

Trump breaks up the Department of Education, accelerating attack on public schools

Nancy Hanover
18 November 2025

The Trump administration announced Tuesday that it is transferring key functions of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to other federal agencies, marking the most aggressive step yet in its systematic dismantling of public education. “The clock is ticking,” posted Education Secretary Linda McMahon, as the administration seeks to fulfill Trump’s campaign pledge to abolish the Department of Education without congressional approval.

The Trump administration is moving the Offices of Elementary Education and Postsecondary Education to the Labor Department, according to an interagency agreement announced Tuesday and back-dated to September 30, just before the government shutdown. At least \$28 billion in funding streams are affected, including Title I appropriations, teacher training programs, English-language instruction and TRIO (a group of student service programs that support disadvantaged students).

The shifting of all oversight and funding for public education from pre-K through college to the Labor Department highlights the administration’s goal of subordinating the public schools and universities to corporate and military interests and reducing them to “work-readiness.”

Additionally, international education grants and Fulbright programs will be moved to the State Department to better align with US military interests. The ED justified the measure claiming these programs have “deviated from the core mission of supporting international education for global competitiveness.” The Office of Indian Education will be moved to the Interior Department, over the objections of Native American education advocates, who said they were made without the consent of tribal leaders. Also, some childcare access and medical programs will be moved to the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Department of Education will technically maintain nominal oversight of these programs—a workaround designed to provide legal cover for McMahon to dismantle the department “in piecemeal” without congressional authorization. For now, the action leaves in place the Education Department’s \$1.6 trillion student loan portfolio and its funding for students with disabilities, though it is widely expected that they will be transferred as well.

An official from the ED said the current staff working on affected programs will be transferred to other agencies but refused to say how many people will still be employed.

The announcement unleashed a torrent of opposition from educators and parents. On social media a New York parent posted, “Neither Trump nor McMahon attended public school nor went hungry because they couldn’t afford lunch. They were both born into multimillionaire families. It’s glaringly obvious they shouldn’t be guiding public education, let alone destroying it. The only motive can be to keep the public dumb and under their control.”

Baltimore_Jack wrote, “And, of course, Congress sits idly by, doing nothing.” MollyG added, “Trump is openly violating federal law and the Constitution. Under normal circumstances, this would be a major scandal.”

The announcement coincided with the White House’s cynical designation of “American Education Week” on November 15. Trump’s presidential message claimed, “By dismantling the Department of Education, my Administration has returned control of education to where it belongs—with States, local communities, and parents.” The proclamation endorses the current Trump plan for universal school vouchers, which would divert taxpayer funds to private and religious schools via tax credits, and highlights a new grant program that incentivizes schools to partner with businesses.

Trump’s “celebration” of education clearly aims to dismantle existing democratic rights and safeguards in access to schooling—fought for over generations—and reshape educational policy to favor corporate interests, the wealthy and increased military recruitment for expanding US wars.

The transfers follow weeks of public statements by McMahon claiming that the 43-day government shutdown, the longest in US history, proved the Department of Education is unnecessary. “The 43-day shutdown, which came smack in the middle of the fall semester, showed every family how unnecessary the federal education bureaucracy is to their children’s education,” McMahon wrote in a November 16 op-ed. “Students kept going to class. Teachers continued to get paid. There were no disruptions in sports seasons or bus routes.”

This is a calculated lie. Head Start programs serving nearly 65,000 children across more than 40 states either closed or faced imminent closure when federal funding was withheld on November 1, leaving thousands of low-income families without childcare and early education services.

Impact Aid payments—critical funding for school districts with non-taxable federal property, such as military bases—were delayed, destabilizing districts across the country. A survey of 90 federally impacted districts found more than one-third were experiencing budget pressures, forcing them to cut programs, freeze hiring and drain reserves.

Civil rights enforcement came to a complete halt. The Office for Civil Rights, already decimated by earlier layoffs that eliminated half its workforce and closed seven of its 12 regional offices, ceased all investigations into discrimination complaints during the shutdown. This left thousands of students—including those facing sexual harassment, disability discrimination and racial bias—without recourse or protection.

Federal grant-making activities were suspended entirely. Technical assistance to schools stopped. And while McMahon claims teachers “continued to get paid,” this misleading statement ignores that teachers are paid by local districts, not the federal government—a fact that reveals her fundamental dishonesty about the department’s actual functions.

Since taking office in January 2025, McMahon has systematically gutted the Department of Education through multiple rounds of mass layoffs. The department’s workforce has been slashed from 4,133 employees when Trump took office to approximately 2,183—a reduction of nearly 50 percent.

The October layoffs, announced during the government shutdown, targeted the very offices now being transferred to other agencies. Virtually the entire staff of the Office of Special Education Programs—responsible for overseeing the \$15 billion Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) program serving 7.5 million students with disabilities—received termination notices. The Office for Civil Rights lost additional staff beyond the devastating March cuts. Key personnel overseeing Title I funding for low-income schools, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, TRIO programs for first-generation college students, and grants to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) were eliminated.

Federal courts temporarily blocked these layoffs, but the Trump administration has persistently circumvented judicial oversight. The transfer of offices to other agencies represents a new tactic: Rather than formally eliminating programs, the administration is rendering them inoperable by stripping away the expertise, infrastructure and personnel necessary to administer them.

A further proposed transfer of special education oversight to the Department of Health and Human Services, run by medical quack Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., is particularly ominous. Advocates warn that this shift would promote a “medical model” of disability that treats students as diagnoses to be managed rather than learners with potential, undermining decades of progress toward inclusive education. The gutting of the ED’s Office of Civil Rights has already effectively ended federal oversight of special education, leaving 7.5 million students with disabilities at the mercy of individual states’ willingness and capacity to provide services.

The Democratic Party’s response to this existential threat to public education was characterized by its usual complacency and complicity. The trade union bureaucracies were no different. National Education Association (NEA) President Betsy Pringle

criticized Trump for making his announcement during Education Week.

Feeling required to evince opposition, she said, “Not only do they want to starve and steal from our students—they want to rob them of their futures.” But Pringle advanced no measures to mobilize the 3 million NEA members against the open dismantling of the Department of Education, a spearhead in Trump’s social counterrevolution.

The response of American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten was even more treacherous. Noting that the AFT “was opposed to a stand-alone Education Department back when it was first proposed in the 1970s” and that “Teachers have always hated bureaucracy for bureaucracy’s sake,” Weingarten urged the fascist president and his billionaire education secretary to “sit down with educators,” who “know how to make the federal role more effective, efficient and supportive of real learning.”

It is clear to all what the administration’s aim is: to destroy public education and transfer the schools into centers of religious, nationalist and militarist indoctrination. The Democratic Party is acting as Trump’s enablers and the union bureaucracies as a labor police force offering their services in exchange for a seat at the Führer’s table.

To defend the right to public education and all democratic rights, teachers, parents, students and the working class as a whole must organize its collective resistance independently of the Democratic Party and labor apparatus through the formation of rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, in every school, neighborhood and workplace.

These popular centers of opposition must connect the fight to defend public education to the struggle against the Trump administration’s broader authoritarian agenda: the roundup and deportation of immigrant families, the attack on democratic rights, and the transfer of trillions in wealth to the oligarchy and the Pentagon war machine while slashing Medicaid, SNAP and other vital programs.

What is required is not appeals to Congress or the courts, but mass political action to bring down the Trump administration and establish a workers’ government to expropriate the wealth of the oligarchy and reorganize economic life along socialist lines to meet the pressing needs of the population, including free, high-quality public education for all.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact