

Trump signs executive order directing the closure of the US Department of Education

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On Thursday, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order directing US Education Secretary Linda McMahon to “take all necessary steps to facilitate the closure of the Department of Education (ED) and return authority over education to the States and local communities.”

Titled, in typical Orwellian fashion, “Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities,” the executive order claims that shutting the 45-year-old department would allow “children and families to escape a system that is failing them.”

With rows of small children seated at school desks staged as props beside him, Trump emphasized, “My administration will take all lawful steps to shut down the department. We’re going to shut it down and shut it down as quickly as possible. It’s doing us no good.” He added that it would be “great,” pointing to Texas and Florida schools and suggesting the costs would “probably be half.” He professed his “love” for educators and called for the expansion of merit pay, a scheme that undermines teacher salaries and punishes them for the impact of decades of public school defunding.

Referring to the \$1.6 trillion in student loans currently overseen by the ED, Trump urged it to exit all “bank functions.” Ending federal subsidies for student loans would deprive countless young people of the ability to attend college.

The administration claimed that the ED’s core functions would remain, citing Pell Grants, Title I aid for low-income schools and special education. However, Trump has previously called for ending the entitlement status of Title I and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and transforming them into block grants, whose funding is easy to cut. Additionally, he failed to mention his plan for universal vouchers to carry out the mass privatization of schools.

Trump is seeking to reverse the historic gains of the fight for universal, high-quality public education, the product of 250 years of struggle in the US. This is an attack not just on current students and their families but on the collective knowledge, culture and scientific achievements of the whole society.

The money-mad American oligarchy is wielding a wrecking ball to dismantle public education. If it is not stopped, the outcome will be a vast expansion of the class divide, where the working class receives only a minimal, work-oriented education while the financial elite purchases the finest education available.

Workers and young people will not accept this lying down. Polling shows that two-thirds of Americans oppose closing the department. Educators have staged protests over the past five weeks throughout the US opposing the shutdown and many more against the ongoing cuts to

school districts across the country.

No modern president has ever tried to unilaterally shut down a department, and no cabinet-level department has been abolished since the Post Office Department was replaced with the United States Postal Service by Richard Nixon in 1971, setting that agency up for the current privatization efforts by Trump.

Trump lyingly claims that he is speaking for millions of parents who are supposedly clamoring for education to be “run by the states.” The reality is that he represents a filthy rich oligarchy that wants to privatize education and transfer billions from public coffers to edubusinesses and Wall Street.

A significant element of this attack stems from the well-placed fear by the oligarchy of the masses of working people. They aim to use the attacks on public education to stifle critical thought in the working class and attempt to browbeat youth with right-wing patriotism, racism, xenophobia, religion and anti-scientific drivel.

The Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street alongside the Republicans, downplayed the existential nature of the attack. The top Democrat on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia, issued a statement describing the order as “dangerous and illegal” and citing the “disparities affecting low-income students, students of color, and those with disabilities.” Expressing the Democratic Party’s policy of complete subservience to these attacks, he registered “disappointment” in McMahon and urged his “Republican colleagues” to “hold the president and Elon Musk accountable.”

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten evinced similar complacency. “See you in court,” she said, and reiterated that only Congress can lawfully close the Department. Despite Linda McMahon’s promise to assist Trump in closing the ED from the beginning, Weingarten and National Education Association President Becky Pringle assured her of their intention to “find common ground.”

As Trump signed the executive order, Weingarten was in Chicago collaborating with Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former teachers’ union lobbyist, to block a strike by 25,000 educators in the nation’s third-largest school district. At a press conference outside of the Chicago Board of Education, Weingarten admitted that some \$100 billion in federal funding would be “effectively abolished from schools,” and that the diversion of this money to the states would go to those like Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who would “voucherize and privatize their schools.”

During the press conference, a WSWS reporter asked Weingarten, given the existential threat to public education and the fact that any contract signed in Chicago would not protect educators and students

from massive budget cuts, “Why isn’t your union and the NEA (National Education Association) calling a strike of Chicago and all national educators to stop this threat? And isn’t preventing a strike just emboldening Trump to carry out this attack?”

The AFT president, a member of the Democratic National Committee, replied, “What we are doing is fighting in the courts. The court of public opinion. We’re fighting in Congress.” She added, “There may be a time when there will be a national strike in America,” before saying the most important thing right now was getting a contract signed in Chicago. In other words, the AFT bureaucracy was working to prevent a strike that could become the catalyst of a national movement to defend public education.

While the Democrats and the Democratic Party-aligned unions are preaching legal remedies and blocking mass protests, Trump is openly defying the law. This was underscored by his refusal to obey a federal court order over illegal deportations this week. Jamal Green, a law professor at Columbia University, described this as “dictatorial power,” adding that the words “constitutional crisis” fail to “capture the gravity of the situation.”

Furthermore, the dismantling of the Department of Education is already taking place in plain view, with or without a formal dissolution by Congress. Two thousand out of the 4,200-employee workforce have already been laid off, with multiple ED functions eliminated or rendered ineffective. For example, this week the ED stopped accepting income-driven student loan repayments and removed the application from its website (prompting an AFT lawsuit.)

While the agency is on life-support, Trump’s congressional supporters are moving to deliver the legal *coup de grace* to the Cabinet-level department as soon as practicable. Last month, Rep. Thomas Massie of Kentucky re-introduced his bill to abolish the ED by December 2026.

Funding cuts are underway. The recently enacted Republican-drafted continuing resolution (CR) to fund the government until September 30, which only passed thanks to Democratic support in the Senate, cut education by \$290 million. This may just be the beginning, as Trump has already withheld congressionally appropriated funds. Educators fear that programs not explicitly funded under the CR will go, including Title II grants for improvement and professional development, \$2.2 billion; migrant education grants, \$376 million; magnet school grants, \$139 million; and McKinney-Vento Homeless Act grants, \$129 million.

Over the past month, the Department of Education has already been gutted.

- The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has lost over 40 percent of its workforce. Six regional offices—Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York City, Philadelphia and San Francisco—have been shuttered. In fiscal year 2024, parents and students petitioned the OCR for help with 22,687 complaints, approximately half of which were fighting for legally mandated disability services. Michael Pillera, a senior civil rights attorney at OCR, said, “Many parents and students are going to go without access to education, go without responses from OCR at all.” The remaining OCR employees are being redirected to Trump’s ideological witch-hunts against “antisemitism” and “discrimination against white students.”

- The Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the department’s research division, has lost at least 62 percent of its staff. IES has played a crucial role in promoting evidence-based instructional methods, including much of the research that supports the “science of reading” movement. These reductions have also hollowed out the

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Center for Education Research. Data crucial for shaping educational policy and research is being compromised, potentially eliminating any objective measure of student achievement nationwide. It also threatens the accuracy of data collection regarding poverty, teacher shortages and student absenteeism. The decline in NCES data is likely to lead to a decrease in federal funding for rural schools, especially for child nutrition and mental health services. Rural schools account for about 20 percent of K-12 schools and rely heavily on federal assistance.

- The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, responsible for distributing grants for special education services and monitoring state compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has been cut. Thirty states and the District of Columbia were already out of compliance with federal disability law as of June 2024.

- The Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) is nearly eliminated. This office mandated compliance with the Supreme Court’s 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* decision, which guarantees English learners the right to English language instruction and administers Title III grants for supplemental services for the nation’s 5.3 million English learners.

- The Office of Education Technology was also eliminated. It assisted states and districts in implementing technology, including artificial intelligence.

It is the working class that must intervene to stop these attacks. On March 15, the Educators Rank-and-File Committee held a powerful meeting of nearly 200, including teachers across the US and from Brazil, Sri Lanka, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Opposing the “toothless measures of petitions, social media campaigns” of the trade union apparatus, it called for “mass action … through independent rank-and-file committees in schools, workplaces and communities to prepare for strikes and collective resistance.”

Opposition to these attacks, as well as the Trump administration’s rampage across agencies, freezing grants, removing databases, imposing censorship, and imposing mass layoffs, is growing. We urge all supporters of the fight for public education to get involved today in the Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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