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Myths & Facts about the US Department of Education



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By now, you've probably heard that President-elect Trump wants to put an end to the US Department of Education. But what exactly does the Department do, what would it mean to "shut it down," and... can he even do that? Below, we unpack common questions about the Department of Education, its role in our education system, and its likely future.

What does the Department of Education do?

In the United States, most education authority lies with state and local governments. The federal government plays a limited but important role supplementing those state and local efforts and ensuring fair opportunity in public education for students across the country. The Department of Education distributes federal funding that supports, for example, high-poverty K-12 schools, special education services for students with disabilities or individualized education plans, and need-based Pell

Grants to help students pay for college. It is also responsible for enforcing civil rights laws, overseeing national data collection on public schools, and managing the federal student loan program.

But Trump claims that eliminating the Department will send education “back to the states.”

For the most part, it's already there. States—not the federal government—are the entities charged with developing curricula and setting standards for public elementary and secondary schools. The Department of Education's primary roles in K-12 education are providing federal funding to support schools and states in fulfilling their obligation to educate students and protecting against discrimination to ensure all students have equal access to quality education. Overall, federal dollars from the Department of Education and other agencies combined account for less than 10% of total elementary and secondary education funding. Likewise, when it comes to higher education, states exercise the most direct authority over public colleges and universities. State governments are the main provider of operational funding for public higher education institutions, set tuition rates for those institutions, and serve as authorizers and oversight bodies for schools and programs operating within state borders. The federal government focuses on college access, affordability, and student success. The Department manages the FAFSA, administers federal student aid (including Pell Grants, student loans, and the work-study program), and provides targeted grants for education research and innovation.

I heard the Department of Education didn't even exist before 1980?

Yes and no. It's true that President Jimmy Carter signed legislation into law to establish the Department of Education as a federal cabinet-level agency in 1979. But its history dates back to 1867, when President Andrew Johnson created the Office of Education, a small non-cabinet agency that was housed in the Department of the Interior. It went through several iterations and names as an office, a bureau, and a department, and operated under multiple agencies prior to its current iteration. Today, the Department of Education remains among the smallest cabinet in terms of both staff size (with fewer than 5,000 employees) and budget (representing less than 2% of total federal spending).

Can the President axe the Department of Education?

Not unilaterally, no. Eliminating the Department of Education would require an act of Congress, and margins in the 119th Congress will most likely be too slim for such a drastic proposal to advance. Even with Republicans' slight Senate majority, they would have to contend with the filibuster and a higher 60-vote threshold for it to pass; and a similar measure in the House failed a 2023 amendment vote, with 60 Republicans and every Democrat voting against it. Dismantling the Department has been a longstanding talking point for conservatives, but the idea does not have a deep well of public support and would need to overcome many hurdles to come to fruition.

OK, but if it *did* happen—what about all the programs the Department runs?

They wouldn't disappear overnight. Any federal funding or program that has been created by Congress would also need to be undone by Congress, and that includes provisions like support for high-poverty Title I K-12 schools authorized in the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, funding for special education and services for students with disabilities established in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, and Pell Grants and federal student loans provided for in the *Higher Education Act*. Many education programs are popular, bipartisan, and offer meaningful benefits for states and local communities (for instance, one in every five K-12 students attends a Title I school), making it unlikely that Congress would want to undo them entirely. If the Department of Education was dissolved, the most likely outcome would be for its responsibilities to be moved around piecemeal to other agencies—say, civil rights enforcement to the Department of Justice or the student lending program to the Treasury Department (so no, federal student loans wouldn't just go away either). Such transformation would undoubtedly be a slow, dysfunctional process, and the disruptions alone could prove harmful to students and public schools by delaying or impeding access to needed federal support.

And if Trump can't abolish the Department... what else may he try?

Let's be clear: the Trump Administration doesn't need to dismantle the Department of Education to wreak havoc on the education system. In his first term, President Trump was an obstructionist when it came to education, repeatedly proposing budget cuts to Department of Education programs and putting up roadblocks to prevent eligible student borrowers from receiving hard-earned benefits like Public Service Loan Forgiveness. In his second term, President-elect Trump has said he plans to defund or transform several major education programs, including a proposal to convert Title I into a

block grant to states with no accountability mechanisms for how it is used (and ultimately eliminate it altogether)—a move that would be disproportionately harmful to low-income students in red states, which spend less on public education and where federal dollars can help mitigate resource disparities. While such fights will in all likelihood unfold with the Department of Education still intact, the threat level is high for core federal education subsidies and services in a second Trump term, and students and public schools across the nation will be in the crosshairs.

TOPICS

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