2 December 2024 / Wrestling with the Education Department

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <8 bit adventure - BMC>

NOEL KING (host): Senator Mike Rounds, Republican, South Dakota, remember the name, just introduced a bill that would abolish the Department of Education.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Xq9uqeqHD0)*> SQUAWK BOX, SEN. MIKE ROUNDS (R-SD): States, for the most part, prefer to make their decisions on how they educate children on their own. They really don’t need a bureaucrat in Washington DC sending out a one-size-fits-all policy in order to receive federal funding…<fade>*

NOEL: It matters because Rounds has a powerful ally on this one–

[*<CLIP>*](https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=0768fee8cae7caeb&q=donald+trump+department+of+education&udm=7&fbs=AEQNm0Aa4sjWe7Rqy32pFwRj0UkWtG_mNb-HwafvV8cKK_h1a_E5MH716yh2H_1TpHARmCiVCw022gDEg-sSnOQiw60SOL6tdrngu0JpTr6UuONpex4bQjiZX9ILLS8anBO81_czrHoT1IizzHScQziRGqxAwqI4beAYLCWK2uvkBb-nm0GKwiBck_JhfNbQ5XCR6TtMHTtXVshm17vKyEFTl8kswFm84w&sa=X&sqi=2&ved=2ahUKEwjIveGwqfqJAxXzFmIAHZLSKqIQtKgLegQIFRAB&biw=1479&bih=865&dpr=2#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:0b2eb452,vid:f16sX-uJiHI,st:0) *PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD TRUMP: We’re gonna end education coming out of Washington DC. We’re gonna close it up, all those buildings all over the place… <fade>*

NOEL: Can it be done?

*<CLIP> ERICA MELTZER, CHALKBEAT: It would require an act of Congress to get rid of the Department of Education. I don't know that there's enough support among Republicans. There’s certainly not 60 votes in the Senate to do it, so as long as we have a filibuster, I think it's probably not happening.*

NOEL: Then WHY has the idea held such appeal for forty years? On *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> PERSON: What do you think today, explained is?   
CHILD: I don’t know. SFX*

ERICA: So I'm Erica Meltzer and I'm the national editor at *Chalkbeat*. And *Chalkbeat* is a nonprofit news organization dedicated to education coverage.

NOEL: Perfect. All right. For those of us in the back of the classroom, what is the Department of Education and what does it do?

ERICA: So the Department of Education is a cabinet-level federal agency that provides support to schools. They oversee Title 1 funding, which provides billions of dollars to high-poverty schools. They provide information about best practices and a certain amount of oversight of low- performing schools. They also run financial aid programs for higher education. And they're responsible for civil rights enforcement, which I, I think is something that we'll probably talk about later in the show.

NOEL: So Linda McMahon is Donald Trump's pick for education secretary. What do we know about her? What are her qualifications?

ERICA: Well, she doesn't have a lot of education experience. She did serve briefly on the Connecticut State Board of Education in 2009 and 2010, and she served on the board of Sacred Heart University, which is a private Roman Catholic university. But she's primarily known as one of the founders of WWE, the wrestling entertainment empire that she founded with her husband, Vince McMahon.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7h55ai5Oay4)*> STONE COLD THEME*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VD0O2fqSlU)*> ANNOUNCER: Linda just slapped the taste out of her daughter’s mouth. Her own daughter!*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcRK5WIYg9U)*> LINDA MCMAHON: On behalf of the entire McMahon family: you’re fired!*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcRK5WIYg9U)*> VINCE MCMAHON: My wife! Linda McMahon!*

*<VO> Producer PBR pitch shifted: STONE COLD LINDA*

ERICA: And she has been very much in the Trump orbit.

SCORING <A Spiral Staircase (hip hop, beat, drums, forward momentum)-02>

ERICA: Trump made some appearances in professional wrestling.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NsrwH9I9vE)*> DONALD TRUMP: What’s going on over here?  
ANNOUNCER: Donald Trump is in a world he is unfamiliar with…*

ERICA: They've known each other for decades.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHMJViA3otQ)*> MCMAHON: We had had a couple of business interactions with WWE and a couple of the properties that then Donald Trump, Mr. Trump, owned and that WWE promoted in those facilities and it was a very good working relationship.*

ERICA: She served in his first administration at the head of the Small Business Administration.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YUqaTSvlqk)*> MCMAHON: As an entrepreneur myself, I have shared the experiences of our nation's small business owners. We are more than our products and services. We are people. We are families.*

ERICA: And she's involved in both the think tank and super PAC that spent a lot of money to help get Donald Trump elected. And she co-chairs his transition team. So she's very much a pick that comes from this sort of inner orbit of Trump loyalists.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7Z2fl627_Q)*> McMahon: He has the heart of a lion and the soul of a warrior, and I believe that if necessary he would stand at the gates of hell to defend our country.*

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Okay, So not a ton of experience in education. Some, but not a ton. A lot more experience in wrestling…

*<VO> Producer PBR pitch shifted: STONE COLD LINDA*

NOEL: …and with small business. What are Donald Trump's priorities when it comes to education?

ERICA: It's worth kind of saying at the outset that that education has not actually been a huge part of, of his campaign.You know, he has talked a lot about abolishing the Department of Education.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TqMek9evXs)*> TRUMP: …and sending all education and education work and needs back to the states.*

ERICA: And he's talked a lot about getting, quote unquote, “woke” out of education. It's not entirely clear what that means or what that would look like.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8p6zZZ3DPGE)*> TRUMP: I have concepts of a plan*

ERICA: He's talked about promoting a more patriotic civics education.

*<SFX> FLAGS FLAPPING*

SCORING <4th\_of\_July\_Woodwinds\_-\_Orchestral\_1603\_-\_High\_Energy\_APM-04>

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TqMek9evXs)> TRUMP: Teach students to love their country not to hate their country like they’re taught right now…

*<SFX> Eagle cry*

ERICA: He's talked about a very stripped-down federal role. And he's also talked a lot about getting rid of woke and DEI practices in higher education and using the accreditation process to to push changes in higher education.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aW_wnSP7dAA)*> TRUMP: These standards will include defending the American tradition and Western Civilization protecting Free Speech eliminating wasteful administrative positions that drive up costs incredibly, removing all Marxist diversity equity and inclusion bureaucrats… <fade>*

SCORING <#DoYourJobDoSomeResearch (minimal kick, polyrhythm, moving forward, figuring things out)-01>

ERICA: So the Department of Education is responsible for ensuring that students’ civil rights are protected at school. So under the Biden administration, Title 9 protections on the basis of gender identity were made clearer and more explicit. And a lot of Republicans and conservatives have reacted to that as an example of government overreach that they believe would endanger cisgender girls who might have to share a restroom with a transgender classmate, or that it might impede the free speech of a teacher who doesn't believe that transgender identity is a thing and that teacher wants to keep using the the previous names and pronouns of a student. Republicans have said that they are going to roll these back. And then if you have a school where, you know, Black boys make up 10% of the student body, but they make up half of the kids being suspended… Things like that might be scrutinized as potential civil rights violations. Republicans have wanted to treat civil rights as a much more individualized type of concern, like was someone being called a slur and and the school didn't do anything about it.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Okay. So there's stuff that Donald Trump has said and there's stuff that Linda McMahon has said. What has she said?

ERICA: Linda McMahon, through this America First Policy Institute, has been an advocate for school choice.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYgbs1OL90k)*> NBC: the organization's education goals include more vouchers for school choice and giving parents more say over curriculum.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/video/?538464-1/house-speaker-johnson-delivers-remarks-america-policy-institute)*> JOHNSON: Parents deserve the chance to send their children to the school that best meets each child’s needs.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTKhUFLfblc)*> PBS: What I think we’re really seeing is we're seeing a push from the Republican Party and from the Trump administration away from public schools and into private schools, whether they're religious or not.*

ERICA: Recently we've seen a big expansion of private school choice in which families can get vouchers, that they can either apply against tuition or in some cases an education savings account that they can apply against home school expenses. And so families are getting public money that would have otherwise gone to presumably a public school that their child would have been attending, but now they can take that money and use it elsewhere. This has been a really big priority for Republicans. And in about a dozen states in the last couple years, we've seen a major expansion of private school choice that used to be primarily for kids who were sort of seen as, as poorly served by public schools.And now we're getting into a situation where in some states, just about any family at any income level is eligible. And the fear is that this is taking money out of public school systems that really can't afford it and need all the resources that they can. What proponents would say back is, ‘Well, you haven't done a good job controlling the quality of public schools, and if my child is not going there, there's no reason to expect that, that my tax dollars would go to that school.’ But i think there's a concern that we're moving from public education as a collective good to something that’s… where the parental choice is sort of the supreme driving factor.

NOEL: Tell me how likely it is she can get some of these priorities accomplished.

ERICA: So I think there's a few things that, that could be done. I mean, I think some of the big things that Trump talked about on the campaign trail, some of those things like changes in civil rights enforcement, could happen at a much more administrative level. Getting rid of the Department of Education would require an act of Congress and I think would be controversial. And I'm not sure that all Republicans even agree with that. So I think that's seen as less likely. And I think some of the stuff around like getting “woke” out of education, sort of what the actual mechanics of that would be are a little hard to imagine. But the actual sort of mechanisms of controlling things at the classroom level are a little less clear.

NOEL: All right Linda McMahon will also have to be confirmed by the US Senate if she's going to get the job. What can we expect to hear during her Senate confirmation?

ERICA: Yeah, I mean, I expect that we'll hear a lot of questions about her experience or lack thereof. I think that she'll be pressed on whether she supports this goal of getting rid of the Department of Education. And then she's also named in a lawsuit against WWE, against her wrestling company, that these teenage boys who were recruited to work as ring boys experienced sexual abuse~~.~~

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_zOYkZZp8Q)*> 11 ALIVE: 5 men who were between 13 and 15 years old at the time say they were taken advantage of. McMahon denies the claims, but the lawsuit says she failed to protect the kids.*

ERICA: I do expect that that will come up in her confirmation hearing. How much of an issue that is? I would say I think we're still learning what the bar is for the set of cabinet picks, like obviously Matt Gaetz is out – that's kind of a more extreme example. There are other allegations against some of his other cabinet picks. And I think I think we're sort of in a process of learning what kind of standard his picks will be held to.

SCORING <Day Trip 1 (granular synthesis, relaxed, beats, spacey)-03>

ERICA: I would be surprised if people really want to go to the mat to try and block this nomination unless something more significant comes out between now and January or February.

NOEL: Erica Meltzer of *Chalkbeat*. Coming up: the long history of trying to kill the DoE.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> TEX THEME, IN SCHOOL BELLS*

NOEL: *Today, Explained* is back with *Chalkbeat*’s Erica Meltzer who reminds us that the Department of Education was founded - following a campaign promise to a big teacher’s union - by President Jimmy Carter in 1979.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZjMMZ_FRfM)*> FORMER PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER, 1980 STATE OF THE UNION: We move into the 1980s with confidence and hope, and a bright vision of the America we want: an America with jobs and good health and… good education for every citizen… <fade>*

ERICA: And the hope there was that by having a standalone federal department that you would get more money and more attention on public education. But we have had public education for at least 100 years before that, and we would continue to have public education after that. Most funding for public education comes from state and local sources. That said, the federal government provides 8 to 10% of funding. And this money is particularly important in high-poverty schools, where Title 1 funds help them do things like hire more social workers, keep class sizes small, hire classroom aides, provide tutoring in reading and math. And I think schools would definitely notice the lack of this funding if it went away. And I think there's you know, depending on your political view, I think there's other things that the Department of Education does that that people find valuable and that would be missed. The other thing that's important to discuss is that it's really unclear what would come after getting rid of the Department of Education. So, for example, there's sort of different levels of detail in different plans. So if you look at Project 2025, they go sort of function by function by function of the Department of Education, and they say, “This function should go to the Department of Justice,” like civil rights enforcement. “This function should go to the Department of Labor.” “This function should go to Department of Health and Human Services.” “And this function should go away entirely.” If we start to talk about Republicans in Congress. I think you will find a range of views and not everyone will agree that we should get rid of the Department of Education and not everyone will agree what that should look like.

NOEL: Alright, so, Erica, what you're telling us is that Donald Trump is not the first conservative to say the Department of Education is a problem and we want to shut it down. When the Department of Education was first created and in the ensuing years. What has the Republican argument against it looked like and sounded like?

SCORING <A Simple Revenge>

ERICA: So Ronald Reagan is elected basically right after the Department is created. And he had promised that he was going to get rid of it. He thought it was a bad idea.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJeoYU_6R4s)*> FORMER PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN, 1983 RADIO ADDRESS: Better education doesn’t mean a bigger Department of Education. In fact, that department should be abolished. Instead, we must do a better job teaching the basics… <fade>*

ERICA: And then his first education secretary commissions this report, “A Nation at Risk,” that outlines all these problems in education and how the United States is going to be at a disadvantage on the world stage because our students aren't graduating knowing enough. And that makes it really hard to get rid of the Department of Education because clearly we need to… fix this problem.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Odq-L8avVAM)*> REAGAN, LATER 1983 RADIO ADDRESS: For the sake of all our children, our country, and our future, we must join together in a national campaign to restore excellence in American education.*

ERICA: And so that was, you know, more than 40 years ago, and we still have a Department of Education. Under George W Bush, you saw this articulation of a somewhat conservative, but also bipartisan, idea of the role of the federal government, where there was supposed to be a lot of accountability for schools based on their test scores. If students weren't making progress, there was going to be consequences for those schools. This was No Child Left Behind.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNzOmgGXXuI)*> FORMER PRESIDENT GEORGE W BUSH: As of this hour, America’s schools will be on a new path of reform…. and a new path of results.*

ERICA: There turned out to be a fair number of challenges with implementation and actually making progress under this. I don't think there's really any defenders of No Child Left Behind anymore. Everyone says they would have, I think, done it differently if they could do it again. But that is sort of the beginning of this enhanced federal role in school accountability that takes a new form under Obama...

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VQYAkMD7HE)*> FORMER PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: And here’s how Race to the Top works: // First, we encouraged states to adopt more challenging standards that will actually prepare our kids for college and their careers. We also encouraged schools to adopt better assessments.*

ERICA: There’s actually a huge Republican backlash to this. And I think to some degree, sort of the most current iteration of Republican ideas around education, I think to some degree still tied to this backlash to the Obama policies. People say like, ‘We're not – You're not going to tell us what to do…’

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rF8opmQLG9c)*> REP. LAMAR ALEXANDER (R-TN): The question is whether we believe Congress oughta write the laws, or the United States Department of Education oughta write the laws. Article I of the United States Constitution says: that the United States Congress – WE should write the laws.*

SCORING OUT

ERICA: So there's a couple different issues in play. Some of this is, is just philosophical, ideological. ‘We favor smaller government. We favor a more constrained federal role. And education is primarily a local issue. So we shouldn't have a federal Department of Education.’

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBSNJ-Ew-ko)*> SEN. RAND PAUL (R-KY): 90, 95% of your education dollars are state and local. That $100B gets swirled around in a big bureaucracy up there. They send rules down that don’t help education. They hinder innovation. I’d cut ‘em out of the loop. I don’t think you’d notice if the whole department was gone tomorrow.   
DAVID AXELROD: Um…   
PAUL: We might have a disagreement on that. HAWHAWHAW.*

ERICA: And then some of it has to do with specific things that the department has done. So, for example, a lot of conservatives really disagree with the approach to civil rights and foreign enforcement under Democratic administrations. And of course, when they take control, they can change how civil rights enforcement is handled. But then if the Democrats come back in, then you get the Democratic approach again. And so let's just, you know, get rid of the department. And then I think…You know, people will point to the fact that many of the problems in education are very persistent and haven't necessarily improved a lot, like things like, gaps between racial and ethnic groups in test scores and graduation rates, that these things have been very stubborn, probably because they're closely tied to socioeconomic issues. I mean, child poverty is a huge predictor of how kids do in school, and we have not solved child poverty. But what conservatives will say is like, look, we're spending all this money and we're not getting anything for it, so let's get rid of the department. But what kind of counters that is that if you're saying that that school – that education's very important – and and schools aren't doing a good job, then that also kind of calls out for a federal role to fix it. And so I think that's why it's been a little bit hard to let go of the Department of Education, sort of regardless of your political perspective.

NOEL: When you talk about the Department of Education screwing things up, one of the things that – even if you don't have kids, even if you're not paying very careful attention – one of the things I think you may know about is the mess up with Fafsa.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J99RBPHz1Po)*> CBS EVENING NEWS: This is the time of the year when many high school seniors choose their college, but millions are in limbo, still waiting to hear how much financial aid they can expect…*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wl-TFraILEA)*> CBS NEWS: …This year, frustration, as improvements to the application caused a slew of technical problems and processing delays.*

ERICA: Yeah. So the Fafsa is the federal financial aid form. And it's pretty much the prerequisite to qualify for any kind of aid. It was notoriously complicated. It made people cry and feel very upset. And so they decided to simplify it. But in the process of simplifying it, they also decided, ‘We need to update all these computer systems, some of which are 40 and 50 years old.’ But this whole kind of massive IT update was not doable in the timeframe. And so the Faf– the new Fafsa launched and people encountered a lot of technical problems, I mean, I had a senior in high school filling out the form and for, for like a minor technical issue, our form got held up for months and months and months.

NOEL: Ooh.

ERICA: The normal decision date for college passed, and we didn't know what our financial aid package was going to be because our form had not been processed.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wl-TFraILEA)*> PAIGE, STUDENT: Without these award packages, I can’t make my final decision, which is ultimately delaying me getting to the finish line.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@ktrinatalks/video/7350121383294274847?q=FAFSA%20mess%202024&t=1732642574552)*> TIKTOK: Whoever modified or adjusted the Fafsa process for this year. Mm-mm. No ma’am. No sir. What in the WORLD were you thinking?*

ERICA: It was something that touched a lot of families, including, you know, a lot of sort of middle class families that don't necessarily otherwise have a lot of dissatisfaction. And I think it just fueled this idea that it's a bureaucratic mess, that people don't really know what they're doing over there.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_cIC--Qvpw)*> SEN BILL CASSIDY (R-LA): This should not be partisan. It is about the students. It is about the parents. It is about the integrity of a process that the Department of Education has totally failed at.*

NOEL: Erica, let me run a thought past you. Clearly, as you've laid out, people have been talking about big changes to the Department of Education for years, and not that much has actually changed. Why are we still entertaining the idea that a new president could come in, appoint a secretary, and blow the whole thing up?

ERICA: I mean, Donald Trump is, is not someone who kind of plays by the normal rules of government or abides by the traditional norms. And we also have the role of Project 2025, which was written by the Heritage Foundation by a numb–… a lot of the authors were people who worked in his first administration, and so I think to some degree, the aftermath of the pandemic where we see these really heated fights at school boards and just sort of this general dissatisfaction with education. And we have this really strong conservative parents rights movement, and so I think for people who have wanted this for a long time, you know, for decades, it was just a line in the platform that no one really thought about. And now it feels like there's some energy around the idea that people are talking about it in a new way.

SCORING <Pages Turning #1>

ERICA: And I actually feel like since the election, I've even noticed a slight shift in the language that people use – conservatives, I mean. So it used to be “we're going to dismantle the Department of Education.” And now I sometimes hear people say “we're going to dismantle *or diminish* the Department of Education.” And so you could… I think it might be more likely that we keep the Department of Education, but that some of its functions are stripped away, that it has a more diminished role. And I think that would be more politically achievable as well.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Erica Meltzer of *Chalkbeat*. Amanda Lewellyn and Peter Balonon-Rosen produced today’s show. We were edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, Kim Eggleston, and Anouck Dussaud. Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir are our engineers. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]