



October 9, 2020

**VIA EMAIL**

FOIA Service Center  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office of the Executive Secretariat  
400 Maryland Avenue SW, LBJ 7W104  
Washington, DC 20202-4500  
[EDFOIAManager@ed.gov](mailto:EDFOIAManager@ed.gov)

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of the Department of Education (Education), 34 C.F.R. Part 5, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

Under Secretary DeVos's leadership, the Department of Education has arguably become increasingly politicized. Secretary DeVos has ignored court orders telling Education to stop collecting the debt of students who borrowed from now-defunct for-profit colleges<sup>1</sup> and calls from Congress to cooperate in a House of Representatives investigation into another for-profit college;<sup>2</sup> hinged the opening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic on politics, not science, according to experts;<sup>3</sup> and revoked sexual assault guidance for colleges implemented by the previous administration, forcing sexual assault survivors, according to one Senator, "back into the shadows."<sup>4</sup>

American Oversight seeks the communications of key officials at Education during this period in order to inform the public and create a historical record of the actions taken

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary Ellen Flannery, *Contempt Citation and Possible Subpoenas – It's Getting Scary for Betsy DeVos*, NEAToday (Oct. 31, 2019), <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/contempt-citation-and-possible-subpoenas-its-getting-scary-betsy>.

<sup>2</sup> Nicole Gaudiano, *DeVos Threatened with Subpoena by House Oversight Panel*, Politico (Feb. 3, 2020, 12:28 PM), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/03/devos-threatened-with-subpoena-by-house-oversight-panel-110528>.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Valant, *School Reopening Plans Linked to Politics Rather Than Public Health*, Brookings (July 29, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/07/29/school-reopening-plans-linked-to-politics-rather-than-public-health/>.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Kitchener, *How Campus Sexual Assault Became So Political*, The Atlantic (Sept. 22, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/09/how-campus-sexual-assault-became-so-politicized/540846/>.



and officials involved in major developments at Education over the time period of Secretary DeVos's leadership.

### **Requested Records**

American Oversight requests that Education produce the following records within twenty business days:

- 1) All text messages (or similar messages sent on messaging applications such as Signal, WhatsApp, or other platforms) concerning agency business sent or received by the Education officials specified below.
- 2) All email communications (including emails, complete email chains, and email attachments) concerning agency business sent by the Education officials specified below.

#### Specified Officials

- 1) Secretary Betsy DeVos
- 2) Chief of Staff Nate Bailey

Please provide all responsive records from February 7, 2017, through the date the search is conducted.

For Item 2, in an effort to accommodate the agency and reduce the number of potentially responsive records to be processed and produced, American Oversight has limited its request to emails sent by the specified officials. To be clear, however, American Oversight still requests that complete email chains be produced, displaying both sent and received messages. This means, for example, that both Secretary DeVos's response to an email and the initial received message are responsive to this request and should be produced.

Please understand messages and emails regarding "agency business" to broadly include, at a minimum, all communications (whether on government-issued or personal devices or accounts) that would ordinarily comprise federal records per 44 U.S.C. § 3301(a)(1)(A), which defines federal government records as,

all recorded information . . . appropriate for preservation by that agency or its legitimate successor as evidence of the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities of the United States Government or because of the informational value of data in them[.]

*Id.*

### **Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency's regulations, American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government

procedures by the general public in a significant way. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is “in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of operations or activities of the government.”<sup>5</sup> The public has a significant interest in understanding the actions taken by and communications of the nation’s most senior Education officials, particularly as those officials have presided over an extremely controversial period in which there have been concerns about the Department’s politization. Records with the potential to shed light on these matters would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including by giving the public a historical record of the communications and actions of senior Education officials. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide to FOIA requests publicly available, and the public’s understanding of the government’s activities would be enhanced through American Oversight’s analysis and publication of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>6</sup> As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight’s financial interest. American Oversight’s mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>7</sup>

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through regular substantive analyses posted to its website.<sup>8</sup> Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to the Trump Administration’s contacts with Ukraine and analyses of those contacts;<sup>9</sup> posting records and editorial content about the federal government’s response to the Coronavirus pandemic;<sup>10</sup> posting records received as part of American Oversight’s

---

<sup>5</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>6</sup> *See id.*

<sup>7</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 15,600 page likes on Facebook and 105,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Oct. 7, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Oct. 7, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> *See generally News*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

<sup>9</sup> *Trump Administration’s Contacts with Ukraine*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-trump-administrations-contacts-with-ukraine>.

<sup>10</sup> *See generally The Trump Administration’s Response to Coronavirus*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-trump-administrations->

“Audit the Wall” project to gather and analyze information related to the administration’s proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border, and analyses of what those records reveal;<sup>11</sup> the posting of records related to an ethics waiver received by a senior Department of Justice attorney and an analysis of what those records demonstrated regarding the Department’s process for issuing such waivers;<sup>12</sup> and posting records and analysis of federal officials’ use of taxpayer dollars to charter private aircraft or use government planes for unofficial business.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

### **Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records**

In connection with its request for records, American Oversight provides the following guidance regarding the scope of the records sought and the search and processing of records:

- Please search all locations and systems likely to have responsive records, regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics.
- Our request for records includes any attachments to those records or other materials enclosed with those records when they were previously transmitted. To the extent that an email is responsive to our request, our request includes all prior messages sent or received in that email chain, as well as any attachments to the email.
- Please search all relevant records or systems containing records regarding agency business. Do not exclude records regarding agency business contained in files, email accounts, or devices in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts or text messages. Records of official business conducted

---

[response-to-coronavirus](https://www.americanoversight.org/cdc-calendars-from-2018-and-2019-pandemic-related-briefings-and-meetings); see, e.g., *CDC Calendars from 2018 and 2019: Pandemic-Related Briefings and Meetings*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/cdc-calendars-from-2018-and-2019-pandemic-related-briefings-and-meetings>.

<sup>11</sup> See generally *Audit the Wall*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; see, e.g., *Border Wall Investigation Report: No Plans, No Funding, No Timeline, No Wall*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/border-wall-investigation-report-no-plans-no-funding-no-timeline-no-wall>.

<sup>12</sup> *DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco’s Recusal*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>; *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

<sup>13</sup> See generally *Swamp Airlines: Chartered Jets at Taxpayer Expense*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/swamp-airlines-private-jets-taxpayer-expense>; see, e.g., *New Information on Pompeo’s 2017 Trips to His Home State*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/new-information-on-pompeos-2017-trips-to-his-home-state>.

using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>14</sup> It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; American Oversight has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.<sup>15</sup>

- Please use all tools available to your agency to conduct a complete and efficient search for potentially responsive records. Agencies are subject to government-wide requirements to manage agency information electronically,<sup>16</sup> and many agencies have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies. These systems provide options for searching emails and other electronic records in a manner that is reasonably likely to be more complete than just searching individual custodian files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency's archiving tools may capture that email under Capstone. At the same time, custodian searches are still necessary; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.
- In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically why it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.
- Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

---

<sup>14</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

<sup>15</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

## Conclusion

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request for records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to American Oversight, please do not hesitate to contact American Oversight to discuss this request. American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Alternatively, please provide responsive material in native format or in PDF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, please contact Emma Lewis at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or (202) 919-6303. Also, if American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Austin R. Evers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers  
Executive Director  
American Oversight