

US

Trump Has Vowed to Close the Department of Education—How Would That Work?

The Department of Education could essentially become just a big building with empty offices.

165

209

Save



U.S. Department of Education building in Washington on July 6, 2023. Madalina Vasiliu/The Epoch Times

By Aaron Gifford

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In September 2023, Donald Trump’s presidential campaign **announced** 10 principles for reforming education. Chief among them was closing the Department of Education in Washington, and sending “all education work and needs back to the states.”

The president-elect has maintained that pledge, even though he appointed a secretary of education (Linda McMahon) to lead a federal agency he vowed to eliminate.

He also promised to support universal school choice, reverse “gender-affirming” care practices in schools, and leverage the department’s funding mechanisms to end Critical Race Theory and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs in K–12 and higher education.

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But how exactly would Trump go about making these changes, and how would he use the \$80 billion department?



Michael McCluskey, director of the [Cato Institute](#) Center for Education Freedom in Washington, said Congress created the Department of Education and is, therefore, the only agency that can eliminate it.



Under [Senate filibuster rules](#), support is required from 60 of the 100 members, but McCluskey doesn’t think there are enough votes to make that happen.



“He can’t just snap his fingers and make it [Department of Education] go away,” McCluskey told The Epoch Times. “It seems unlikely if no Democrats get on board.”

The department, established in 1979, is also the smallest federal cabinet with about 4,100 employees, McCluskey said.

As something not considered a sacred pillar of the U.S. government, there may be enough bipartisan support to shrink the agency by moving some functions to other federal agencies.

McCluskey said the Constitution does not guarantee the right to education.

Public schools and higher education institutions are mainly funded at the state and municipal levels, while state and local boards of education mandate curriculum, graduation requirements, employee credentials, and annual operating budgets.

Private colleges, though mainly funded by tuition and donations, still get federal financial aid for students.

Higher education financial aid programs, for example, could be moved to the Treasury.

Civil Rights functions for investigating discrimination and harassment complaints at schools and college campuses could easily be handled by the Department of Justice.

The funding programs for low-income school districts and special needs programs would have a place with Health and Human Services.

And The Census Bureau within the U.S. Department of Commerce is well-equipped to take on the data and services that have been provided by the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and Institute of Education Sciences, McCluskey said.

Through block grants, state education departments could easily handle the smaller federally funded programs for accelerated learning loss recovery in core subjects, nutrition, career and technical education, and various other areas related to academics or student wellness, McCluskey said.

"It's just a matter of how much control the federal government wants over these programs," he said, adding that hundreds of millions of dollars could be saved if state employees administered a program instead of both state and federal employees.

In awarding block grants, McCluskey added, Trump could withhold funding from state education agencies that continue DEI and CRT policies if the president deems, they "discriminate based on race."

Will Congress Support Downsizing?

Changes to the Department of Education will be a high priority in the next legislative session.

On Nov. 21, Sen Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) introduced the “[Returning Education to Our States Act](#),” which would eliminate the Department of Education and move its critical programs to other federal agencies.

In a [news release](#), Rounds said the department’s budget increased by 449 percent in its 45-year history, while student test scores have dropped in the past decade.

“The federal Department of Education has never educated a single student, and it’s long past time to end this bureaucratic department that causes more harm than good,” Rounds said in the release.

“We all know local control is best when it comes to education.”

Similar [legislation](#) from Rep. Barry Moore, a Republican from Alabama, also called for abolishing the department and moving its funding to states.

It was introduced in February 2023 but never passed the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.

The chair of that committee, Rep. Virginia Foxx, a Republican from North Carolina, states on her [website](#) that she supports returning “decision-making power and resource flexibility to the local level while keeping schools accountable for results to taxpayers, parents, and students.”

Sen Bill Cassidy, a Republican from Louisiana, is expected to take over as chair of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

He has criticized the Department of Education in recent years but stopped short of calling for its elimination.

In June, Cassidy, Ohio Senator and now Vice President-elect JD Vance, and 20 other republican legislators introduced the Dismantle DEI Act that would cut federal funding for any federal department, contractors, or programs that institutionalize discrimination in hiring and employee training.

The list of contractors and programs includes educational accreditation agencies.

“Taxpayers expect the most qualified candidates to be hired, not the most favored,” Cassidy said in a [June 13 news release](#).

Will Policies be Reversed?

An Epoch Times review of announcements, news releases, and speeches on the [Department of Education website](#) under the Biden administration found that initiatives related to DEI and student loan forgiveness have been the department’s most publicized activities.

Sarah Spreitzer, American Council on Education (ACE) chief of staff of government relations, said during a [Nov. 7 ACE panel discussion](#) that voters care about education reform and are pressuring the next administration to downsize the department “and give it a smaller role.”

“When they think about their complaints about education, you know, blame the Department of Education,” she said.

“I can see them moving some of the big pieces from the Department of Education, and you’re kind of left with a much smaller footprint of the department.”

ACE leaders echo the Cato Institute’s sentiments that Trump is poised to use his executive authority to remove DEI and CRT from federally funded programs.

Spreitzer said the president-elect did so on a limited basis with federal contractors during his previous term—without any court challenges

she's aware of—so he could easily dust that policy off and expand it after he's sworn in.

“The hook they’ll always have is that federal funding,” she said. “Whether it’s through your grant agreement, or whether it’s through your program participation agreement, you know putting new requirements in there is the hook they will use.”

Will Teachers Accept Changes?

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten expressed mixed reactions to Trump’s election and his recent appointment of McMahon at a time when the U.S. Department of Education could face major change.

“We look forward to learning more about Linda McMahon, and if she is confirmed, we will reach out to her as we did with Betsy DeVos at the beginning of her tenure.

“We hope Donald Trump means it when he says he wants a focus on project-based instruction, career and technical education, and apprenticeships.

“This will improve education and job options, making schools more relevant and engaging for young people,” Weingarten said in a [Nov. 19 news release](#).

“But we question the future of these popular ideas and more if the Trump administration follows through with plans to close the Department of Education, leaving in doubt a federal funding lifeline that disproportionately goes to children in need, children with disabilities, and young adults who are the first in their families to go to college.”

The Epoch Times reached out to the Department of Education, but a response was not provided.

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