



## Linda McMahon led WWE and the SBA. The U.S. Education Dept. may be next

FEBRUARY 8, 2025 · 5:00 AM ET



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Donald Trump's nominee to lead the U.S. Education Department, Linda McMahon, seen here in December, has come out in support of school choice and "parental rights in education," and in opposition to "political indoctrination in classrooms."

*Anna Moneyraker/Getty Images*

It's [common practice](#) for U.S. secretaries of education to [come](#) from a [background](#), in, well, [education](#). That includes [Betsy DeVos](#), President Donald Trump's previous, headline-grabbing education secretary, who had a well-documented record when it came to schools.

But Trump's current nominee for that position, Linda McMahon, bucks the trend. McMahon has a limited background in education, and a long career as a business executive.

She led World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), and served on Connecticut's State Board of Education for about a year, before heading the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) for about two years during Trump's first term. She [left the federal government](#) in 2019 to chair the pro-Trump Super PAC America First Action, and currently serves in leadership roles at the [America First Policy Institute](#) (AFPI), a

think-tank staffed by veterans of Trump's first White House team.



#### EDUCATION

### Trump is weighing big cuts to the U.S. Education Department

Up until recently, not much was known about McMahon's policy positions on education. But in January, AFPI [shared more](#) about where she stands: McMahon supports "parental rights in education," the expansion of school choice beyond district boundaries, career and technical education programs, and prioritizing "evidence-based learning" in core subjects like math and reading. She opposes "political indoctrination in classrooms," and "one-size-fits-all education models." More broadly, McMahon aims to uplift local control of schools and reduce "the Federal Education Bureaucracy."



President Donald Trump participates in a cabinet meeting in 2018, during his first presidential term. At the time, Linda McMahon (right) was leading the U.S. Small Business Administration.  
*Evan Vucci/AP*

If confirmed, Linda McMahon would oversee an agency the president has [already moved to diminish](#). The administration has placed dozens of Education Department employees on paid administrative leave with little explanation. The White House has also confirmed the president's plans to shutter department programs that are not protected by law and his plans to call on Congress to close the department entirely.

McMahon would also inherit an agency [that has struggled](#), under Secretary Miguel Cardona, to launch big initiatives (from broad-based student loan forgiveness to the revamped Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA) in the face of flat-funding from Congress.

To learn more about the person who may soon become the next education secretary, NPR spoke with several people who have either spent time with McMahon over the years or know her work. We also spoke with two former U.S. education secretaries for their views on the job's necessary qualifications and their advice for leading the department. NPR requested an interview with Linda McMahon several times and did not get a response.



#### EDUCATION

#### **A guide to what the U.S. Education Department does (and doesn't) do**

Many of McMahon's former colleagues described her as a hard-working, energetic, clear-eyed leader who knows how to rely on a team of subject-matter experts to get any job done.

Her critics fear she is an unqualified choice for education secretary — one who helped build a scandal-ridden sports media empire in the WWE alongside her husband, Vince McMahon.

### **Decades leading WWE**

Originally from North Carolina, Linda McMahon got her start as a business leader in the 1970s when she and her husband invested in a construction company. That venture ended in bankruptcy, according to a [2017 interview](#) McMahon gave to CNBC. Their careers took a turn in the 1980s, when they took over a company that would become the multi-billion-dollar business now known as WWE. Today, it [reaches nearly 90 million](#) U.S. households.

"My husband and I built our business from scratch," McMahon said at her [SBA confirmation hearing](#) in 2017. "Over decades of hard work and strategic growth, we built it into a publicly traded global enterprise ... I am proud of our success—I know every bit of the hard work it took to create that success."





The McMahon family, including Vince McMahon, often appeared in WWE broadcasts. But on-camera appearances from Linda – like this one from 2009 – were more rare.

*Ethan Miller/Getty Images*

McMahon served as WWE's president, and then its CEO, until she stepped down in 2009.

Journalist Dave Meltzer has spent decades reporting on the wrestling industry, including on Vince McMahon and WWE. He says Linda McMahon had little to do

with the creative, public-facing side of WWE, known for its over-the-top plot lines in which wrestling personalities face off in often-bloody battles. Instead, he says McMahon was responsible for running business operations behind-the-scenes.

McMahon did make a [few appearances on-camera](#), including in violent skits with members of her family, but otherwise, Meltzer says, it was Vince who fans got to know.

Under the McMahons' leadership, WWE gained international renown, but also faced a series of scandals, including around [steroid abuse](#) and [alleged sexual abuse of minors](#) who worked for their organization.

"You can just imagine the stuff that happened in the wrestling business that she kept her mouth shut on," says Dave Meltzer.

"I think that she will be very, very loyal. Like she'll never be the one who turns on [Trump]."

Still, Meltzer warns against drawing too many conclusions about Linda McMahon based on the story of WWE.

"She got way too much credit for the growth of the WWE business and she got way too much blame for the product of WWE, which she had absolutely nothing to do with," says Meltzer.

NPR reached out multiple times to Linda McMahon's representatives for comment on the scandals surrounding WWE, and they did not respond.

### **A short stint on a state board of education**

Linda McMahon's limited education experience includes her appointment to the Connecticut State Board of Education in 2009, where she served for about a year.

During a hearing for that role, [she told state lawmakers](#), "I'm not an educator but what you will have from me is my commitment of open-mindedness, my commitment, my passion to education, and I will do everything I can to bring sides together from the community, from the public, from business leaders, and hopefully, from legislators to make our education the best it can be."





McMahon ran two unsuccessful campaigns for the U.S. Senate. Here she celebrates her 2012 Republican primary win in Stamford, Conn.

Jessica Hill/AP

Andy Fleischmann, a former chair of the Connecticut General Assembly's Education Committee, served in the state's legislature at the same time McMahon was appointed to the board. He says her appointment and confirmation process elicited discord between legislators. "It's very unusual for there to be any opposition [to state board appointments]," he says.

Fleischman attributes that discord to McMahon's past at WWE. In fact, in that confirmation hearing, he questioned McMahon about what he called the "disconnect" between McMahon's values around education and the "wildly unreasonable things that happen on television through your organization every day."

McMahon's response: "I don't think that has anything to do with my ability to have good administrative marketing skills, to understand how reading is important, to understand how the art of communication and knowing your audience and being able to get things accomplished – I don't see that there necessarily has to be a connection with the product on television versus that."

She also acknowledged WWE programming wasn't "necessarily appropriate for all ages."

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**U.S. education policy is at a crossroads. This congressional hearing shows why**

Janet Finneran also remembers opposition and debate surrounding McMahon's appointment. Finneran was vice chair of the state board of education during the year McMahon served. She says any concerns about McMahon's qualifications were quelled once she began serving on the board.

"She always exhibited a tremendous amount of professionalism," says Finneran. She says she was impressed with McMahon's "knowledge of the material and...discussion of the material."

NPR reviewed meeting minutes during McMahon's tenure on the board and found that McMahon, along with other members of the board, tended to vote largely in agreement.

But Andy Fleischmann points out that McMahon only spent a year on the state board before resigning, and doesn't have much education experience beyond that.

"I cannot think of another instance in my lifetime where someone was nominated to be U.S. secretary of education with so little background in any part of the field," he says.

He worries McMahon's nomination may not be getting the same level of scrutiny as [other](#) cabinet [nominees](#). "The fact that it kind of slips into the background because there's so many other controversies is, to me, really troubling and scary," says Fleischmann.

**As head of the SBA, she set high expectations**

If McMahon is confirmed as U.S. education secretary, it will not be her first time working for the federal government. During his first presidency, Donald Trump tapped McMahon to lead the Small Business Administration, the agency tasked with supporting entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Barb Carson first joined the SBA during the Obama administration, and worked closely with McMahon over the two years she spent leading the agency. Carson



remembers an early meeting with McMahon: Carson was sitting in a conference room, casually chatting with her colleagues, when McMahon stepped into the room and commanded their attention.

"She slapped the table and said, 'There's going to be one conversation in this room and it's mine,' and everybody straightened up."



Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy (right) introduces Linda McMahon at her 2017 Senate confirmation hearing for her nomination to the SBA. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, also of Connecticut, smiles on the left.

*Alex Brandon/AP*

McMahon set a tone of high expectations from the beginning, Carson recalls. "She said clearly and explicitly that she trusted us until we lost that trust and that we'd have a hard time getting it back."

McMahon was the first SBA administrator Carson worked with who came from the private sector without experience in the federal government.

"Linda had to take the time to understand what was different about this sector... but was willing to spend the time it took to make the public sector efficient."

Pradeep Belur served as chief of staff to McMahon at the SBA, and says McMahon spent her first 90 days on the job "listening to small businesses, listening to employees, listening to advocates to really understand what works and what needs to be fixed."



POLITICS

### **Linda McMahon To Quit Small Business Administration, Join Pro-Trump SuperPAC**

Belur says while McMahon didn't work directly in education, she did help expand the reach of an existing brick-and-mortar education program for women entrepreneurs by helping to take it online. The expanded program [ultimately launched](#) under McMahon's successor, Jovita Carranza.

Both Carson and Belur praise McMahon's ability to listen and learn from subject-matter experts—a skill they believe will serve her well at the Education Department.

### **What it'll take to be Trump's education secretary**

It's unclear what the U.S. Department of Education will look like after McMahon's confirmation hearing. The Trump administration has put dozens of department employees on paid administrative leave. The White House has also [confirmed plans](#) to shrink, and potentially dismantle the agency.

NPR asked two former U.S. secretaries of education to weigh in on the job McMahon has ahead of her, especially given the fluid state of affairs at the department.

"Every secretary has the latitude to ... add, subtract, to edit and put their mark on the department, and I know she will," says Margaret Spellings, who served as education secretary under President George W. Bush.



EDUCATION

### **Trump orders Education, Labor and other departments to enhance school choice**

"There are lots of ways to hurt vulnerable kids from the U.S. Department of Education, if that's your goal," says Arne Duncan, former education secretary under President Barack Obama. "And I just hope and pray that's not [McMahon's] motivation."

The [agency has a long list of congressionally-mandated responsibilities](#), including supporting schools in low-income communities (Title I), English language learners (Title III), students with disabilities (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act), and helping low-income undergraduates pay for college through Pell Grants.

Spellings says *some* downsizing could have its benefits.

"I'm not hearing anyone say, 'We need to abolish Title I, we need to get rid of Pell Grants.' So it's a matter of who is best to manage those programs. Where should they live? How can they be most accountable to the taxpayers and citizens and students, in this case, of our country? And I think that's a worthy discussion."

But Duncan worries shrinking the department could mean losing a wealth of knowledge from career staffers.

"Their advice, their guidance was just extraordinarily helpful," he says.

"The execution, the implementation of ideas, you sort of can't do it without the career staff."

For Spellings, McMahon's background as a business executive and in the federal government has prepared her well for the top education job in the country. She says a background in education isn't necessary to lead the department effectively.

"The Department of Education is not a school," she says. "It's a bank. It's an advocate. It's a relationship partner with states, localities, the Congress. It's a policy shop."

Duncan does have concerns about McMahon's lack of education experience, but he notes, "there are people with far more experience in education who could be much more disastrous than she."



Linda McMahon appears with fellow Trump nominees (left to right) Lee Zeldin, Kash Patel and Pete Hegseth on Jan. 20, the president's second Inauguration Day.

*Chip Somdevilla/AP via Pool Getty Images*

Spellings now serves as president and CEO of the Bipartisan Policy Center, a nonprofit think tank. In the spirit of her current role, she has hope that McMahon will work with Congress in a bipartisan way, especially around improving student achievement.

"If you're concerned about a 'woke agenda,' what you really should be concerned about is do [kids] have the basic skills necessary to be successful? Can they read? Can they do math? Can they think critically? And so that's a unifier [across party lines]."

Duncan now runs Chicago CRED, a nonprofit that aims to prevent gun violence. His hopes for unity are a little more cautious.



"Working in a bipartisan way on behalf of kids is always a possibility, and I always remain hopeful. But have the chances of that shrunk dramatically in the past two weeks? Of course."

Ultimately, Duncan and Spellings both say, McMahon must let one goal guide her work if she is confirmed: to advocate for the country's students.

Linda McMahon's confirmation hearing has been [scheduled for Feb. 13](#).

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