

What Would Really Happen if the Department of Education Was Abolished? Expert Analysis



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The Department of Education manages a massive \$1.6 trillion student loan program and provides about 10% of K-12 funding nationwide, including \$18.4 billion for high-poverty schools. What would happen if it disappeared?

People have called for this federal agency's abolition since its creation in 1979. The department proved its most important role by distributing \$190 billion in COVID-19 emergency relief to schools. Any attempt to eliminate it would need complex legislative action that could take up to 10 years.

Let's get into the potential risks of abolishing the Department of Education. We'll look at everything from civil rights enforcement to special education protections. This analysis will show how such changes could affect education at both state and federal levels.

Why Republicans Want to Abolish the Department of Education

Republicans have opposed the Department of Education since President Jimmy Carter established it as a cabinet-level agency [\[1\]](#). Their resistance comes from their beliefs about federal overreach and state's rights in education.

Historical opposition to federal control

Ronald Reagan started the movement to eliminate the Department of Education during his 1980 presidential campaign [\[2\]](#). His opposition showed a core Republican belief that education control wasn't constitutionally granted to the federal government. The department's creation challenged the traditional belief that local authorities should control education [\[3\]](#).

Current political arguments

Republican opposition has grown stronger, especially about the department's involvement in curriculum decisions. A newer study, published by Pew Research Center shows that [65% of Republicans viewed the Department of Education negatively](#) [\[4\]](#). Republican parents with K-12 students believe the federal government has too much control over public school teaching [\[4\]](#).

Republicans have three biggest concerns today. They don't want federal funding linked to curriculum requirements. They see federal involvement in local education decisions as overreach. They support giving states complete control over education [\[4\]](#).

State rights point of view

The 10th Amendment provides the constitutional basis for state control in education by reserving powers not given to the federal government for states [\[1\]](#). So, states now control everything in education:

- Teacher certification and curriculum standards
- School district operations and graduation requirements
- Collective bargaining rights and school funding decisions [\[1\]](#)

This state-based system has changed substantially. State and local governments now provide [over 90% of public school funding](#) [\[1\]](#). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has strengthened state's control over education policy by limiting federal intervention in low-performing schools [\[1\]](#). ESSA also removed requirements for states to adopt common core standards in exchange for federal funds [\[1\]](#).

Critical Programs at Risk

Getting rid of the Department of Education would put several vital educational programs at risk and affect millions of students across the country. Let's get into the most important programs that could see major changes.

Title I funding distribution

Title I funding helps schools that serve low-income students survive and thrive. The program gave out **\$15.6 billion** in fiscal year 2022 to support educational technology, remedial instruction, internet access, and mental health services ^[5]. The Department now distributes these funds through four different formulas:

- Basic Grants for districts with at least 10 formula children
- Concentration Grants for areas with more than 6,500 students or 15% of school population
- Targeted Grants using weighted calculations for higher-need areas
- Education Finance Incentive Grants based on state effort and funding equity ^[6]

Civil rights enforcement mechanisms

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces federal laws that ban discrimination in schools based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, and age ^[7]. OCR's responsibilities cover all state education agencies, elementary and secondary schools, colleges, universities, and other institutions that receive federal funds ^[8].

The Department of Justice would likely take over civil rights enforcement if the Department of Education disappeared. Parents would need to go through litigation to solve their complaints. This creates huge problems for families who need to address civil rights concerns ^[9].

Special education protections

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) makes sure students with disabilities can access appropriate education. Federal IDEA funding provides about **12-13%** of the money used for special education services ^[9].

Schools must follow specific procedures before they remove students with disabilities for disciplinary reasons. They need to prove through a manifestation determination that any behavior leading to removal did not stem from the disability ^[10].

These funds would turn into block grants if the Department of Education disappears, which removes federal oversight for compliance. School districts would become responsible for using funds without supervision. This could hurt services for students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 plans ^[9].

Impact on Higher Education System

America's higher education would look very different if the Department of Education disappeared. This change would alter how student loans work and who watches over colleges and universities.

Federal student aid administration

The Department now manages a massive **\$1.7 trillion student loan portfolio** and gives out about **\$100 billion** in student loans each year, plus **\$30 billion** in Pell Grants ^[11]. The Treasury Department would take over federal student loans if changes happen, and private lenders might play a bigger role ^[12].

Students who get federal aid should expect big changes. Right now, college students receive more than **\$160 billion** in federal grant money ^[13]. These important programs might change:

- Federal Work-Study programs (**\$1.2 billion**)
- Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (**\$910 million**)
- Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (**\$171 million**) ^[13]

Research grant management

Research schools nationwide would face new challenges in handling grants. Universities have spent an extra **\$7 billion** on research support from 2010 to 2017 ^[14]. Since 1991, the federal government added **110 new regulations** about research grants, which made everything more complex ^[14].

Other federal agencies could take over research grant management. This change would affect projects that NASA and the National Science Foundation fund ^[15]. Large research schools, like the University of California system, stress how important it is to keep research money flowing steadily for scientific progress ^[15].

Institutional accountability measures

Schools would follow different rules for staying accountable without the Department. The Office of Federal Student Aid runs with fewer than **1,500 employees** who review policies, contracts, and enforce rules ^[11].

States might need to take charge of college accreditation, which could change how schools maintain their quality ^[12]. This move could hit historically Black colleges and universities hard because they depend heavily on federal money for buildings and daily operations ^[9].

The change needs careful planning to keep student services and school operations running smoothly. Some experts think this might make colleges compete more ^[9]. Others worry about slower financial processing and fewer students getting into college ^[9].

State-by-State Implementation Scenarios

State education systems show glaring gaps in funding and resources. These gaps highlight risks if the Department of Education stops its oversight. These differences already exist under current rules.

Wealthy vs. poor state disparities

The funding gap between rich and poor districts has grown **44%** in just ten years ^[4]. Rather than distributing funds fairly, 14 states spend more money per student in low-poverty districts than in high-poverty areas ^[3]. To cite an instance:

- Nevada allocates **\$12,798** per student in low-poverty districts but only **\$8,731** in high-poverty areas - a **32%** difference ^[3]
- Illinois shows an **18%** disparity favoring wealthy districts ^[3]
- Connecticut maintains a **14%** gap between rich and poor districts ^[3]

Rural vs. urban implications

Rural and urban districts each face their own unique challenges. Districts with high numbers of students of color get about **\$1,800** less per student than those with fewer minority students ^[16]. Districts that serve mostly white students, though smaller in size, receive **\$23 billion** more than those serving mainly students of color ^[16].

Educational equity concerns

States handle equity-related provisions differently ^[4]. They want to provide fair opportunities but don't have enough staff, money, or resources ^[4]. The country underfunds education by **\$150 billion** every year ^[3].

Some states handle these challenges better than others. Utah gives about **21%** more funding to low-income districts compared to wealthy ones [16]. Alaska and Utah put **57%** more money into poorer areas than wealthy regions [3].

The Education Law Center's study reveals a troubling reality that "millions of students are consigned to schools lacking essential resources" [3]. These gaps could grow worse without federal oversight, especially affecting the **25%** of American schools that qualify as high-poverty [17].

Practical Feasibility of Elimination

Dismantling the Department of Education involves a complex legislative process with substantial practical hurdles. Let's get into the specific requirements and challenges this transformation would bring.

Legislative requirements

Congress must approve the elimination of the Department of Education through specific legislative channels. A bill needs to pass both chambers of Congress and receive presidential approval [13]. The process needs:

- A complete bill outlining program transfers
- Detailed plans to redistribute the **\$1.70 trillion** student loan portfolio [18]
- Amendments to existing education laws
- Provisions to continue civil rights enforcement [13]

Some functions could move to other federal agencies. The Treasury Department could manage student loans instead of eliminating them completely [18]. The Department of Justice would take over civil rights enforcement [19].

Timeline and transition challenges

The transition process creates major logistical hurdles. We managed **200+ programs** with thousands of legislative authorizations [20]. These programs' redistribution would need extensive planning and coordination.

Moving Federal Student Aid operations would create massive disruption [11]. The Treasury Department would need new systems and more staff to process loan payments and protect borrowers [18]. The department's **4,000 employees**, including more than **1,000 GS-15 managers** who earn over **\$160,000** yearly in Washington, would need new assignments or face job cuts [21].

Political obstacles

Public opposition creates a major barrier to elimination efforts. A recent YouGov survey showed voters rejected the proposal by a margin of **63-26** [22]. Public perception has changed somewhat, with the department's positive rating dropping from **53%** in 2018 to **45%** in summer 2023 [22].

Today's political world poses extra challenges. The Senate's 60-vote threshold makes passage unlikely [21]. Resistance comes from unexpected places - rural Republican states that rely heavily on Title I funding show reluctance to support elimination [23].

Education experts oppose the proposal and question whether program transfers could work. Questions arise about consistent funding streams and student interest protection [11]. Managing federal education programs through scattered agencies raises doubts about program effectiveness [24].

Conclusion

Getting rid of the Department of Education isn't simple. The impact on American education would be nowhere near small. Republicans promote state control with less federal oversight, but this raises some big concerns. Someone would need to handle the department's \$1.6 trillion student loan portfolio. The same goes for civil rights enforcement and vital funding programs like Title I. These responsibilities would need careful distribution among other federal agencies.

Looking at state-level scenarios reveals a troubling pattern. Educational gaps could get worse without federal oversight. Rich districts already receive more funding than high-poverty areas. Rural communities don't deal very well with unique challenges, and federal programs help them significantly.

The legislative process would take years. Moving hundreds of programs is just the start. Thousands of employees would need new assignments while keeping vital services running. Public opinion of the department has declined over the last several years, but most voters still don't want it gone.

Complete abolition might not be the answer. A better solution could involve reforming current structures while keeping vital programs and protections intact. This approach helps maintain educational fairness across states. It also addresses valid concerns about federal overreach. Finding the right balance between state independence and federal support for vulnerable students will shape American education's future.

FAQs

Q1. What would happen to federal education funding if the Department of Education was abolished?

Federal education funding would likely be significantly reduced or eliminated. Programs like Title I for low-income schools, special education funding, and student financial aid could be severely impacted. States would have to make up the funding difference or cut services.

Q2. How would abolishing the Department of Education affect special education services?

Special education services could be drastically reduced without federal oversight and funding. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) may no longer be enforced, potentially leaving students with disabilities without legally mandated services and protections.

Q3. Would teacher salaries and job security be affected if the Department of Education was eliminated?

Teacher salaries and job security could be negatively impacted, especially in states heavily reliant on federal education funding. Without federal standards and funding, some states may reduce education budgets, potentially leading to lower salaries or job cuts.

Q4. How would curriculum standards change if the Department of Education was abolished?

Curriculum standards would likely vary significantly between states without federal oversight. Some states may implement more religious or politically-influenced curricula. There could be less consistency in educational quality and content across the country.

Q5. What would happen to federal student loan programs if the Department of Education was eliminated?

Federal student loan programs would likely be disrupted or potentially privatized. This could result in higher interest rates, less favorable repayment terms, and reduced access to higher education for many students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds.

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Note: This article was thoughtfully crafted with the help of AI tools and fine-tuned by me, Dr. Burger, at the Student Evaluation Center, to ensure high quality and accurate information that is essential to for anyone wishing to learn more about becoming a special education advocate. Feel free to reach out to me with any questions you have.