



EDUCATION

Trump administration gives schools a deadline to end DEI programs or risk losing federal money



President Donald Trump waves from his vehicle as he arrives at the Trump International Golf Club, Monday, Feb. 17, 2020, in West Palm Beach, Fla. (AP Photo/Rob Gitter)



BY [COLLIN BINKLEY](#)

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration is giving America's schools and universities two weeks to eliminate [diversity initiatives](#) or risk losing federal money, raising the stakes in the president's fight against " [wokeness](#)."

In a memo Friday, the Education Department gave an ultimatum to stop using "racial preferences" as a factor in admissions, financial aid, hiring or other areas. Schools are being given 14 days to end any practice that treats students or workers differently because of their race.

Educators at colleges nationwide were rushing to [evaluate their risk](#) and decide whether to stand up for practices they believe are legal. The sweeping demand threatens to upend all aspects of campus operations, from essays on college applications to classroom lessons and campus clubs.

It's meant to correct what the memo described as rampant discrimination in education, often against white and Asian students.

"Schools have been operating on the pretext that selecting students for 'diversity' or similar euphemisms is not selecting them based on race," said Craig Trainor, acting assistant secretary for civil rights. "No longer. Students should be assessed according to merit, accomplishment and character."

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The guidance drew sharp backlash from civil rights groups and university groups. Some believe its vague language is meant to have a chilling effect, pressuring schools to eliminate anything touching on the topic of race even if it may be defensible in court.

"Creating a sense of risk around doing work that might promote diverse and welcoming campuses is much more of the goal than a clear statement of existing law," said Jonathan Fansmith, senior vice president of government relations at the American Council on Education, an association of college presidents.

The memo is an extension of President Donald Trump's executive order [banning diversity, equity and inclusion](#) programs. As legal justification, it cites the 2023 [Supreme Court decision](#) barring race as a factor in college admissions.

"Put simply, educational institutions may neither separate or segregate students based on race, nor distribute benefits or burdens based on race," it said.

On Monday the Education Department announced it also cut \$600 million in grants for organizations that train teachers. The programs promoted "divisive" concepts like DEI, critical race theory and social justice activism, the department said.

Confusion around the implications of Trump's anti-DEI order was apparent at last week's [confirmation hearing](#) for education secretary nominee Linda McMahon. Asked whether classes on African American history would run afoul of the president's order, McMahon said she wasn't certain.

The School Superintendents Association is reminding members the new guidance is not legally binding and any cuts to funding would involve lengthy investigations, said Sasha Pudelski, the group's director of advocacy. The group is urging schools not to preemptively cut programs.

"We're not certain a district should do anything beyond reading the guidance, talking to their legal counsel" and gauging community interest in keeping existing programs, Pudelski said.

The new guidance takes aim directly at college admissions, suggesting colleges have sought to work around the Supreme Court's decision.

[College essays](#), for instance, cannot be used to predict a student's race, the guidance says. In the Supreme Court decision, Chief Justice John Roberts said nothing prevents colleges "from considering an applicant's discussion of how race affected his or her life," though he warned that colleges couldn't use essays as an indirect workaround to consider students' race.

The memo also said it's unlawful for colleges to eliminate standardized testing requirements "to achieve a desired racial balance or to increase racial diversity." Dozens of colleges across the U.S. have [dropped SAT and ACT requirements](#) in recent years, citing concerns the exams favor students from high-income families.

Practices that have long been commonplace could become legal liabilities, including recruiting in underrepresented areas or buying lists of potential students with certain academic and demographic information, said Angel B. Pérez, CEO of the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

"Colleges and universities are going to find themselves between a rock and a hard place," Pérez said. "They know that what they're doing is not illegal, but they are worried that if they do not comply, not having federal funding will decimate them."

Some universities said they expect little change. At Oregon State University, a legal review concluded that its programs "are fully compliant with all state and federal laws," according to a campus message from Rob Odom, vice president of university relations and marketing.

The department memo appears to take aim at scholarships for students from certain racial backgrounds. There's been legal debate about whether the Supreme Court decision extends to financial aid, with some schools and institutions deciding to scrap racial requirements for some scholarships.

The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators said there's no consensus on the question, and the group is trying to understand how the memo could affect student aid.

"The last thing students need when making plans about how to pay for college is uncertainty over when or whether they will receive financial aid they've been relying on," the group said in a statement.

Trump has called for the elimination of the Education Department, and Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency has [slashed dozens of contracts](#) deemed wasteful.

The DOGE team won a legal victory on Monday when a federal judge declined to block it from federal student loan records. The judge said the plaintiff, the University of California Student Association, failed to prove it was harmed by DOGE's access to the data.

Associated Press writer Jocelyn Gecker contributed to this report from San Francisco.

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