

**Analysis of the President's State of the Union Address and  
the Democratic Response**

On February 4, 2020, President Trump delivered his State of the Union address in which he highlighted some of the Administration's accomplishments during his time in office, as well as laid out his priorities for the upcoming year. Specifically, the key themes from the President's address included the strength of the economy; supports for working families, including paid family leave, school choice, and greater access to affordable child care options; and national security. The full text of the President's remarks as prepared for the State of the Union address can be accessed [here](#). Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer (D) delivered the Democratic response to the President's address with a transcript that can be accessed [here](#). Additionally, Rep. Veronica Escobar (D-TX) delivered the Democratic response to the State of the Union in Spanish, from El Paso, Texas, which can be accessed is [here](#).

**Key to Know:**

- The State of the Union address offers a preview of potential areas of focus that we can expect to see in the fiscal year (FY) 2021 President's budget request, which is set to be released on *February 10, 2020*. Given the President's focus on Education Freedom Scholarships<sup>1</sup> during his address, it is likely that the Administration will again make school choice a focus of the budget request.
- Areas of agreement between the President's address and the Democratic response included support for early childhood education, vocational and technical education (with the Democratic response focusing on union apprenticeships), and the need for infrastructure improvements.
- On the higher education front, the President briefly highlighted support for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), while the Democratic response called for affordable opportunities at community colleges and four-year universities for students.

**Highlights from the State of the Union Address related to Issues of Interest:**

- **School Choice:** The President used the address to note efforts in 18 states to create school choice in the form of Opportunity Scholarships. Building off of efforts in the states, the President urged passage of H.R. 1434/S.634, the "Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunity Act." The Act would establish tax credits to encourage individual and corporate taxpayers to contribute to scholarships for elementary and secondary students through eligible scholarship-granting organizations. Additionally, the President welcomed Janiyah Davis as his guest. Janiyah is a fourth grader from Philadelphia who had hoped to access a scholarship; however, the President noted that the Governor of Pennsylvania vetoed legislation that would make this possible. The President revealed during the address that Janiyah Davis would receive an Opportunity Scholarship to attend the school of her choice.
- **Early Childhood Education:** The President highlighted increases to the child tax credit and federal funding for child care during his Administration. The President announced that the Administration has sent to Congress a plan with a "vision to further expand access to high-quality child care," and urged Congress to act "immediately."
- **Infant Health:** Recognizing the special needs of premature babies, the President stated that he will be asking Congress for an additional \$50 million for neonatal research.
- **Paid Family Leave:** The President called on Congress to pass the H.R. 5296/S. 2976, the "Advancing Support for Working Families Act," which would allow parents to borrow up to \$5,000 as an advance against future benefits from the federal Child Tax Credit when a child is born or adopted. Additionally, the President highlighted recently enacted legislation providing new parents in the federal workforce paid family leave.
- **Workforce Development and Job Training:** In a specific reference to the FY2021 budget request, the President stated, "My budget also contains an exciting vision for our nation's high schools. Tonight, I ask Congress to support our students and back my plan to offer vocational and technical education in every single high school in America."
- **Higher Education:** The President used the address to tout permanent funding that was recently enacted for HBCUs. The address did not include specific references to a higher education plan or student aid reform.

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<sup>1</sup> The President's FY2019 budget request included an Education Freedom Scholarships proposal to provide federal tax breaks to individuals who contribute to a scholarship program for students to use at various educational programs. To date, Congress has not acted on the proposal.

- **Safe and Secure Environments:** The President expressed the importance of young people having a safe and secure environment to learn and grow. He noted that the First Lady’s BE BEST initiative<sup>2</sup> is aimed at advancing a, “safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free life for the next generation — online, in school, and in our communities.”
- **Religious Liberty:** The President called attention to recent efforts by the Administration to “defend religious liberty, and that includes the constitutional right to pray in public schools.” The speech is referring to guidance<sup>3</sup> released on January 16 by the U.S. Department of Education (USED) on constitutionally protected prayer and religious expression in public elementary and secondary schools.
- **Opportunity Zones:** The President highlighted investments in underdeveloped communities as a result of Opportunity Zones. Opportunity Zones promote investment, economic growth, and job creation.
- **Infrastructure:** The President noted the need to rebuild America’s infrastructure, including “new roads, bridges, and tunnels.” He also committed to ensuring that every citizen can have access to high-speed Internet, especially in rural areas. Schools and child care were not mentioned in relation to infrastructure improvements.
- **Criminal Justice Reform:** The President highlighted the Administration’s work with Congress to implement criminal justice reform, which has “given many former prisoners the ability to get a great job and a fresh start.” Specifically, he noted, “This second chance at life is made possible because we passed landmark criminal justice reform into law.”

#### **Highlights from the Democratic Response:**

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer began her response by noting she is delivering remarks from East Lansing High School, a public school in Michigan – the home state of USED Secretary Betsy DeVos. Governor Whitmer’s response focused on “what Democrats are doing” to support working Americans and drew on examples from her fellow governors across the country. The governor highlighted examples of Democratic governors investing in infrastructure while noting that congressional Democrats have presented similar proposals, but “President Trump and the Republicans are blocking the path.” Governor Whitmer went on to describe the impacts of affordable health care on working Americans and the need to expand coverage across the country. Further, she countered President Trump’s assertions regarding the state of the economy by noting that the American economy needs to be a “different kind of strong” and called for a greater focus on ensuring it is strong for working- and middle-class Americans. Governor Whitmer also noted that while over 275 bipartisan bills are “just gathering dust on Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s desk,” Democrats across the country are “getting things done.” Governor Whitmer highlighted specific education related actions or proposals, including:

- **Teacher salaries:** “Nevada [Governor] Steve Sisolak and North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper are working to give hardworking teachers a raise;”
- **School funding:** “Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers unilaterally increased school funding by \$65 million last year;”
- **Early childhood education:** “[Colorado] Governor Jared Polis has enacted free all-day kindergarten;”
- **School safety:** “[Young people] respond to mass shootings, demanding policies that make schools safer... Democrats want safe schools;”
- **Postsecondary education:** “[Democrats want] everyone to have a path to a good life, whether it’s through a union apprenticeship, a community college, a four-year university, without drowning in debt;”

Rep. Veronica Escobar (D-TX) also delivered a response to the State of the Union from El Paso, Texas. Her full response, delivered in Spanish, is [here](#).

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<sup>2</sup> The First Lady’s [BE BEST initiative](#) is a campaign which champions well-being programs that provide children with the tools and skills required for emotional, social, and physical health.

<sup>3</sup> The guidance is [here](#). A summary by the Department is [here](#).