



Abolish or Reform? The Future of America's Department of Education

Charlisa Penzak

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American students face widening achievement gaps and learning losses intensified by the pandemic, raising concerns about the nation's educational performance in math, reading, and science. At the same time, debates over the role of the federal government, including proposals to reduce or eliminate the Department of Education (ED), have intensified. This brief examines the ED's responsibilities, evaluates its strengths and weaknesses, and explores policy reforms to improve student outcomes and strengthen the nation's education system.

II. OVERVIEW

Currently, the Department of Education administers K-12 funding, manages various student loan programs, enforces civil rights compliance in schools, and collects national education data. On average, the education department provides 6.4% of total funding to K-12 schools and establishes federal standards for student achievement.

The department's role has long been controversial. The Reserved Powers clause in the Tenth Amendment of the Constitution implicitly empowers states and local governments with full

authority over education policy. Due to this precedent, some believe that the power to create education policy should lie exclusively with the states, and view the ED's existence as unconstitutional. Others believe that limited federal involvement is justified to facilitate funding and research at a national scale with resources that many state and local governments lack. At its core, much of this debate centers around broader tensions about the balance of federalism and the consequences of expanded federal power.

A. Relevance

The state of American schools today is on the brink of a crisis. Reading and math performance has fallen to its lowest levels in decades as chronic absenteeism is on the rise. In 2024, only 28% of eighth graders demonstrated proficiency in math, and only 30% in reading. At the same time, widespread teacher shortages are leaving an estimated 400,000 classrooms without qualified educators. Compound this with a mental health crisis and debates about the use of phones/AI in classes, and it's clear how many schools, particularly the most under-resourced, are struggling to meet literacy and math standards, according to Elevate K-12.

Education is critical to ensuring that the next generation can succeed, contribute to society, and

engage in the democratic process as informed citizens and voters. Furthermore, an educated citizenry maintains economic growth and productivity. As competitors like China catch up to the United States in educational attainment and skilled labor, investing in education is a national security priority necessary to sustain America's global hegemony.

III. HISTORY

The first federal department of education was established in 1867 during the post-Civil War Reconstruction to collect national education data. However, the department lasted less than a year before being demoted to an office within the Department of the Interior amid concerns about federal overreach and educating formerly enslaved children.

Jimmy Carter elevated the Office of Education to a formal cabinet department in 1979, as legislation like the 1958 National Defense Education Act and the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act had already significantly expanded the office's role to handle the distribution of new federal education funds. The ED's early years were full of controversy - Ronald Reagan made plans to dismantle the department early in his presidency but eventually gave up due to a lack of congressional support.

A. Current Stances

The Democratic Party indicates in their 2024 platform that they support increased federal investment in education in various areas, including disability and English learner accommodations, STEAM education, student

debt relief, career/technical vocational programs, and hiring more educators/staff.

On the contrary, the Republican Party supports devolving education entirely to the states and argues in their 2024 platform for the elimination of the ED, citing underperformance despite record investments in the ED. The Trump administration has since made moves to dismantle the agency by firing nearly half of its workforce, leaving roughly 2,000 employees responsible for the wide range of ED responsibilities. Democrats have criticized cuts to the Office for Civil Rights, which received a record of 22,500 complaints in FY 2024 with concerns that the weakened ED will not be able to effectively prevent discrimination in schools. Additionally, this administration has made significant cuts to the ED's budget by withholding \$2.5 billion in COVID relief funds and \$6.2 billion in Congressionally approved K-12 funding due to be released in July, amounting for 14% of the agency's budget.

Apart from the partisan positions, there are also many who support reforming the ED short of elimination. A poll from the Wall Street Journal found that 61% of registered voters opposed abolishing the ED entirely.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The main stakeholders in this issue are:

1. Students/families: Most importantly, the ED exists to serve American students. Proponents of the ED argue that it plays an active role in enforcing civil rights and

anti-discrimination laws, distributing federal funds, and collecting data. Opponents believe that the ED's regulations favor public schools compared to non-traditional K-12 education pathways and impose overly broad one-size-fits-all standards.

2. Teachers/Administrators: Educators are directly responsible for upholding the standards and testing requirements set by the ED.
3. Educational institutions: schools and colleges are affected by the ED's regulations and funding policies.

On a broader scale, the general American population has a stake in education, not only because they pay taxes for the ED and public education services, but also because a well-educated citizenry is essential to national competitiveness, democratic participation, and economic prosperity.

B. Risks of Indifference

Critics of the ED, such as former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, argue that despite record investments of over \$80 billion, American students are failing to meet basic literary and mathematics standards. Reflecting this philosophy, the Trump administration has reduced the scope of the Education department to the fullest extent legally possible through staffing and funding cuts. In the status quo, the ED is likely to see further reductions in scope, unless Congress and/or the courts act otherwise. Based on the blueprint outlined in Project 2025, this administration will seek to devolve Education policy to the states, support policies that expand school choice, move student loans to the private

sector, and redistribute the ED's responsibilities to other federal agencies. However, the aforementioned WSJ poll finds that the majority of Americans opposed eliminating the ED. Similarly, when an amendment to a bill that would abolish the ED was on the House floor last year, 60 Republicans joined Democrats in opposition, reflecting the widespread support for federal involvement in education policy. Policymakers should acknowledge the ED's shortcomings, but indifference risks allowing its elimination, potentially reversing decades of progress in educational equity.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Education policy is a nonpartisan concern because it affects every American family, community, and industry. Both parties recognize that education shapes the nation's economic growth, civic engagement, and social mobility. Regardless of whether one supports expanding federal oversight or devolving authority to the states, the ultimate goal is the same: improving outcomes for students. As such, the debate over the Department of Education (ED) is less about ideology and more about implementation.

Both parties can agree that the ED is in need of reform. Many conservatives agree that the federal government should help ensure a minimum standard of quality education, while many liberals share concerns about inefficiency and bureaucracy. Through bipartisan cooperation, the ED can meet the best of both worlds.

V. TRIED POLICY

While critics argue that federal oversight creates

inefficiency and bureaucratic waste, past policy experiments suggest that removing or decentralizing the ED's functions leads to coordination gaps, inconsistent standards, and administrative challenges.

1. **Decentralized Federal Education Functions:** Before the ED became a cabinet-level agency, its functions were scattered across various departments, including Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), as well as the Department of the Interior. This led to inefficiency, duplication of efforts, and inconsistent federal standards across states, which prompted the creation of the ED in 1979. There was no coherent national strategy aimed at improving student achievement and reducing performance gaps between Empirically, delegating education responsibilities to multiple departments could reintroduce bureaucratic confusion and weaken national coordination – problems that the establishment of the ED originally sought to fix.
2. **Expansion of the ED:** Over the decades, the ED has evolved to address new priorities, including special education, equity initiatives, and educator workforce development. The department's growth reflects the increasing complexity of America's educational needs, from higher education affordability to ensuring equal access for marginalized communities. The Government Accountability Office finds that since the ED's creation in 1980, indicators of K-12 student achievement have increased, racial education inequalities decreased, and access to higher education has expanded. The ED's

growth, while imperfect, highlights the support for a centralized agency capable of encompassing new challenges.

3. **Reductions in Scale:** Efforts to limit the ED's influence through Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) proposals and staffing cuts have made tremendous changes to federal education policy by eliminating some bureaucracy and regulations. Since these events are so recent, there is limited evidence to evaluate potential consequences for student performance. However, stakeholders like the National Education Association argue that these cuts are undermining essential services like financial aid management, civil rights protections, and data reporting that states depend on.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Since there is bipartisan support for a federal education agency, legislation that would eliminate the department is unlikely to be viable in the current political climate. Instead, thoughtful restructuring could modernize its functions without dismantling the federal role in education. Reforms should try and eliminate redundancy while ensuring that modern education challenges are met.

There are areas in the ED that could be consolidated to reduce duplicative bureaucracy. For example, the ED could combine the four separate Title I formula grants into a single, simplified grant program. Currently, Title I funding is divided into multiple grants—such as the Basic Grants for schools with high numbers

of low-income students, the Migrant Education Program for children of migrant workers, the Neglected or Delinquent Youth grant, and the School Improvement Grants for struggling schools—each with its own eligibility rules and application process. This separation can make it complicated for schools to access and use the funds efficiently. A consolidated grant would combine all four into one program, giving schools a single source of funding based on the number of disadvantaged students they serve. Schools could then use the money in the way that best supports their students, whether through tutoring, after-school programs, or specialized interventions. By simplifying the process and giving schools more flexibility, a unified grant could make it easier to direct resources where they are most needed, ultimately helping disadvantaged students improve academically.

On the other hand, the ED could expand involvement in certain areas, such as supporting teachers, especially as the national teacher shortage worsens. Teacher quality is one of the most important factors affecting student achievement, yet many schools, especially in low-income or rural areas, struggle to recruit and retain quality educators. The ED can set and support professional development standards to assist current teachers. Additionally, the department could increase funding and initiatives to encourage more interest in education careers. This could look like mentorship programs, collaborating with the National Education Association or the American Federation of Teachers to offer competitive salaries, loan forgiveness, or relocation incentives for teachers in high-need districts. By investing in teacher development, the ED could directly improve

classroom instruction and student outcomes nationwide.

VII. CONCLUSION

The ED plays a critical role in ensuring equitable access to quality education across America. While debates about federalism and efficiency persist, evidence suggests that a well-structured ED can address achievement gaps, support teachers, and support disadvantaged students. By investing in these areas, policymakers can strengthen student outcomes, promote economic prosperity, and uphold the long-term health of American democracy.

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