

# Trump's attack on the Department of Education

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The Trump administration is proposing to merge the US Department of Education (DoE) with the Labor Department, creating the Department of Education and the Workforce. The measure is part of a wider reorganization, which aims to “shrink government,” according to a June 21 announcement.

The proposal is a wide-ranging initiative aimed at privatization and budget-cutting. It seeks to restructure and possibly privatize the US Postal Service, the power assets of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. The plan also renames the Department of Health and Human Service as the Department of Health and Public Welfare, in a transparent effort to blackguard the agency and enact drastic cuts in social services.

The elimination of a cabinet-level department devoted to the promotion of education has been a longstanding goal of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and large sections of the Republican Party for decades. Harkening back to the reactionary notion of “states’ rights,” they call for unimpeded state and local control of schools along with a vast expansion of vouchers, privately-run (but taxpayer funded) charter schools and other edu-businesses.

To this end, they oppose the role of the DoE, which has three basic missions: the provision of grants primarily to impoverished districts; overseeing nondiscrimination in education including students’ access to civil rights in special education and bilingual education; and the measurement and assessment of overall educational progress nationally.

While the sweeping changes in the Trump initiative are widely considered insufficiently popular to assure congressional passage immediately, the administration is nonetheless clearly setting its sights on a massive assault on social rights. It will no doubt push these or similar measures to pay for the budget deficits created by the Trump tax cut and receive support from the Democrats to do so, as they secured Democratic votes for the tax cut itself. Indicating the speed with which the administration wants to move in dismantling the DoE, the original budget proposal last year demanded a \$9 billion cut in the department, 13.5 percent of the total, while allocating more than \$1 billion to vouchers and school “choice.”

A critical aim of the government reorganization is to degrade

public education by tilting its mission in favor of promoting practical job-ready programs for the bulk of the working class. This plan seeks to deepen the class divide within education, pushing children as early as middle school into career tracks. Traditional higher education could, once again, become the province of only the wealthy.

The plan would divide the merged DoE and Labor Departments into four sub-agencies. The “American Workforce and Higher Education Administration” division would be responsible for “vocational education, rehabilitation, and higher education programs”—indicating their order of priority by the administration. Explaining the changes, Margaret Weichert, the deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, told reporters, the initiative would “upgrade our thinking of preparing children for the workforce.”

Indicating the intended trajectory of education policy, DeVos attended the SkillsUSA conference last week in Louisville, Kentucky to promote skilled trades and technical education such as plumbing, masonry and carpentry. She toured alongside Governor Matt Bevin, notorious for his vilification of protesting teachers last April and his deep-going assaults on pension and public education in the state. Kentucky has seen a 35 percent drop in support to postsecondary education since 2008. In other words, education in the trades is not being *added* as an option for young people but *substituted for* a robust and well-rounded education, which would include hands-on learning and many skills.

The mantra of “workforce development” has been seized upon by both Democrats and Republicans to promote a “business-friendly” orientation at the direct expense of four-year colleges and universities. DeVos asked that Pell Grants—normally used by working-class students for college—be applicable to short-term certificate programs in the trades that would “provide students with a credential, certification, or license in a high-demand field.”

The clear implication is that the purpose of education is primarily to create skilled workers for America's workforce, as opposed to the development of human culture, knowledge and science in addition to a career. Albert Einstein once said, “It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.” Such a vision is clearly out of step

with the contemporary assault on public education and the increasing class nature of schooling.

In fact, DeVos and her family have lavishly funded the Acton Institute, which rejects “compulsory education” and embraces child labor. A blog post by the group argues that photos from the early 20th century showing children with their faces covered in coal dust from mining “represent the faces of those who are actively building enterprises and cities, using their gifts to serve their communities, and setting the foundation of a flourishing nation, in turn.”

While seeking to track large numbers of working class young people into career-ready programs, DeVos and company are also seeking to maximize the profit potential of for-profit institutions and the federal government’s student loan programs. DeVos effectively killed the team within DoE charged with investigating for-profit college fraud and placed former officials within the for-profit sector into her department. Students at these highly lucrative for-profit institutions are nearly three times as likely to default on their student loans as those from public institutions. The net effect of all of these measures is that college is being pushed further out of reach for many and for those who do enroll, they and their families are saddled with life-long debt.

The right-wing media in the US has mounted a years-long campaign attacking the supposed frivolity of the humanities and mocking the reading of philosophy and history to buttress the libel that students who take on debt are self-destructive because “college isn’t for everyone.” Putting teeth into this reactionary message, DeVos’ budget proposal last year sought to cut college work-study programs in half, end public-service loan forgiveness and reduce government subsidies of college loans.

Other aspects of the proposed reorganization are equally reprehensible. The Labor Department’s safety protection division will be consolidated with the DoE’s Civil Rights department and merged into one Enforcement sub-agency, degrading the capacities of both. For students, it would inevitably result in a further assault on special education and bilingual education. Charter schools are already notorious for either failing to admit special education students under phony pretexts or failing to provide the required services.

As to the pressing need for expanded bilingual education, DeVos wants to eliminate the federal office for English-Language learners and fold its functions into the office for elementary and secondary education. These measures were presaged by the Obama administration’s failure to support the office of English-language acquisition, under conditions where such learners were dramatically increasing in public schools.

It was the administration of Ronald Reagan that first targeted the Department of Education, calling for its dissolution in 1980. While unsuccessful on that front, the measure was only the first in a broad and sweeping social counterrevolution aimed at all of the gains of the working class. Those attacks were deepened

under all subsequent administrations including that of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. The biggest inroads by charter schools and privatization took place during the eight years of Obama.

The federal government provides about 12 percent of K-12 education funding nationally, providing very mildly increased services to impoverished schools. While these monies are clearly being targeted by the administration’s proposals, nevertheless the entire funding system for American education is archaic. Funded primarily at the state and local levels, it is a system of yawning and growing social inequality between school districts. US parents and prospective parents are constantly uprooting families to “move to a better school,” or spending hours commuting in the hopes of improved opportunities for their children.

The increasing focus on providing “off the rack” [and on the cheap] workers for businesses will deepen the attack on the right to high quality education. The decline of world capitalism is mirrored in its attitude toward education. When the UNESCO report, “Recommendation on the Status of Teachers” was written in 1966, American industry dominated the world and sections of the ruling elite could still tolerate the traditions of the Enlightenment. It elaborated an education policy for the globe: “Education from the earliest school years should be directed to the all-round development of the human personality and to the spiritual, moral, social, cultural and economic progress of the community as well as to the inculcation of deep respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; within the framework of these values the utmost importance should be attached to the contribution to be made by education to peace and to understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and among racial or religious groups.”

The US and world’s corporate and financial elites have long repudiated such conceptions and fear that the enlightenment of working-class young people will only fuel their desire for an end to class oppression and social inequality. The Trump administration, with the active participation of the Democratic Party, is trying to stamp out every progressive tradition in America, including the ideal of increasing educational opportunity, the better to streamline the state’s essential function for repression at home and war abroad.



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