Mass layoffs at the Department of Education target special education

Nancy Hanover
14 October 2025

As part of Trump's nationwide reductions-in-force (RIF) of federal employees beginning October 10, the Department of Education (ED) was cut by another 466 positions, threatening to decimate the programs that sustain disability rights in America. Nearly all personnel responsible for enforcing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have been terminated, abandoning 8.4 million students with disabilities. These cuts follow the earlier elimination of 2,000 ED workers—half its workforce.

IDEA, first passed in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, grew out of the civil rights struggles and the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision. It guaranteed children with disabilities the right to free public education and specialized services. The destruction of this framework marks a conscious effort to return to the days when working class children with disabilities were institutionalized, excluded from schooling or pushed into menial labor.

This reactionary attack on the right to education is bound up with a broader war on public health, including the promotion of anti-scientific lies about vaccines and autism, and the revival of eugenicist ideology that animated large sections of the American right in the early 20th century and provided the intellectual foundation for Nazi racial hygiene policies.

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) has been almost entirely wiped out, leaving a single official to oversee $15 billion in special education funding. Formerly staffed by 200 workers, OSERS reviewed state compliance, approved plans and investigated violations. Now, states can deny services and slash programs with impunity, free from any meaningful federal monitoring.

Thousands of parents, who once called OSERS for help navigating their children's rights, will find no one answering. Rural and low income districts, already suffering shortages of specialists, will be hardest hit. Without oversight, wealthier districts may maintain programs, but working class areas will face devastating cuts.

The layoffs coincide with the Trump administration's cancellation of IDEA Part D grants that fund research, professional development and family support. In September, 25 grants worth $14.8 million were eliminated, followed by nine rehabilitation grants worth $3.5 million. These grants funded university-based training and teacher development in critical shortage fields. Four terminated state Personnel Development Grants alone cut $6 million from special education training during an unprecedented teacher shortage.

Trump and billionaire Education Secretary Linda McMahon cynically denounced these grants as "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) programs. In reality, they financed services for children with low-incidence disabilities, such as deaf-blindness, and provided parent resources and academic research essential to IDEA's functioning.

Civil rights enforcement dismantled

The mass firings also cripple the Department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), which investigates discrimination in schools. McMahon has redirected OCR staff to pursue politically motivated "antisemitism" cases against pro-Palestinian speech while abandoning disabled students facing blatant discrimination, particularly in charter schools.

Federal law requires that ED maintain oversight capacity to ensure state compliance with disability statutes, making these actions illegal. The administration's claim that the cuts stem from the government shutdown is a fraud: Simultaneously it is transferring special education oversight to the Department of Health and Human Services—an agency spearheading attacks on healthcare—and openly vowing to abolish the Department of Education altogether.

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA)—with over 5.3

© World Socialist Web Site

million members—have refused to mobilize any opposition. Instead of calling strikes to halt the destruction of public education and healthcare, they have resorted to futile lawsuits. Earlier suits against Trump's previous mass firings were thrown out, with the Supreme Court sanctioning the president's federal jobs "bloodbath."

Against this treachery, educators, parents and students must build rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. These committees should link teachers, education workers and families in collective action—including a nationwide educators' strike—to defend the right to public education, oppose Trump's fascistic dictatorship and fight for the reorganization of society to meet human need, not private profit.

The dismantling of IDEA and the Department of Education is part of a broader effort to privatize public schooling and funnel trillions in social wealth to the ruling elite. From the start, IDEA was undermined by both parties. The 1975 law authorized the federal government to pay 40 percent of special education costs, but funding has never exceeded 18 percent and is currently 12 percent. Even within these limits, IDEA's programs provided certain social protections that the oligarchy now seeks to destroy.

IDEA's three core components have been crucial to millions of families:

• **Early Intervention (birth to age 3):** Serves 540,000 infants and toddlers, capitalizing on rapid early brain development to prevent long-term disabilities.

Special Education (ages 3 to 21): Provides Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for 7 million students, detailing specific services and supports.

• **National Activities and Capacity Building:** Funds research centers, technical assistance, and teacher training through Part D grants, most of which have now been abolished.

The services endangered by Trump's measures illustrate the tremendous scientific and social progress now under attack:

Speech-Language Pathology: Assists 1.3 million students with language and communication disorders through diagnostic therapy, augmentative communication systems and family training.

•**Occupational and Physical Therapy:** Supports students with cerebral palsy, spina bifida and brain injuries, ensuring access through adaptive equipment, wheelchair positioning and environmental modifications.

Assistive Technology: Provides devices from simple tools to sophisticated computer systems enabling independent communication and learning.

• **Transition Services:** Beginning at age 14, links school programs to adult employment and independent living through job training and counseling.

•**Autism Support:** Offers behavioral therapy, social skills instruction and communication enhancement for students with autism spectrum disorders.

• **Specific Learning Disabilities:** Covers 35 percent of IDEA students, offering specialized instruction and technological accommodations for reading, writing and math.

• **Low-Incidence Disabilities:** Serves students with deaf-blindness and multiple impairments requiring highly trained specialists.

• **Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities:** Coordinates educational and mental health services for youth facing trauma, anxiety or depression.

The destruction of these programs would condemn millions of children to neglect, reversing half a century of scientific and social progress. It exposes the reactionary character of the entire capitalist system, which regards the most vulnerable layers of society as expendable.

The way forward

The assault on special education and public schooling cannot be fought through appeals to Congress, the courts or the trade union apparatus—all of which accept the framework of austerity and nationalism. The working class must mobilize its own independent strength.

Rank-and-file committees should be established in every school, district and community to defend the right to free, universal education and healthcare, link up with federal workers opposing mass firings, and unite with workers in every industry.

The struggle to defend special education is inseparable from the fight against capitalism itself. The gains of the past—won through the civil rights and labor movements—must be carried forward through a conscious socialist movement of the working class to guarantee the right to education, healthcare and human dignity for all.

To join the fight to build educators rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site