There’s a promise we make to the next generation: Graduate from college and you can get ahead. Indeed, recent studies show that college graduates earn $1 million more than high school graduates over their lifetimes.

Yet, as we make this promise, public higher education institutions nationwide are facing a troubling trend of disinvestment. Even with poorly treated adjuncts and other non-tenure-track contingent faculty doing the lion’s share of teaching at many colleges, tuition costs keep rising. Even with current federal and state student loans and grants, students have been saddled with crippling debt.

For-profit colleges feed off our goal to ensure higher education is a ladder of opportunity.

And then there’s another side of higher education. For-profit colleges are defined by putting profit before the public good, earnings over education, shareholders above students. At these schools—such as Corinthian Colleges Inc., which filed for bankruptcy this month, and ITT Tech, which is being investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission for alleged fraud—students are products, faculty are afraid to tell accreditors the truth about where they work, and taxpayers foot the bill for aggressive marketing that preys on first-generation college students, veterans and students of color.

Funded largely by taxpayers, for-profit colleges get close to 90 percent of their funding from federal aid—that’s more than $30 billion annually. The industry feeds off of research universities, veterans and students of color. And as the nation’s largest union of higher education faculty and staff, the American Federation of Teachers has joined with courageous students and community organizations to demand justice.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Education has been sitting on the sidelines. For instance, even though Corinthian Colleges faces a $30 million fine for falsified job placement rates and “blatant disregard” for the federal student loan program, the federal government has done little to help the 16,000 students left high and dry. In fact, the corporation is asking for a taxpayer bailout of its $143.1 million in debts.

How did we get to this place where promises are broken, students are held back and for-profits are using our money to fund their schemes?

The simple answer is that the for-profit college industry, through its trade association, the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities, and other lobbyists, has enormous sway in Washington. It’s used massive public relations campaigns and campaign contributions to keep politicians on both sides of the aisle from policing its institutions.

Still, we are fighting back. In Congress, Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) led the charge with a groundbreaking investigation in 2012. Right now, Rep. Mark Takano (D-Calif.) is pushing the Protections and Regulations for Our Students (PRO Students) Act, which aims to protect students from the deceptive and fraudulent practices of for-profit colleges. And as the nation’s largest union of higher education faculty and staff, the American Federation of Teachers has joined with courageous students and community organizations to demand justice.

We can’t be a country that tells Michael and millions like him that college is important but then allows predatory institutions to stick them with crippling debt, worthless degrees and an uncertain future. Students deserve better, and now is the time to act.

Join us and call Secretary Duncan at 855-534-2400. Tell him to cancel the Corinthian students’ debt because the promise of a better future through higher education is one that we intend to keep.