



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

FEBRUARY 4, 2025 · 6:45 PM ET

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LA Johnson/NPR

Over and over, President Donald Trump and his colleagues have pointed to the U.S. Education Department as a poster child for government overreach. In fact, Republicans have been [calling for the department's dissolution](#) ever since its birth.

That effort reached a new level this week, as the president [began exploring dramatic cuts](#) to programs and staff at the department, including an executive action shuttering programs that are not protected by law and calling on Congress to close the department entirely.



EDUCATION

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

Which raises the question: What, exactly, does the Education Department do?

Created by Congress in 1979, the department employs [more than 4,000 people](#) and has an annual budget of \$79 billion. Many of its responsibilities were given to it by lawmakers. (The U.S. Constitution doesn't actually mention a federal role in education.)

Here's a look at what the Education Department does and doesn't do – and how much of it is protected by acts of Congress:

Sending money to U.S. public schools

Most public school funding comes from state and local governments. The federal government, in general, provides only a small fraction of schools' overall funding – between 6 and 13%, according to [a 2018 report](#) from the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Two of the most important federal funding streams to public schools are:

- **Title I, which provides money to help districts that serve lower-income communities.** In 2023, the Education Department received [more than \\$18 billion](#) for Title I.
- **IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), which provides money to help districts serve students with disabilities.** In FY 2024, the department received more than [\\$15 billion](#) for IDEA.

Both of these funding streams were, like the department itself, created by separate acts of Congress: Title I was signed into law in 1965, and IDEA was signed into law in

1975. They cannot be unwound except by Congress. Large changes to either are unlikely, as the money enjoys broad bipartisan support.

The department has no power over what's taught in schools

Over the years, Donald Trump has vowed to rid America's schools of such ideas as "wokeness" and critical race theory. And he [has said](#) that he would close the Education Department in order to return "all education, and education work and needs back to the states." In reality, it is already up to states to determine what is taught in classrooms.

"It is not the business of the federal government to be involved in curriculum or personnel hiring," says Kenneth Wong, a professor of education policy at Brown University.

"The Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], which was enacted during the tail end of the Obama years, really clearly laid [that] out."

Wong points out that ESSA was shaped, in part, by concerns that its predecessor, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was teetering into government overreach. When NCLB was reauthorized in the form of ESSA, the law made it clear that it was up to states to determine what was taught in classrooms.

Managing college financial aid and federal student loans

The Education Department is not only responsible for managing the federal student loan portfolio, which amounts to approximately \$1.6 trillion in student loan debt, it's also responsible for the mechanism that gives students access to college financial aid: the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA.



NATIONAL

Trump wants to cut the federal workforce. Who they are and what that means

More than 17 million current and aspiring college students fill out the FAFSA each year in order to qualify for student loans, grants and more. For many, it's the only way they can get help paying for college.

Students who end up taking out loans become part of the department's massive student loan portfolio, which is managed by the office of Federal Student Aid (FSA). FSA "provides approximately \$120.8 billion in grant, work-study, and loan funds each year to help students and their families pay for college or career school," according to [the office's website](#). That includes \$33 billion in Pell Grants for low-income and middle-income undergraduate students.

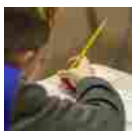
FSA also oversees student loan servicers, the outside companies it hires to work directly with borrowers on their loan payments, among other things.

Data collection on colleges and college students

The department [maintains and collects data](#) from every college, university, and technical and vocational program that participates in the federal student aid program. This allows tax-payers and families the ability to analyze, compare and track things like student admissions, academic outcomes, graduation rates, need-based aid eligibility, and more.

Tracking student achievement through the Nation's Report Card

The Education Department also oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), or the "Nation's Report Card." It is considered the gold standard of student achievement tests in subjects such as reading, math and science.



EDUCATION

Nearly 5 years after schools closed, the nation gets a new report card

The assessment, which is mandated by Congress, actually predates the Department of Education: The federal government began administering the test in 1969, a decade before the department was created.

The Nation's Report Card has long served as a common yardstick for student achievement, and has been an especially valuable tool through, and since, the pandemic years. [In addition to shedding light on how much ground students lost academically](#), it has also helped the country track chronic absenteeism, poverty levels and educational experiences of students. The data generated by NAEP is then used by educators, policymakers and researchers to work towards improving K-12 education

across the country.

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