

Trump administration's layoffs would gut department overseeing special education, eliminating parents' last resort

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A sign marks the outside of the Department of Education headquarters in Washington, D.C.

J. David Ake/Getty Images

A federal judge on Oct. 16, 2025, paused the Trump administration's latest round of layoffs, which targeted more than 4,000 federal workers at a range of agencies, including 466 workers at the Department of Education.

U.S. District Judge Susan Illston said that the administration's layoffs, which it has justified because of a lapse of funding during the government shutdown, are "both illegal and in excess of authority" and called them "arbitrary and capricious." The Trump administration is expected to appeal the judge's decision.

The Trump administration first eliminated about half of the Department of Education's more than 4,200 positions in March 2025. This latest round of cuts would eliminate almost all of the work of the remaining Department of Education offices, including that of the Office of Special Education Programs. OSEP is responsible for ensuring children with disabilities across the U.S. receive a free, appropriate public education, as required by federal law.

Amy Lieberman, the education editor at The Conversation U.S., spoke with Josh Cowen, a scholar of education policy, to understand how these cuts would hinder the educational opportunities for children with special needs.



People rally in front of the Department of Education to protest budget cuts on March 13, 2025.

Kayla Bartkowski/Getty Images

What would these cuts mean for parents, children and schools?

With these cuts, we are talking about getting rid of some really important positions. People in these roles serve kids and families across the country. They help them answer questions about how school districts are providing for their children, in the way they are legally required to, if their child has special needs.

Special education is a very broad category. Under the Department of Education, it encompasses everything from dyslexia to a child who is blind. There is no educational need so severe that a child is not entitled to free and adequate education.

When navigating challenges related to your child's special needs education, you really need an advocate – in the legal sense of the term rather than the political one. You need someone whose job it is to take your call and walk you through options, or just document your call and start an inquiry into your case.

What does the Office of Special Education Programs do?

The Office of Special Education Programs is part of the Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, which has about 179 employees. The government spent more than US\$20 billion on its work from April 2024 through March 2025, making the broader Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services the third-largest branch of the Education Department, in terms of spending.

There are very strong federal legal obligations – and often state ones, too – for schools to serve kids with whatever need they have. This office's main job is to be a resource to parents for their child's education, particularly if parents feel they are not having these legal obligations met.

Let's say a child with autism is in school. Their parent does not believe the school district is providing the accommodations that their child is legally entitled to. The school district disagrees and thinks the child is doing well in school. When things get fuzzy about what a child's needs actually are, or parents feel they are being ignored, OSEP can help parents learn what their options are, and then can even become involved and serve as an arbitrator to figure out the best course of action.

Sometimes, public school districts and state departments of education have very clear, accessible ways for parents to receive information about their rights and obtain instructions for putting together an individualized education plan for their child. If those rights are not met, states may open an investigation into the matter to ensure compliance.

Throughout this process, parents may seek support and guidance from OSEP to make sure state investigations into special education cases are being done and being done well.

What could these investigations result in?

The Department of Education can help hold states and districts accountable and push districts and schools to be more responsive. In the best-case scenario, additional or tailored programming and support – whether it is a teacher's aide or something else – can come from an OSEP investigation.



U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon, center, speaks during a cabinet meeting at the White House on Aug. 26, 2025.

Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images

What does your research show about the impact of cutting services like these?

Well, we don't really know what happens when you gut OSEP because no one has tried to gut OSEP before.

But it's safe to say that parents will get really frustrated. I have been contacted by parents who have shared heartbreaking examples of the special education system not working over the past couple of years.

Feeling like the education system is really not serving you can push parents to leave the public school system and consider homeschooling or private options. In the long run, this may actually make parents even worse off because those sectors have have no obligation at all to serve students with special needs. So what's happening at the U.S. Department of Education right now is not only creating more dissatisfaction and distrust in the system as it stands, but it's also going to leave parents and kids with fewer options to get the support they need.

Josh Cowen ran for Congress as a Democrat prior to ending his campaign and returning to research and teaching during the fall of 2025.

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