

# Education Dept. abruptly ends COVID relief extensions, revoking \$3 billion nationwide

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In the latest series of actions by the Trump administration to decimate public education, the Department of Education has abruptly ended billions in pandemic relief funding to districts across the country.

Last Friday, the Department of Education (DE) revoked funding extensions—previously granted under the Biden administration—for states to use remaining Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. This will retroactively nullify spending plans already approved for schools across the country such as tutoring, mental health services, and infrastructure upgrades.

The Trump administration's revocation of ESSER extensions affects 41 states, with \$2.5 billion stripped from K-12 schools and \$433 million from private school grants.

In a blatant disregard for the well-being of students, Education Secretary Linda McMahon issued a letter on Friday, March 28, informing state education officials that the deadline to spend remaining COVID relief funds had passed that very day at 5 p.m. EST.

McMahon's letter issued sweeping dismissals of schools' ongoing need for pandemic aid, framing further support as unnecessary and misaligned with the department's priorities. She stated that "extending deadlines for COVID-related grants, which are in fact taxpayer funds, years after the COVID pandemic ended is not consistent with the Department's priorities and thus not a worthwhile exercise of its discretion."

Furthermore, she asserted that states and school districts "have had ample time to liquidate obligations" and that they "could not rely on the Department adhering to its original decision" to grant extensions. This declaration effectively pulled the rug out from under school districts that had already budgeted and committed these funds for crucial projects, anticipating federal reimbursement.

Districts had requested extensions for a variety of reasons. Many had already signed contracts for services, like tutoring, HVAC and window upgrades, and mental health programs, that extended past the original deadline. Supply chain issues delayed deliveries, and labor shortages made it hard to schedule contractors, especially since many districts were competing for the same workers. Major renovations also had to be done during summer breaks to avoid disrupting classes, further limiting timelines.

Some districts needed extra time to launch tutoring, literacy, or after school programs, and the complex process of managing and reimbursing funds also caused delays. These extensions were essential to help schools use the funds to improve air quality, boost health and safety, and support student recovery.

These cuts are only the latest in the Trump administration's efforts

to do away with the right to a public education and critical thought. Since January 2025, the Trump administration has slashed billions in education funding while halving the Department of Education's workforce. These cuts have disrupted Title I support for 26 million low-income students, gutted civil rights enforcement, and jeopardized 420,000 education jobs.

Programs serving 7.5 million students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are being transferred to the Department of Health and Human Services, under the control of the anti-science quack Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

The \$1.6 trillion federal student loan portfolio was handed to the Small Business Administration amid its own staffing crisis. This restructuring deliberately destabilizes public education to pave the way for the Trump administrations privatization schemes like vouchers.

School officials across the country, already facing major budget crises are now scrambling to figure out how they will deal with the abrupt loss of billions of dollars already approved for their schools. Details from just a few states indicate the massive impact on schools across the country:

**Maryland** faces over \$350 million in lost funding, placing immediate halt to HVAC upgrades, tutoring, mental health services, and school construction in Baltimore City, Prince George's, and Montgomery counties. \$305 million was already spent but not reimbursed, including literacy programs and room health upgrades in schools across the state. Some districts may be unable to pay vendors for new instructional materials and tuition costs for educator preparation programs.

**Massachusetts** lost \$106 million for pandemic recovery initiatives. The New Bedford Public School District in Massachusetts, where approximately 80 percent of students come from low-income families, had \$12 million in ESSER funds approved for extension to support five critical infrastructure projects. Three of these projects—a central kitchen, modular classrooms, and accessibility upgrades—are nearing completion. The district is now relying on emergency reserves to honor existing contracts.

The sudden ending of federal funds has halted and jeopardized the remaining two projects in the district: the installation of an HVAC system in a 1970s-era building that currently lacks proper ventilation and the construction of a school-based health center to provide medical services for students.

**Michigan** stands to lose as much as \$42 million, impacting at least 27 school districts. State Superintendent Michael Rice rightly decried the action as "unacceptable," telling the *Detroit Free Press* that the state had already approved projects, including HVAC improvements

and window upgrades, with the expectation of federal reimbursement. Now, to honor these contracts, districts may be forced to reduce classroom spending or dip into savings. Flint Community Schools faces the largest potential loss in Michigan, at \$15.6 million.

Efforts to improve student health in communities heavily impacted by the pandemic, such as Flint and Pontiac, Michigan, are also likely to be undermined. Programs supporting homeless students, including transportation, after school tutoring, mental health services, and navigators who assist families with basic needs, are now at risk.

Initially, states had to justify each expense as pandemic-related but were not required to submit contracts, only to keep them on file. Then in February, the department quietly changed course, demanding itemized receipts for every purchase, adding a new layer of red tape.

On March 11, just weeks before the cutoff, Secretary McMahon fired all 16 staffers in the office responsible for processing those payments, effectively shutting down the mechanism for distributing the remaining funds.

By mid-March, state officials were scrambling. “I’m reaching out again to find out the status of these approvals,” a Pennsylvania official pleaded in a March 15 email to the department, according to *The 74*.

“It makes me incredibly angry,” said Laura Jimenez, who led the relief office until January. “We very carefully administered \$200 billion, and they’re completely destroying that with the last couple of billion.”

The ED, meanwhile, offered no real justification. Spokeswoman Madi Biedermann claimed it was “past time for the money to be returned to the people’s bank account” and vaguely referenced “numerous documented examples of misuse” without naming one.

While GOP lawmakers have long railed against schools spending on gyms and athletic fields, there’s little evidence of actual fraud. In contrast to the Paycheck Protection Program, which saw over \$60 billion lost to theft largely from businesses, school relief funds were tightly monitored. A 2023 Inspector General report confirmed the department had taken “significant actions” to oversee spending.

The Trump administration’s ending of ESSER funds extensions comes after the Biden administration had allowed ESSER funding to expire, sending many districts across the country over a “fiscal cliff” because of their dependence on the funding. Even before the abrupt cutoff last Friday, school districts have been carrying out steep budget reductions by closing schools, shuttering vital programs, and triggering layoffs of thousands of teachers, counselors, social workers, and support staff, stripping schools of vital personnel and pushing class sizes higher.

Furthermore, the Trump administration, through its Education Department spokesperson Madi Biedermann, shamelessly declared, “COVID is over” as a justification for halting the payouts. This statement flies in the face of the pandemic’s continued global impact.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) has documented, five years after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the disease continues to spread, having claimed roughly 30 million lives globally, with hundreds of millions more suffering from Long COVID.

The current administration’s denial of the pandemic’s ongoing effects is a continuation of the deliberate bipartisan policy of deception to justify the austerity measures imposed on the working class to fund war and enrich the world’s oligarchs.

The assault on public education must be understood within the broader context of the Trump administration’s agenda to dismantle essential public services. Just days before McMahon’s announcement,

the Department of Health and Human Services abruptly canceled more than \$12 billion in federal grants to states used for tracking infectious diseases, mental health services, addiction treatment, and other urgent health issues.

This move, like the defunding of schools, will further cripple already underfunded public programs, leading to the layoffs of thousands of workers and jeopardizing programs vital to the working class. The halting of COVID relief funds is another step in this destructive process, aligning with the administration’s broader attack on science and social programs and its “let it rip” pandemic policy.

The capitalist system is incapable of addressing the fundamental needs of the population, as evidenced by the disastrous response to the pandemic and now the gutting of public health and education.

The fight to save public education cannot be left to the Democrats or union bureaucracies who, in their refusal to act in the interests of the working class, are open collaborators with the fascist Trump administration.

The Democratic National Committee issued a statement denouncing the cuts to education as part of Trump’s broader agenda to dismantle public education, calling it a betrayal of 50 million students. Yet, despite their rhetoric, Democrats voted for the 2025 federal budget that included over \$200 million in cuts to education, exposing their complicity in the bipartisan assault on public education.

Meanwhile, the national teachers unions the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association—led by Randi Weingarten and Becky Pringle respectively—have sought to suppress the growing opposition of their four million members, including blocking strike action by 26,000 Chicago teachers. Instead, the union bureaucracies are trying to smother opposition by telling educators to appeal to Democratic Party legislators as well as Trump himself.

As layoffs, budget cuts, and privatization accelerate, and Trump employs dictatorial measures against campus protesters and immigrants, rank-and-file educators must organize their resistance independently of the trade union bureaucracies and both capitalist parties. This means forming rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood to unite educators, students and parents with broader sections of the working class in mass meetings, protests and strike action to defend the right to public education and democracy.



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