

Trump education budget calls for dismantling core programs, promotes vouchers and charter schools

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The Trump administration's proposed 2018 budget, released last Tuesday, includes drastic cuts to federal spending on public education, which if enacted would affect everyone involved in public K-12 and higher education. In total, the Department of Education (DoED) faces a \$9.2 billion cut in spending, or 13.5 percent of the DoED budget, through the elimination or reduction in funding for more than 30 discretionary programs.

As with the overall 2018 budget proposal, Trump's Department of Education budget takes a wrecking ball to many foundational programs. The budget entirely eliminates funding for 22 major programs, including the following:

- Supporting Effective Instruction State grants (\$2.3 billion), which fund professional development programs and seek to reduce class sizes.
- 21st Century Community Learning Centers (\$1.16 billion), which fund K-12 after-school programs serving 2 million students at roughly 11,500 centers nationwide.
- Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (\$732 million), which provides grant aid to low-income undergraduate students.
- School Improvement Grants (\$449.1 million), which allocate money to the lowest-performing schools.
 - Preschool Development Grants (\$249.5 million), which fund preschools in low-income communities.
 - Comprehensive Literacy Development Grants (\$189.6 million), which fund K-12 literacy programs.
 - Mathematics and Science Partnerships (\$152.4 million), which seeks to improve math and science education.
 - Strengthening Institutions (\$86.4 million), which provide infrastructure funding for K-12 schools.
 - Public Service Loan Forgiveness, Subsidized Stafford loans, and the payment of Account Maintenance Fees to

guaranty agencies, which subsidize undergraduate student loans.

Programs also slated for complete elimination include those promoting foreign language learning, Alaska and Hawaiian Natives Education, Arts in Education, Special Olympics Education Programs, and multiple programs that seek to recruit and retain high-quality teachers and principals at struggling schools.

In addition to these eliminations, the budget proposes the reduction of funding for several key programs by double-digit percentages, including:

- \$487.8 million (50 percent) cut from the Federal Work-Study Program, which provides grants to enable low-income students to work part-time to pay for college.
- \$103.1 million (32 percent) cut from the GEAR Up program, which supports early college preparation and awareness activities for low-income elementary and secondary school students.
 - \$166 million (13 percent) cut from the Career and Technical Education Grants program.
 - \$142 million (15 percent) cut from the TRIO program that helps disadvantaged K-12 and higher education students.
 - \$95 million (16 percent) cut from the Adult Education program.

Each of these significant cuts represents a separate attack against core programs that provide the scaffolding for public education in the US. The cuts target programs that predominantly serve lower-income communities, and in combination seek to drastically undermine the quality of public schools in these areas.

Through this assault, the Trump administration is deepening the decades-long drive to create the conditions that justify increased federal funding for private charter and religious schools, which are promoted by billionaires

such as Trump’s Education Secretary Betsy DeVos as an alternative to failing public schools.

Thus, in tandem with the savage cuts listed above, the line item receiving the most substantial budgetary increase involves a \$1 billion grant for the Title I Furthering Options for Children to Unlock Success (FOCUS) program, a front organization dedicated to funding school voucher programs nationwide.

As the DoED budget proposal explains, “The proposed FOCUS grants would provide supplemental awards to school districts that agree to adopt weighted student funding combined with open enrollment systems that allow Federal, State, and local funds to follow students to the public school of their choice.”

The real purpose of school vouchers is to starve already desperate public schools of their resources, in order to funnel money to private and parochial schools, which are constitutionally prohibited from receiving direct federal funding.

The DoED budget also allocates \$500 million (a 46 percent increase) to the Charter Schools Grants program, as well as \$370 million (a whopping 370 percent increase) to the Education Innovation and Research Fund, which will be retooled to “support efforts to test and build evidence for the effectiveness of private school choice.”

During his election campaign, Trump took up the mantle of “school choice,” vowing last fall to provide \$20 billion for school voucher programs while in office. Last week’s budget proposal thus represents a down payment on this promise.

The decades-old “school choice” campaign dates back to the 1950s, when the right-wing economist Milton Friedman began promoting the concept that the “free market” should dictate allocations of federal funding for education. Support for such policies only started to become mainstream in the 1980s, after being taken up by Ronald Reagan. Their direct implementation, however, began in full force under Democratic President Bill Clinton, who oversaw the creation of the first 1,700 charter schools in the US.

Under both presidents George Bush and Barack Obama, “school choice” policies thrived under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTP), successive standardized testing frameworks that dictated whether schools would be forced to close or turned into charter schools.

The Obama administration carried out the most sweeping attacks on public education, overseeing the permanent firing of more than 300,000 public school

teachers and staff members and the doubling of the number of charter schools in his first term alone.

Throughout this time, Betsy DeVos, heiress to the Prince family fortune and wife of the heir of the Amway pyramid scheme fortune, has been a zealot for the cause of charter and religious schools. She has headed or founded numerous pro-charter organizations, including the Acton Institute (which also promotes the repeal of child labor laws), Education Freedom Fund, All Children Matter, Alliance for School Choice and American Federation for Children.

While the Trump budget cuts will likely be pared back, they have shifted the baseline for future cuts even further to the right and will embolden the most right-wing, pro-privatization elements to step to the fore.

Leading Democrats such as Senator Elizabeth Warren have mouthed hypocritical opposition to the proposed DoED budget, which she deemed “an all-out assault on America’s kids, teachers, college students & student loan borrowers.” Over the past eight years under Obama, however, during which Warren served on the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, she directly facilitated the processes that have laid the groundwork for the current budget proposal.

The fight to defend public education must be waged against both capitalist parties, which support the drive to war and the privatization of public education. Public education workers and students must unite with the working class internationally to put an end to war and rebuild society in the interests of the vast majority, which includes a massive expansion in funding for public education.



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