Ending the student debt nightmare

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More than 43 million Americans have federal student loans, taking on debt so they can pursue opportunities, chase their dreams and, like my members, prepare for careers in service to others. Something is very wrong when these dreams and aspirations turn into nightmares. There’s the physical therapist in an intensive care unit who heads home after each exhausting shift—to her mother’s basement. The retired teacher whose Social Security check was garnished when she fell behind on loan payments. The school staff who adore children and would love to have their own but can barely support themselves after making their loan payments. Even something “small,” like the teacher with young children who has never been able to afford to buy their school pictures, shows how overwhelming student debt can affect nearly every aspect of borrowers’ lives.

The federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness program was designed to address this, incentivizing public service by enabling the discharge of student debt for nurses, teachers, firefighters and others in public service, after 10 years of making qualifying payments. As Rep. Ayanna Pressley said at a recent discussion about the state of student debt, PSLF is “how we care for the folks who care for us,” and it helps recruit and retain people in these crucial professions. PSLF was a bipartisan promise made to people who choose this work, a promise that has been badly broken. During the Trump administration under former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, 99 percent of all borrowers who applied for PSLF were denied. This is not the AFT’s first rodeo taking on unaffordable student debt. We sued the student loan giant Navient because the student loan industry made life hell for many borrowers. We sued Betsy DeVos for her refusal to make PSLF work. And we have made the case for something bigger: that everyone striving to improve their life, while struggling under crushing student debt, deserves relief.

President Joe Biden has done what other presidents could have done, but only he has: cancel student debt for 4 million borrowers eligible for relief.

MOHELA currently has an eye-popping backlog of more than 800,000 unprocessed PSLF forms. Our investigation discovered an appalling companywide playbook featuring a “call deflection” strategy. Rather than striving to help borrowers resolve issues, the “call deflection” scheme diverts borrowers away from customer service representatives—often to non-operative parts of the MOHELA website—even though many servicing functions can only be performed by a customer service representative.

Jeremy Doran, a high school English teacher and AFT member in New York, made more than 12 years of payments but was told by his loan servicer that half those years of payments did not count toward PSLF debt relief. MOHELA’s “customer service” number is available only during limited weekday hours. Doran has spent countless hours on hold while teaching, trying to speak with a representative. The AFT is working to help Doran get the debt relief he is entitled to. And Sen. Elizabeth Warren has invited MOHELA’s CEO to testify at a hearing on its performance as a student loan servicer.

Generations of young people have been advised, “Get a college education.” While it’s true that typical earnings for workers with a bachelor’s degree are 84 percent higher than for those whose highest degree is a high school diploma, career and technical education programs are preparing many high school students for well-paying in-demand jobs right after graduation. The AFT will continue to fight for real solutions that help people secure a better life, including expanding career pathways for those who do not attend college and making higher education affordable for those who do.

Until leaders address America’s college affordability crisis, higher education will be out of reach for too many, and the astronomical price of attending college will continue to crush untold numbers of Americans.

Randi Weingarten, right, with Sen. Elizabeth Warren at a discussion in Boston on March 18 about the student debt crisis.