

Trump's Department of Education strips "professional" status from teaching, nursing and other essential fields

Nancy Hanover, Kimie Saito
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The Trump administration's Department of Education (ED) has effectively reclassified nursing, teaching, social work, and dozens of other essential professions as non-professional fields through changes to federal student loan regulations. This move will impose severe financial barriers on students attempting to pursue these careers.

Degrading the status of degrees in science, medicine, and education is the latest move in the Trump administration's war on knowledge and culture, carried out by Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Trump's quack-in-chief, Education Secretary Linda McMahon of the World Wrestling Federation, and the administration as a whole. These attacks echo the Nazi *Gleichschaltung*, which aimed to bring culture and education into line with the demands of the fascist state.

The reclassification, finalized through the Reimagining and Improving Student Education (RISE) Committee's negotiated rulemaking sessions in early November, narrows the definition of "professional degree" programs to just eleven fields: medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, optometry, law, veterinary medicine, osteopathic medicine, podiatry, chiropractic, theology, and clinical psychology. The changes are to take effect on July 1, 2026.

Theology is *included*, whereas nursing at all advanced levels (Master of Science in Nursing, Doctor of Nursing Practice), teaching and education degrees, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, audiology, social work, public health, architecture, and counseling are *excluded*—professions that educate children, care for the sick and elderly, and provide essential social services.

The ED is lowering the status of these fields—even though they require licensure, advanced education, clinical training, and direct practice—the literal definition of a professional program. The goal is to prevent hundreds of thousands of students from accessing graduate education in these specialties.

Under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act's new student loan structure, students pursuing degrees now classified as "non-professional" face significantly lower federal borrowing limits:

\$20,500 annually with a lifetime cap of \$100,000, compared to \$50,000 annually and \$200,000 lifetime for the narrowly defined "professional" programs. Equally damaging, the administration has eliminated the Grad PLUS loan program, which previously allowed graduate students to borrow up to the full cost of attendance for expenses not covered by other financial aid.

For nursing students, the impact is immediate and severe. A Master of Science in Nursing program costs an average of \$15,030 to \$42,880, while a Doctor of Nursing Practice degree—essential for advanced practice registered nurses who provide primary care, especially in underserved areas—averages between \$21,318 and \$74,752 depending on the institution and program type. Many programs, particularly those preparing nurse anesthetists, exceed \$100,000 in total costs.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) also establishes an "earnings premium" that connects federal loan eligibility to graduates' earning outcomes—a hurdle that will devastate teacher graduate programs in particular.

American teachers are now so underpaid after years of bipartisan budget cuts that teacher education programs fail the "earnings test" an astounding 60-80 percent of the time. If a program's graduates are not, on average, earning more than the high school-only comparison group, the program fails the "earnings premium" or median earnings test for that year. As of 2024, teachers earn 26.8 percent less than comparable college graduates.

The Trump administration is now using the decades of declining living standards for educators—enforced by the teacher unions—as a fatal weapon against public education's institutional survival. If would-be teachers are not eligible for federal student loans, they will be forced to change fields or forego higher education. The clear aim is to exacerbate the already dire shortage of educators.

Existing national teacher shortages have long reached a breaking point with the Trump administration simultaneously cutting \$600 million in federal teacher preparation funding. Other service-oriented fields with low starting wages—such as mental health, community health, and childhood

education--will also be sharply affected.

How can you focus if you're worried about debt?

A working Physician Assistant (PA) from Irvine, California, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "It's going to greatly impact me. A lot of my friends are doing NP [nurse practitioner] or occupational therapy [training programs] and they're just starting out. They're not sure if they want to do it anymore because their families can't afford it, and they don't want to be in debt afterward.

"It's not fair because there's a huge investment [on our part] that goes into this, even beyond just paying for the school. There is the sacrifice of doing volunteer hours, interning. I remember having to volunteer and intern during the holidays. But I feel bad for people that have already done that work, and now they're not going to get the same help that I did.

"In a lot of programs, you're not allowed to work while you're in the program. But how are you supposed to make money to pay for this and live? If they want you to really focus on school, how can you really focus if you're worried about all this debt? I don't want to switch professions. But I know a lot of my friends are considering it because they know that it's just going to be more difficult.

"What this program has done is help people become medical professionals because they can get the financial help to pay for these expensive programs. It also helps to raise people's socioeconomic level."

The administration's loan restrictions will be implemented amid critical shortages in most of these fields. For example, there is a deficit of approximately 295,800 registered nurses as of 2025, with projections indicating shortages will persist through 2037. Ten states, including North Carolina, Washington, Maryland, South Carolina, and Michigan, are expected to face nursing shortages exceeding 17 percent by 2037.

Rural and underserved communities, which already struggle with healthcare access, depend disproportionately on nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and advanced practice registered nurses—precisely the professionals now excluded from higher loan limits. According to the WWAMI Rural Health Research Center, rural non-core counties have just 55.2 nurse practitioners per 100,000 population compared to 69.5 in metropolitan areas, and approximately 5 percent of rural counties have no family physicians at all. Nurse practitioners and physician assistants provide essential primary care in regions where only 11 percent of physicians practice.

The teaching profession faces parallel devastation. At minimum, 411,549 teaching positions nationwide are either unfilled or filled by teachers not fully certified for their

assignments—representing approximately one in eight teaching positions. The most acute shortages are in special education (98 percent of districts report hiring difficulties), STEM fields, and schools serving high-poverty communities. The Learning Policy Institute reports that teacher shortages have increased every year since tracking began, with over 365,000 positions filled by uncertified teachers and 45,582 positions remaining completely vacant.

By restricting loan access for graduate education degrees, the administration is taking aim at teacher educators, school administrators, counselors, speech-language pathologists, audiologists, and special education specialists—professionals that schools depend upon and who require advanced degrees.

Speaking on behalf of the ruling oligarchy, Department of Education press secretary Ellen Keast arrogantly dismissed students as "crying wolf" because their "unlimited tuition ride on the taxpayer dime is over." In point of fact, the financial industry will cash in on the changes, exploiting young people who are seeking an education in these highly demanding and self-sacrificing fields.

As a result of the changes, hard-pressed students who choose to continue their education will be forced into the private loan market and high interest borrowing, without recourse to loan forgiveness or other federal protections. Private loans charge interest rates ranging from 3.19 percent to 17.95 percent—substantially higher than federal graduate loan rates of 7.94 percent.

US Congresswoman and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez downplayed the attack as "a way to quietly push women out of professional careers" rather than the fundamental reshaping of public education into a commodity primarily accessible to the wealthy. This is in line with the "working partnership" being effected between the DSA and the Trump administration in the wake of the election of Mamdani as New York City mayor.

The direct consequences of these measures to de-professionalize these careers will be: hundreds of thousands of students forced out of school, deepening workforce shortages in essential fields, and expanding healthcare and educational deserts in working class communities.

The Department of Education is expected to publish a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking in January 2026, opening a 30-day public comment period before final regulations take effect on July 1, 2026.



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