

Amid unprecedented attacks on public education, teacher unions launch “email Congress” campaign

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Public education is under existential attack, with the Department of Education (ED) already being dismantled by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and with the imminent installation of Trump acolyte and privatization advocate Linda McMahon as Secretary of Education.

As of this date, more than 100 Department of Education employees have been let go, and approximately \$900 million has been cut, severely impacting the department’s research arm, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Among the immediate studies being affected are those that track student learning from kindergarten through high school, research evaluating strategies for teaching elementary school reading, and evaluations on the effectiveness of support for youth with disabilities.

Last week, the Education Department eliminated two major teacher training programs. The department terminated the Teacher Quality Partnerships program, which had an annual budget of \$70 million, and the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants, which were allocated \$80 million per year.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the Trump team has already drafted an executive order eliminating the Department of Education which they plan to release after McMahon is confirmed as secretary. “The Department of Education’s a big con job,” Trump told reporters on February 12, saying he would “like it to be closed immediately.”

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP) last week advanced the nomination of McMahon with a vote along party lines of 12-11. This is expected to be ratified by a full vote of the Senate in the coming days. At her February 13 hearing in front of the HELP committee, the billionaire wrestling industry executive denounced the Department of Education, saying it was responsible for “the vast majority of bureaucracy and red tape” in the nation’s educational system. She also endorsed the agency’s breakup and said, “The bottom line is, because it’s not working.”

While acknowledging that only Congress can close the Department of Education, McMahon stated that federal oversight of public schools is unnecessary because it “is best handled at the state level, closest to the states, working with state administrators, teachers and parents, who should have input into their curriculum.”

Throughout the hearing McMahon reiterated her staunch support for major expansion of school privatization efforts. Supporting the comments by Republican Senator Jon Husted from Ohio that “freedom and choice is good ... for markets and business” and that schools should be treated the same, McMahon added that school choice is one of the cornerstones of the Trump administration’s policy

on education. She cynically claimed that “school choice” makes schools “more competitive” and provides families with an opportunity to leave underfunded public schools.

Some state budgets are already shifting funds from public schools to voucher and school choice programs after Trump’s recent executive order promoting the diversion of public funds to for-profit charters, private and parochial schools. In Ohio, \$100 million is slated to be cut over two years while increasing funds for vouchers. Tennessee recently enacted a \$447 million statewide school choice program.

For their part, the Democrats have bent over to accommodate the attacks on public education. Bernie Sanders, the HELP committee’s ranking delegate for the minority party, said, “Is it [the Department of Education] a perfect entity? No. Is it bureaucratic? Yes. Can we reform it? Yes. Should we abolish it? No.” Senator Tim Kaine, a Democrat from Virginia, likewise said he found areas of agreement with McMahon. However, he said he would not vote for someone “who will willfully engage in the destruction of the very agency she wants to lead.”

The Democrats continue to seek common ground with McMahon, a figure who will lead the Trump administration’s unprecedented attacks on public education. At first claiming that McMahon was “elegantly gaslighting” the committee, Senator Maggie Hassan (D-New Hampshire) made certain to emphasize the bipartisan support for expanding Career and Technical Education (CTE) in schools, and her willingness to work with McMahon.

At the hearing, McMahon reiterated the threat to deny federal funding to schools. After several senators asked what will happen to the funding for K-12 schools the Department of Education administers such as Title I and IDEA, McMahon claimed that funds approved by Congress would be distributed. She added, however, that “it is worthwhile to take a look at the programs before money goes out the door.”

During questioning, she refused to answer whether teaching African American history would target a school district for a reduction or cut off of federal funding. Responding to a question about whether IDEA funds would be cut, McMahon said residents “should not be concerned that Federal funding is going away from their schools” and that only “how they get that funding may change.”

McMahon said IDEA funds would likely be distributed by the department of Health and Human Services (HHS). “I think that funding could very well go back to HHS where it started.” HHS is now headed by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a notorious supporter of anti-science and anti-vaccine disinformation. Placing IDEA funds in the

hands of HHS and RFK Jr. will have enormous negative impacts for students leaving students with disabilities vulnerable to inconsistent state-level support.

McMahon also backed Trump's fascistic attacks on democratic rights of students and teachers. Fascist Republican Senator Josh Hawley from Montana, railed against students who protested on campuses against the Israeli genocide, during his time for questioning. McMahon reassured Senator Hawley that she will absolutely enforce Title VI investigations on campuses, remove funds from these universities, and deport student protesters with visas.

The Trump administration's unprecedented assault on public education is exacerbating the already dire situation faced by schools across the United States. This attack follows decades of underfunding by both parties, which continued under the Biden administration. District officials cite declining enrollment and birth rates, as well as the ending of COVID-relief funding as pretexts for slashing jobs, vital programs, and closing schools.

The latest announcements of cuts paint a grim picture of the ongoing assault on public education:

- **Socorro Independent School District in El Paso, Texas**, is eliminating over 300 positions, gutting its elementary arts program, and increasing class sizes.

- **Anchorage School District in Alaska** is axing middle school sports, high school gymnastics, swimming and hockey, gifted student programs and cutting over 200 teaching positions.

- **San Francisco Unified School District** has unveiled plans for mass layoffs that may result in the elimination of over 800 positions to slash \$100 million from its budget.

These cuts come on the heels of the Biden administration's decision to end COVID-19 relief funds, with the deadline for the last installment of ESSER II funds expiring on September 30, 2024. Just last week, the Department of Education's acting Secretary Denise Carter announced updated policies requiring districts to pay for expenditures upfront before seeking reimbursement from the remaining \$4.4 billion in state COVID-19 relief funding. This move will cause further cuts, intensifying the crisis in public education and helping to pave the way for privatization schemes favored by the ruling class.

There is enormous anger among teachers and school workers to the unparalleled attacks on public education. Protesters gathered outside the HELP committee hearing to protest Trump's cuts and attacks on democratic rights. Mass protests have erupted in multiple cities in opposition to the federal employee layoffs, many of whom worked in the Department of Education. Thousands of teachers, school workers, and students have walked out of classrooms and participated in protests against Trump's fascistic anti-immigrant policies. School board rooms continue to be flooded with opposition from teachers and families as budget cuts continue to be announced across the country.

Fully aware of the major opposition among teachers, the leaders of the national teachers unions are attempting to divert and smother teachers' anger into dead-end campaigns of appealing to state and federal legislators—the very same people who have carried out the bipartisan assault on public education for years, if not decades.

The National Education Association (NEA), the largest trade union in the US with over 3 million members, launched its "Protect Public Schools" campaign encouraging teachers to call their senators to vote no on McMahon and to email Congress to "pushback against executive overreach."

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), with 1.8 million

members, launched a near-identical campaign called "Protect Our Kids." The PR campaign includes spending teachers' dues money to buy advertising space in New York's Times Square to complain that Trump has broken his promises. It also calls on teachers to "pressure decision makers," "share real-life stories of educators" with the media and hold rallies or press conferences in their areas on March 4 for a "day of action."

There is not the slightest suggestion that a "day of action" should involve millions of educators withholding the collective labor and appealing to broader sections of workers to follow suit to defeat Trump's dictatorial measures.

On the contrary, Weingarten has repeatedly made the point that she has personally begged Trump to rethink his policies. She is now suggesting that teachers get on their knees and beg too. Such demoralizing appeals are worse than useless. Trump and Musk are part of, and speak for the oligarchy, which is hostile to the concerns of working people and determined to destroy their Constitutional and democratic rights.

This historic attack will not be defeated by begging but only by a powerful movement of the working class. Such a movement is already developing. But educators cannot allow this movement to be diverted behind another campaign to reelect Democrats in the 2026 Congressional elections.

Instead, educators must build new organizations of struggle, controlled by the ranks and free from the interference of union bureaucrats. This means expanding the network of educators rank-and-file committees into every school and neighborhood, and linking together with rank-and-file postal and other federal employees, healthcare, logistics and industrial workers.

Educators rank-and-file committees in Michigan, New York, California and other areas, which are affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), are fighting to unite educators, parents, students and the broader sections of workers. They are assisting educators in organizing protests, strikes and other forms of collective action to connect the fight to defend immigrant students and families with the fight to defend public education.



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