



March 2, 2021

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

Dear Secretary Cardona:

On behalf of the American Psychological Association (APA), I would like to express our congratulations on your confirmation as Secretary of Education at this critical time for our nation's students. APA is the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States, with more than 122,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students as its members and affiliates. Our association works to promote the advancement, communication, and application of psychological science and knowledge to benefit society and improve lives.

Psychological science has much to offer to improve the effectiveness of how students learn, how educators teach, and how we address the social and emotional needs of all students across the education spectrum. Psychology as a field is deeply committed to providing equitable access to a high-quality education for all students, irrespective of socioeconomic status. This includes ensuring that higher education is both accessible and affordable—including for first-generation college students—as it is critical to train a diverse, culturally competent workforce that can serve all communities.

We applaud President Biden's pledge to increase funding for both P-12 and higher education, re-open schools safely, bolster school-based mental health services, and provide more affordable pathways to postsecondary options, including for doctoral psychology degrees. President Biden's commitment to accomplishing these goals through a racial and socioeconomic equity lens is one that APA strongly shares.

COVID-19 has adversely impacted the physical and mental health, and economic security of children and families across the United States.<sup>i</sup> Learning at all levels of education has pivoted to a remote capacity, in many cases with less than ideal outcomes.<sup>ii</sup> Since March 2020, as many as 3 million students have not been regularly attending classes, whether virtual or in-person, including some of the most at-risk students.<sup>iii</sup> Many parents are also pulling their children out of classrooms, as evidenced by declining public school enrollments last fall.<sup>iv</sup> This has contributed to learning loss and further exacerbated disparities in educational attainment, which are particularly evident among low-income students and students of color, further widening racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps.<sup>v</sup> Isolation and lack of social interaction have caused varying levels of trauma and emotional distress,<sup>vi</sup> with particularly deleterious results for the most vulnerable students, including students of color, those with disabilities, and LGBTQ students.<sup>vii</sup>

Many working parents are struggling with childcare and home-schooling, while trying to maintain their careers. Low-income and historically underserved populations, which are often also of color, are bearing a disproportionately larger burden. Federal support is critical, including for childcare, housing, nutrition, and education. More funding for public schools will help them re-open safely, provide equitable access to broadband for remote learning, maintain their educator workforce, and provide critically needed mental health services. Furthermore, the Department of Education must ensure that schools are safe

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environments for all students, irrespective of race or gender identity. Many of these issues were already areas of significant concern before the pandemic and were among the factors widening racial achievement gaps at all education levels.

Historically, the federal government's role in higher education has been to increase access and affordability, while addressing the needs of students, a rapidly diversifying population, and the demand for a well-trained workforce. APA is committed to working with the Biden administration and the Department of Education on policies that support graduate study, make campuses safer, address the well-being of all students, and invest in the mental health workforce.

In nearly all states, a doctoral degree is required to qualify for licensure upon entry into the field of psychology. This length of study involves significant time and economic investment, leaving many students with a substantial debt burden.<sup>viii</sup> Due to prevailing racial wealth gaps, for students of color in all fields, including psychology, student loan amounts are typically larger compared to their white counterparts.<sup>ix</sup> This often serves as a disincentive to pursue graduate education, including in psychology, which impedes efforts to diversify the field. Debt also impacts career choice, potentially decreasing the likelihood of qualified professionals pursuing careers in critical service sectors, such as public health, and in underserved communities,<sup>x</sup> where demand for mental health care is expected to grow.

The pandemic has further exacerbated disparities in wealth and access to postsecondary education. Colleges and universities are struggling to respond, including to increased student mental health needs.<sup>xi</sup> This disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable students, including those with disabilities, students of color, or undocumented students. Increased support for institutions of higher education will allow them to safely welcome students back to campuses; provide aid to low-income, first-generation students; and maintain necessary support services, including for mental health. Finally, student loan forgiveness, including through the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, can serve as an economic stimulus, help close racial wealth gaps, and continue incentivizing qualified professionals to enter high-demand public service fields, such as psychology, which will be critical in meeting the increased demand resulting from the pandemic.

To address the full scope of these issues, APA offers a [series of recommendations](#) to aid the Department of Education in achieving many of your laudable goals. We appreciate your consideration and would welcome the opportunity to work with you and your staff on their implementation. If you have any questions, please contact Kenneth Polishchuk, Senior Director for Congressional & Federal Relations, at [kpolishchuk@apa.org](mailto:kpolishchuk@apa.org).

Sincerely,



Arthur C. Evans, Jr., PhD  
Chief Executive Officer

<sup>i</sup> American Psychological Association. (2020). Stress in America 2020: A national mental health crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/sia-mental-health-crisis.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> Hobbs, T. D., & Hawkins, L. (2020, June 5). The results are in for remote learning: It didn't work. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-coronavirus-remote-learning-lockdown-tech-11591375078>.

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