

Senate Labor, HHS, Education and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee Holds Hearing On President Trump's 2020 Budget Proposal for Education Summary  
by Shayla Britton

For the better part of the Thursday, March 28, 2019, Senate Subcommittee on Labor, HHS, Education, and Related Agencies ' 2020 Budget hearing, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos presented and responded to questions regarding the Administration's 2020 Budget Proposal on Education.

Detailed below is a summary of the key topics related to higher education policy discussed during the hearing entitled "Review of the FY2020 Budget Request for the U.S. Department of Education" led by Subcommittee Chair, Roy Blunt (R-MO) and Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA).

Chairman Roy Blunt began the hearing reminding the Committee Administration's proposed budget "is not that much different than the budget proposed by the President last year" other than the fact that it is almost "10% less than last year." Sen. Blunt went on to explain that the cuts are "almost exactly the reduction required by law" under the Budget Control Act that was passed by the Senate under the Obama Administration.

Ranking Member Murray set the tone for the hearing from the Democrats' perspective, when, as part of her opening statement, she echoed similar sentiments of that of her Democratic colleagues from the House side earlier this week during their hearing with Secretary DeVos.

Ranking Member Murray indicated that "this budget is a reflection of [Administration's/DeVos'] values" and asserting that the Administrations' proposals would "not only harm students and families, but they are also in stark contrast" with Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander's (R-TN) and her current HEA reauthorization efforts. (Reminder: Senator Murray is both the Ranking Member of the Senate Appropriations Committee that determines the funding for education policy and Senate HELP Ranking Member who sets education policy.)

She went on to state her frustration with the Department's efforts regarding the lack of "relief to student loan borrowers who were cheated and defrauded by predatory for-profit colleges

Secretary DeVos then presented her testimony, which were, as you would expect, very similar to the presentation she gave on Tuesday before the House Appropriations Committee.

As part of her testimony, Secretary DeVos shared with the Subcommittee that the Administration is supporting key policy proposals to reduce Gainful Employment, Borrower Defense rules, and more. Endorsing what the Secretary calls a rejection of "one size fits all reform" proposals by focusing on student choice and educational freedom efforts to give students and potential borrowers choices for their education.

Secretary DeVos again reiterated the Administration's attempts to expand the use of Pell Grants for quality, short term certificate programs, to be used for career and technical education to help

streamline and benefit student repayment outcomes for those programs, with this FY 2020 proposal. The Secretary added the high hopes she and the Administration share for the potential of IRAPs and pre-apprenticeships in directing younger students to participate in—and businesses to establish—viable, innovative, and new ways to target those struggling sectors and high unemployment in specific states. (Note: see CSPEN coverage of the Wednesday, March 27, 2019 House Postsecondary Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee for more details on these topics.)

During the lengthy Q&A Ranking Member Murray, continued to confront Secretary DeVos regarding the over 140,000 that are pending review. DeVos took issue with what she considered to be a personal attack and then answered the question by stating that when she arrived there were tens of thousands of claims left over from the Obama Administration and that the Department was continuing to work through them.

Murray pressed for both a reason why the Department has not done more on the issue and also for a number of outstanding claims and timeline for addressing them. Secretary DeVos said that she would respond to the numbers upon returning to the Department and would share additional information on timing in her response to questions submitted for the hearing record.

Senator Murray also discussed concerns related to ACICS and the interaction between the Secretary and the Department's former Inspector General – using the discussion to render her view that the Secretary and Senior Department officials decision to overturn the previous revocation of ACICS' recognition as inappropriate and potentially illegal.

Later Senator Murray also confronted the Secretary on the Administration's proposal related to campus crime and security. She passionately stated her view that the Administration's Title IX revisions will “weaken [its] protections for survivors and allow[s] colleges to shirk their responsibility to investigate claims of sexual assault.” DeVos' response focused not as much on the issue as the need for fiscal constraint and the Department's efforts to reduce the federal deficit.

Additional questions from Democrats and Republicans expressed concerns with the Administration's responsibility to act in the interest of struggling students, communities, and regions across the country unable to fulfill much needed job field positions, yielded similar responses from Secretary DeVos as the remarks she made to the House on Tuesday of this week.

As for the Secretary's response to both Republicans' and Democrats' inquiries concerning the Court rules on granting Borrower Defense claims—and particular questions from Democrats about supposed purposeful blockages for relief for students from the Department, the Secretary provided very little transparency from the Department on those such issues.

On the questions of borrower repayment and the national debt associated with students' inability or unwillingness to repay their loans, the Secretary noted the Budget proposal's attempt at streamlining repayment measures into one program and capping income-based repayment at 12.5% of borrowers discretionary spending in hopes of curbing the national debt associated with defaults to repayment problems occurring under current legislation.