

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 19, 2026

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

Dear Secretary McMahon:

As strong supporters of the Federal TRIO Programs, we write to urge the Department of Education to ensure the timely execution of the upcoming Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 TRIO grant competitions for Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers. Specifically, we ask that the Department of Education issue the Notice Inviting Applications for new Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers by March 1, 2026, so that award notices can be released no later than June 30, 2026, and programs can begin promptly on September 1, 2026.

Federal TRIO programs support postsecondary access, retention, and completion for low-income, first-generation students from all backgrounds. These programs help approximately 840,000 students prepare for, enter, and graduate from college each year. Congress annually appropriates funding for TRIO on a bipartisan basis, and the FY26 Consolidated Appropriations Act, which President Trump signed into law, appropriated \$1.191 billion for TRIO programs.

As you know, the Federal TRIO programs operate on a competitive five-year grant cycle, and for FY26, the Department of Education is expected to issue grant competitions for Talent Search and Education Opportunity Centers. The Talent Search program focuses on low-cost, early interventions for students in grades 6-12, and has had successful results. For instance, the Department's own data shows that 22% more Talent Search students enroll in college than students in the bottom income quartile nationally.¹ Educational Opportunity Centers, which prepare adult learners for entry into the workforce, are also similarly effective. For example, data from the Department of Education shows that 73% of eligible Educational Opportunity Center participants applied for college admission.²

Unfortunately, in recent years, the Department of Education has failed to award grants to TRIO recipients in sufficient time, despite the fact that the Higher Education Act requires the Secretary to inform TRIO applicants about the status of their application for continued funding "at least 8 months prior to the expiration of the grant or contract."³ For example, last year, the Department of Education delayed releasing more than \$600 million in federal funding for over 2,000 TRIO programs, which impacted over 650,000 low-income, first-generation students.⁴

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Talent Search, Grantee-Level Performance Report, Washington, D.C., 2022.

² U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Student Service, *Fast Facts Report for Educational Opportunity Centers Program: 2018-19*, Washington, D.C., 2022.

³ 20 USC 1070a-11(c)(7).

⁴ Jessica Blake, *Trump Administration Delays \$660M for College Access Programs*, Inside Higher Ed (September 12, 2025), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2025/09/12/trump-administration->

These delays can result in increased strain on program administrators and, more importantly, students. By delaying the execution of these programs, programs may be forced to make difficult decisions, including laying off staff or scaling back services. This has a direct impact on the timeliness and quality of TRIO services, and it may result in students losing access to the help they need to succeed in college.

As such, the FY26 Consolidated Appropriations Act included language to direct the Department of Education to “ensure that the notices inviting applications for new awards for the Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers grant competitions are published no later than December 1, 2025” and “to take steps necessary to issue grant award notifications for all TRIO programs (both new and non-competing continuation award notices) no later than June 30, 2026.”⁵

While December 1 has already passed, the intent of that language is clear—to ensure that the FY26 TRIO competitions and grant award notifications are released in a timely manner. As such, we ask that the Department of Education launch the grant competition for Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers by March 1, 2026, so that award notices can be released no later than June 30, 2026, and programs can begin promptly on September 1, 2026.

We are deeply concerned that any delays in the Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers competition process will result in irreversible damage to our students, families, and communities, as many rely on the vital programs and services provided by TRIO programs. Therefore, we respectfully urge you to ensure that the upcoming Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers competition is conducted in a timely manner.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



Angela D. Alsobrooks
United States Senator

[withholds-millions-trio-programs.](#)

⁵ S. Rept. 119-55, at 306 (2025).

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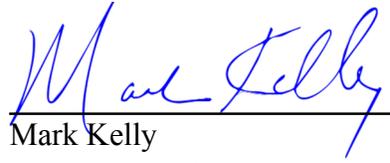
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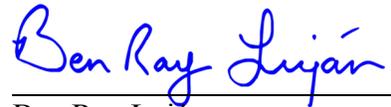
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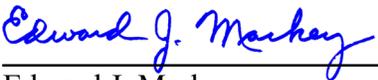
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