
Public Education on the Brink

Many of our colleagues are concerned about how schools may be affected by the current actions of the federal government. Here are some comments from a colleague who recently retired from a state department of education:

“The ED distributes billions of dollars in federal funding for K-12 education, special education, higher education, and student financial aid. All of these systems are trying to function, but they don’t know whether to pause hiring, take job postings down, continue to plan implementation of programs or wait. They don’t know how to project local budgets or whether to pause policies changes and new policies, because if the US Department of Education is abolished or if divisions were dissolved or placed in another agency, K-12 state and local leaders wouldn’t know if these funds would either be transferred to state governments, with each state determining how to allocate funds or whether the funding would be restricted or cut entirely, leaving school districts either to make up for the loss through increased taxes or budget adjustments. Programs like Title I and Individuals with IDEA funding could be reduced or eliminated, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged students, so school districts are desperately afraid of that because services to their most fragile students would be compromised and lawsuits against school districts would soar, causing complete chaos. Students and families are filled with fear about federal student loan programs, including Pell Grants, subsidized and unsubsidized loans, and Public Service Loan Forgiven being abolished. Student loan servicing and forgiveness programs could end or transition to private lenders, which would devastate family incomes and especially hit middle class families. Parents and high school seniors are terrified of what is happening and the potential for decisions that will impact students aiming to attend college because parents know that if the only way to go to college is borrowing money from banks, the banks will raise interest rates making college unaffordable for many families. That is having a chilling effect on students, parents, colleges, universities, and businesses and local governments concerned about the impact on the workforce. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process could change or be eliminated, impacting millions of students.

Without ED OCR, protections may fall to individual states, leading to inconsistent protections across states and across school districts. Local school board attorneys are fearful of the resulting legal chaos from inconsistencies. Some school districts will delay hearings and court proceedings to see if OCR will be eliminated because they know there will be fewer resources to investigate discrimination cases. Increased legal battles over student rights, including for LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, and racial minorities will flood the courts, and the courts will be shackled with moving and shifting legal landscapes and new precedencies.

There is a real possibility that standardized testing for accountability purposes could be eliminated or diminished in purpose, and the resulting local accountability measures would vary widely. Data collection on student achievement would become fragmented, making it harder to measure national progress. The threat of reducing or eliminating ED funds for teacher training programs, professional development grants, and teacher loan forgiveness programs has put professional learning and teacher recruitment at a standstill. Fewer

resources will be available to improve teacher quality which will negatively impact teacher retention - a major concern nationally. School districts with lower budgets will struggle to retain and train educators and even provide basic school supplies. Rural and underserved areas will face severe teacher shortages even beyond the current problems they have finding teachers. We are hearing that some prospective teachers are concerned about funding so they are considering other professions.

Proponents of eliminating the ED argue it would lead to more school choice, charter schools, and private school vouchers. However, public school funding for these schools of choice would decrease as states shift toward privatization, which would require local schools to close successful charter schools, and even if they did continue to operate, accountability would be substantially weakened.

School districts have worked hard to address educational inequality but the confusion, decreased funding, limited accountability guidance, teacher shortages, and dwindling resources will make educational inequity unavoidable, especially for students in low-income or rural areas. IDEA enforcement would fall to the states, leading to disparities and fights over funding priorities. Some states may cut special education funding due to budget constraints. Parents may face legal challenges in securing resources for children with disabilities. Superintendents, special education teachers, and parents are scared – not worried; they are scared.

Abolishing the U.S. Department of Education would drastically shift education policy and funding to the state level. While supporters argue it could reduce bureaucracy and increase local control, they should be warned it could lead to disruptions in local school funding, weakened protections for vulnerable students, lower graduation rates, lower teacher retention rates, reduce college enrollment and completion and ultimately undermine the future workforce.

We invite anyone who has something to share about this (direct information or possible implications) to send it to us. We will compile and share with the field and discuss implications for what schools, districts, and state departments of education can do to mitigate damage.

Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu -- looking forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes and be well,

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