

White House plans attack on the Department of Education

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The Trump administration has begun a multi-pronged plan to shut down the US Department of Education (ED) and take control of its \$80 billion budget. The *Washington Post* reported Tuesday that the White House was drafting an executive order to begin the demolition of the department. The next day, billionaire Elon Musk and a team from his “Department of Government Efficiency” (DOGE) were reportedly in the headquarters of the department to begin the process of devising the cuts.

According to the *Post* account, “At least some DOGE staffers have gained access to multiple sensitive internal systems ... including a financial aid dataset that contains the personal information for millions of students enrolled in the federal student aid program.” One of the key functions of the department is to administer the vast loan program for post-secondary education, which accounts for most of the nearly \$2 trillion in student loan debt.

Access to this data would allow the White House to target students engaged in protest activities against Trump administration policies who also have loan balances which would make them vulnerable to retaliatory action.

The Education Department (ED) was established in 1979 by Congress, as part of a large-scale restructuring of federal social programs. The former Department of Health, Education and Welfare was broken up into three separate units: the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Social Security Administration, which operates as an independent federal agency. Head Start, the vastly popular federally subsidized pre-kindergarten program, remained with the Department of Health and Human Services under the 1979 reorganization, and so is not directly affected by the attack on the ED.

The draft executive order reportedly acknowledges that Trump cannot simply shut down the department, because it was created by Congress. Instead, the Trump White House proposes to remove as many functions as possible from the Department of Education, transferring them to other federal agencies while Trump seeks the legislation required to shut it down. Trump said he expects his nominee for Secretary of Education, World Wrestling Entertainment billionaire Linda McMahon, to “put herself out of a job” by overseeing the running down of the department she is to head.

Regardless of the immediate timetable, the Executive Orders and other measures advanced by the oligarchic regime spearheaded by Trump and Elon Musk seek to eviscerate education for the vast

majority, facilitate privatization and dramatically increase profit-taking by education companies. Additionally, they aim to impose patriotic and religious curricula to stifle dissent among educators and students and limit access to higher education, pushing more young people directly into the workforce.

The ED currently employs approximately 4,000 people, the smallest workforce of any federal department, while managing a budget of nearly \$80 billion and overseeing more than \$1.7 trillion in student loans. Its two largest grant programs are Title I, which provides aid to low-income schools at \$21 billion in 2024, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which assists schools in funding special education services and establishing standards, costing \$15 billion. Other services provided by the ED include statistics gathering, educational research, civil rights enforcement, pre-kindergarten student grants and career preparation programs.

In short, the Education Department has expanded access to public education to millions and supplemented the highly discriminatory school funding model based on local property taxes, which has created a chaotic patchwork of districts with wildly varying funding. As a result of years of defunding public education by both Democrats and Republicans, the vast majority of schools are underfunded and feature classes that are too large, a lack of resources and severely underpaid staff. The massive growth of social inequality across the country translates into 63 percent of US public students attending schools deemed “low-income.”

As *EdWeek* recently noted, a key purpose of a shutdown of ED would be to terminate those supports, specifically Title I and IDEA. In fact, last year House Republicans proposed a budget that would have cut funding for Title I schools by 80 percent.

Such threats were all too clear when, on January 28, the administration suspended payments for federal grants and other programs. While the “pause” was temporarily blocked by the courts, the flagrantly illegal and catastrophic measure caused fear and panic among millions of Americans dependent on federal funding. This included school districts serving 49.6 million children across the US.

The following day, Detroit Public Schools Community District Superintendent Nikolai Vitti emailed all staff and parents, stating that should similar “pauses” occur, it would “affect employment,” “school meals,” and “special education,” adding this was only “to name a few” of the implications. He noted that the district received

nearly 32 percent of its total funding from the federal government. This is typical for American city schools qualifying for Title I.

Then late Friday, January 31, at least 60 Department of Education employees received letters placing them on indefinite administrative leave. These staff members had participated in routine diversity training seminars, including in 2019 during Trump's first term. The affected employees include civil rights attorneys handling student discrimination cases and staffers working on artificial intelligence projects in education, student loan regulators, and workers involved with providing individualized education programs for special needs children.

On the same day, Representative Thomas Massie (Republican-Kentucky) reintroduced a bill in the House of Representatives to formally dismantle the Department of Education. The bill, H.R. 899, contains just a single sentence: "The Department of Education shall terminate on December 31, 2026." Similar legislation was introduced in the Senate by Mike Rounds (Republican-South Dakota) last November.

Massie issued a statement, echoing Trump's lies, saying, "Unelected bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. should not be in charge of our children's intellectual and moral development." Given that the ED has no role—by law—in either curriculum development or prescribing standards for schools, such statements are pure demagoguery. The purpose is to conceal the drive by Christian fundamentalists and Trump fascists to promote private religious schools and national-patriotic indoctrination in what public schools remain.

On Tuesday, February 4, Elon Musk's cost-cutting team held an all-hands call with the employees in the department's Office of Civil Rights (OCR). According to a recording of the meeting received by the *New York Times*, some employees were told to expect to lose their jobs and others to "increase efficiencies in OCR and Ed generally."

By "efficiencies," Musk and Trump mean "dismiss[ing] cases expeditiously, consistent with the law and the administration's priorities," according to the recording's text. In other words, employees should make quick work of denying cases involving allegations of racial or sexual discrimination. Instead, the OCR was instructed to refocus its activity on "antisemitism," a term that has been perversely redefined and weaponized to target anti-genocide or anti-Trump teachers and students.

These measures build on his two Executives Orders of January 29. "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling" is a vicious attack on the democratic rights of students, teachers and parents, alleging schools are "imprinting anti-American, subversive, harmful, and false ideologies on our Nation's children." It essentially orders the transformation of K-12 education into a system of patriotic brainwashing.

"Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunity for Families" aims to provide a legal facade for the large-scale diversion of federal funds to support private, for-profit schools and religious instruction. In its legal jargon, it instructs federal agencies to "prioritize school choice initiatives" and, in violation of the separation of church and state, to explore ways to utilize federal funds for faith-based education. It specifically directs the Department of Education to find methods for redirecting Title I

funds from low-income schools toward for-profit and religious educational institutions. The Executive Order also urges the Department of Health and Human Services to "issue guidance explaining how states can use federal childcare subsidy funds to support private and religious options."

In a further coordinated frontal attack on public education, on February 3, Republican lawmakers introduced legislation in both chambers to create a federal tax credit scholarship program. The transparent purpose of these scholarships is to legalize the use of federal dollars for private and parochial schools.

As *EdWeek* explains, these programs provide funding from private donors for families to use on private school tuition. The private donors, either individuals or corporations, donate to nonprofits known as "scholarship-granting organizations" and receive federal tax deductions in return. Subsequently, these funds are distributed to students (typically family members) as "scholarships." While such programs currently operate in most US states, federalizing the system would drastically increase their scale. The proposed bills allocate \$10 billion annually for these questionable "scholarships."

While using the ED's powers to promote backwardness and conformity, Trump and the oligarchy aim to grab as much money as possible from the approximately \$770 billion spent annually on K-12 education. As education reformer Jonathan Kozol noted, for the financial industry, "education ... represents the final frontier of a number of sectors once under public control" and, therefore, the largest "market opportunity" since healthcare services were privatized in the 1970s. Quoting a banking analyst, Kozol said, "The K-12 market is the Big Enchilada."

Finally, turning to the \$1.7 trillion loan portfolio currently held by the Department of Education, Musk and Trump seek to reorganize and possibly end federal student loans. They have floated the idea of moving the portfolio to Treasury with the shutdown of the ED. No matter whose jurisdiction the loans will fall under, the aim is to cut costs to the federal government.

The net effect will be to force young people and their families to take out expensive private loans or forgo college, intensely deepening the class divide by putting college out of reach for many. According to a 2024 Sallie Mae survey, 31 percent of college students already consider dropping out due to financial challenges.



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