented, we added three new priority recommendations.

- **Improving the federal student aid system.** The Department of Education should enhance oversight of federal student aid and loan programs as student loan debt exceeds \$1.6 trillion. As a result of challenges in deploying Education's modernized Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, some students could not complete the form. Although the agency implemented changes to improve the user experience and streamline the completion of the form, some technical issues remain, making it hard for some students and their families to complete it. [Improving the process to complete and submit the form](#) would make it easier for students and families to apply for financial aid.

Our work also identified challenges with Education's operation of its FAFSA Processing System (FPS). [We recommended](#) ways for the agency to develop guidance that adheres to agency policy to guide its testing activities and develop policy for independent acquisition reviews. Doing so could help Education identify and reduce risks, meet user needs, and better position the agency to ensure a more successful system modernization. In addition, effectively managing the FPS acquisition is imperative to ensuring that millions of students seeking federal aid can successfully apply. However, Education could not always demonstrate that key oversight personnel obtained the proper qualifications to perform their job duties or took specialized training before executing the contract they were overseeing, [as we recommended](#). Implementing these recommendations will better position the agency to more effectively monitor the FPS contract.

- **Protecting sensitive information.** Federal agencies that collect personally identifiable information are required to establish programs to protect it. [We recommended](#) that Education establish a time frame to update, and make updates to, its policies for creating, reviewing, and publishing system of records notices, which notify the public about changes to an agency's collection, disclosure, and use of personal information. Updating this policy could help the agency more consistently and effectively implement privacy protections for students.
- **Managing financial risks associated with charter school management organizations.** Given Education's role in helping to ensure that the nation's K-12 students have access to a quality education, the agency should take additional steps to oversee charter schools that contract with management organizations. We reported in 2022 that schools entering into contracts with management organizations may face major programmatic risks if they relinquish too much control over the administration of federal grants. Education's Office of Inspector General found that charter schools contracting with management organizations may present elevated risks and a lack of accountability for federal funds. We recommended that Education [address misreporting and underreporting of information on management organizations](#) and take steps to help states report accurate data about these contracts. Reporting more accurate information could help Education better manage financial risks associated with charter school management organizations.

Priority recommendations related to FPS and protecting sensitive information are on GAO's [High Risk List](#) under [improving IT acquisitions and management](#) and [ensuring the cybersecurity of the nation](#), respectively.⁴ Several other government-wide high risk areas have direct implications for Education and its operations, including [strategic human capital management](#). We also identified actions Education should take that result in cost savings or enhanced revenue collection or reduce duplication, overlap, and fragmentation. For example, [we recommended](#) that Education obtain data to verify income information for borrowers reporting zero income on Income-Driven Repayment applications. More information on our [Duplication and Cost Savings](#) work can be found on the GAO website.

A comprehensive list of open recommendations, including new priority recommendations, and information about their status can be found on the GAO website at [Recommendations Database | U.S. GAO](#). Copies of this letter are being sent to the appropriate congressional committees.⁵ This letter will also be available at [Priority Recommendations | U.S. GAO](#).

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss how to address our open recommendations, as we pursue the shared goal of working to increase efficiency and effectiveness of government programs and spending. Please do not hesitate to contact me or Cindy Brown Barnes, Managing Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues, at brownbarnesc@gao.gov. Contact points for our offices of Congressional Relations and Media Relations may be found on the last page of this letter. Thank you for your personal attention to these important issues.

Sincerely,

//SIGNED//

Orice Williams Brown
Acting Comptroller General
of the United States

cc: Kirsten Baesler, Assistant Secretary, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Department of Education
Thomas Flagg, Chief Information Officer, Department of Education
Candice Jackson, Principal Deputy General Counsel, Department of Education
Nicholas Kent, Under Secretary of Education, Department of Education
Danielle F. Yosif, Chief of Staff, Office of General Counsel, Department of Education
Richard Lucas, Acting Chief Operating Officer of Federal Student Aid, Department of Education

⁴The High Risk list identifies government operations with greater vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement. GAO, *High-Risk Series: Heightened Attention Could Save Billions More and Improve Government Efficiency and Effectiveness*, [GAO-25-107743](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2025).

⁵We also help Congress identify congressional oversight actions that can help agencies implement priority recommendations, such as incorporating them into legislation. James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 7211(a)(2), 136 Stat. 2395, 3668 (2022) (codified at 31 U.S.C. § 719 note). Congress can also use its budget, appropriations, and oversight processes to incentivize executive branch agencies to act on our recommendations and monitor their progress. For example, Congress can hold hearings focused on agencies' progress in implementing priority recommendations, withhold funds when appropriate, or take other actions to provide incentives for agencies to act.