



Education | Healthcare | Public Services

Department of Education Talking Points Memo

The Department of Education is the government agency responsible for overseeing and regulating federal education efforts, primarily through distributing federal funds, enforcing civil rights laws and conducting educational research. For higher education in particular, this means the department develops educational policies, establishes accreditation standards, distributes funding to colleges, and provides technical support to educators, parents and students. The department also conducts research on student performance and educational equity, establishes accommodations for special education needs, and creates workforce development initiatives. Since its inception in 1979, the department has played a key role in shaping the future of education and fostering societal progress for Americans of all walks of life.

Department of Education offices affecting higher education:

- Office of Federal Student Aid
 - FSA manages the federal student loan program and ensures students have access to financial resources for college, such as grants and work-study programs.
 - FSA paid out \$85 billion in federal student loans in 2023-24, helping 45 million students attend college.
 - Pell grants are the largest source of non-loan student aid, totaling \$31 billion in 2023-2024 supporting 6.8 million students.
- Institute of Education Sciences
 - The IES conducts educational research and disseminates research findings, provides tools and resources to educators, school leaders and policymakers to help them make data-driven decisions.
 - Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency has canceled 89 contracts with the IES worth up to \$881 million, affecting the work of the National Center for Education Statistics, which is part of IES.
 - The Education Department canceled 10 contracts with the IES's Regional Educational Laboratories worth \$336 million, affecting the work of all 10 labs that help states and districts address issues such as postsecondary readiness, teacher preparation and workforce alignment.
- Office for Civil Rights
 - The OCR enforces federal civil rights laws in education.
 - The OCR's Feb. 4 Dear Colleague letter on Title IX reverses protections for transgender students, including requiring cross-examination of witnesses in a Title IX complaint, which must be conducted in a live hearing.
 - The Feb. 14 Dear Colleague letter and President Donald Trump's executive order titled "Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity" calls for the elimination of diversity,

The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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equity and inclusion programs and services, affecting underrepresented students' access to higher education, ability to afford their degree, and sense of belonging on college campuses.

- Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education
 - This office administers and coordinates services and programs to help people access education and training that aligns with the needs of the labor market, improves employment prospects and supports lifelong learning.
 - \$7.4 million annually is allocated to implement programs related to cybersecurity, teacher pipeline, work-based learning and employable skills for adult learners nationwide.
- Office of Postsecondary Education
 - This office formulates policies related to financial aid (e.g., Pell grants, student loans), accreditation, access to higher education, and the quality of colleges and universities.
 - The Office of Postsecondary Education administers postsecondary pipeline programs such as TRIO, which includes eight federally funded grant programs with hundreds of grantees that provide college access services for underrepresented populations. The elimination of these programs could leave hundreds out of work, institutions at a loss of between \$5 million and \$35 million in grant funds, and thousands of students without access to college.
- Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services
 - This office oversees programs, resources and services for students with disabilities.
 - It provides assistance for individuals up to age 21 to transition to postsecondary education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

How does the Department of Education affect AFT Higher Ed?

The relationship between institutions of higher education, their students and the federal Department of Education is very different from the relationship between local K-12 education agencies, minor students and the department. This primarily has to do with federal student aid, which makes higher education possible for millions of students.

From filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid to repaying student loans, a college graduate's relationship with the Education Department can last decades. Colleges and universities coordinate directly with Federal Student Aid, by some estimates the fifth-largest bank in the country,¹ to manage dispersal of grants and loans.

¹ Mike Enzi, "The Biggest Bank You've Never Heard Of," U.S. Senate Committee on the Budget, March 15, 2017, <https://www.budget.senate.gov/chairman/newsroom/oped/the-biggest-bank-youve-never-heard-of#:~:text=This%20makes%20student%20loans%20the,largest%20bank%20in%20the%20country.>

AFT Higher Ed represents thousands of workers across the country who do critical financial aid and admissions work that relies on the accessibility of the Federal Student Aid office.

Without access to this funding, student enrollment will plummet. Even short disruptions to the flow of federal funding, such as the issues in 2023 with the newly revised FAFSA, can affect student enrollment. Without students to teach, courses won't run.

Recent comments from Trump about moving the student loan portfolio to another agency such as the Treasury Department or the Small Business Administration² gloss over the serious logistical hurdles of such a transition.

The Education Department funds an array of programs to support student success in higher education, as illustrated above. Many of them, such as Clery Act crime reporting requirements for on-campus safety,³ are mandated by statute. AFT Higher Ed represents thousands of professional staff who support these and other critical programs.

The programs supported by the Education Department don't just support currently enrolled students, they also offer important insights into how institutions of higher education can adapt to serve today's students. The department-supported research into the use of technology, advising and career pathways can help all institutions improve.⁴ The Trump administration has already cut over \$900 million from the Institute of Education Sciences, severely restricting this work.⁵

How do people feel about the proposed changes to the Department of Education?

Eliminating the department is deeply unpopular. Polling backs up what we all know from our interactions with bureaucracy: People want to interact with knowledgeable humans, not AI chatbots.

² Kayla Tausche, "Dismantling of Education Department Puts Future of Trillions of Dollars in Student Loans in Question," CNN, March 7, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/07/politics/student-loans-education-trump/index.html>.

³ "Summary of the Jeanne Clery Act," Clery Center, <https://www.clerycenter.org/the-clery-act>.

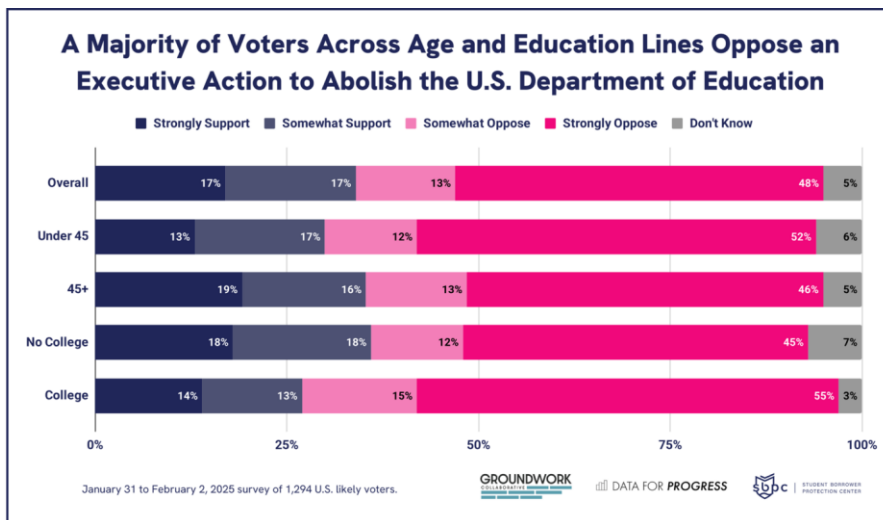
⁴ What Works Clearinghouse, "Search Publications" webpage, Institute of Education Sciences, <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Publication#/FWWFilterId:21,ContentTypeId:3,SortBy:RevisedDate,SetNumber:1>

⁵ Maria Carrasco, "What Cuts in Institute of Education Sciences Funding Means for Higher Education Research," National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, February 24, 2025, https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/35685/What_Cuts_in_Institute_of_Education_Sciences_Funding_Means_For_Higher_Education_Research.

A new poll published by New America in partnership with Voss Research and Strategy⁶, conducted between Feb. 21 and 25, shows:

- Only 1 in 4 Americans (26 percent) favor eliminating the U.S. Department of Education. **Further, only 10 percent of Black respondents and 18 percent of Latino respondents favor its elimination.**
- Fewer than 1 in 5 Americans (17 percent) favor moving the responsibility of distributing and overseeing student financial aid to another agency.
- Only 1 in 4 (20 percent) favor ending research into identifying the most effective ways students learn. The Trump administration has cut most contracts from the Institute of Education Sciences, including evaluations of and technical assistance to grantees of the Postsecondary Student Success Grant program.
- Only 15 percent favor replacing call centers, like student loan call centers, with AI chatbots.

A poll conducted earlier in February by Data for Progress, in partnership with the [Student Borrower Protection Center](#) and Groundwork Collaborative, had similar results:



Source: Student Borrower Protection Center

⁶ Sophie Nguyen, Rachel Fishman, and Olivia Sawyer, “Trump’s Proposal to Dismantle the Education Department Unpopular Among Americans,” New America, March 3, 2025, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/trumps-proposal-to-dismantle-ed-unpopular-among-americans/>.

Even the majority of Republicans show strong support for higher education programs managed by the Department of Education. [Polling by Third Way](#) of 500 Republican voters shows 81 percent support for Pell grants, 79 percent support for Public Service Loan Forgiveness, 79 percent support for income-driven repayment and 63 percent support for graduate student lending⁷. This underscores that Trump has no mandate for this extreme agenda.

What actions can members take against the proposed changes?

- Share your stories with the public. Please [fill out our form](#) if you have a story you want help amplifying.
- Lobby federal officials through attending public meetings and town halls or by setting up your own meeting with your member of Congress or their staff. If you are new to federal advocacy or would just like some advice, AFT Higher Ed can provide support.
- Contact state officials such as attorneys general, state superintendents and state workforce boards to share your concerns.
- Contact your alma mater's alumni offices to share your concerns.
- Build solidarity with other unions. Trump administration attacks are coming from all directions; do not assume that other unions are tracking this issue in detail. Your local labor councils are a great way to spread the word and to coordinate grassroots actions on this and other issues

⁷ Ben Cecil "What do Republican Voters Want on Higher Education?" Third Way. March 6, 2025. <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/what-do-republican-voters-want-on-higher-education> .