



Education Spotlight Forum

“Dismantling Education: What the Trump Administration’s Illegal Attacks on Federal Programs Mean for Students, Families, and Educators”

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WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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Senator Hirono, members of the Senate Democratic Caucus, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Denise Forte, and I’m the president and CEO of EdTrust, a national nonprofit organization focused on closing opportunity gaps and advancing racial and economic justice in education. At EdTrust, we believe education is not just a pathway to opportunity — it is a civil right.

As I shared earlier this year when I had the wonderful opportunity to speak at a prior forum, our nation’s democracy, economy, and future are determined by students’ access to education. Yet for far too many students — especially Black and Latino students, Native students, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and students with disabilities — that access has always been fragile.

This administration and its allies have continued their unrelenting efforts to dismantle public education and remake American society as they see fit, which is outlined in Project 2025. This has taken the form of the dismembering of the Department of Education (ED) by selling it off for parts. The administration is claiming unilateral authority to move tens of billions of dollars in federal funding alongside ED’s programs, offices, and responsibilities to other agencies, despite being in clear violation of the Constitution, the authorizing statute for the Department of Education, recent appropriations laws, the Administrative Procedure Act, and a host of other federal laws that reference the myriad roles and responsibilities of ED and Secretary of Education. This is not only unlawful, but horrible policy that diminishes the ability of students and families to receive justice and essential supports, schools and universities to marshal vital resources, and the federal government to conduct the necessary oversight of the entire national educational system and the investments we make in it.

Moving ED's functions to other agencies, such as the administration of K-12 and higher education programs to the Department of Labor (DOL), is unlawful and is guaranteed to confuse and frustrate their efficient administration — and in fact, will only *increase* bureaucracy for states, districts, and individuals to sift through. States and cities, districts and universities, and administrators and educators, will all have to navigate multiple agencies and points of contact in the federal government to get information on funding status, technical assistance, and legal guidance for these programs, while continuing to work with the Department of Education on responsibilities like compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act and new rulemaking processes. This will result in disruptions, delays, and confusion for states, districts, other grantees, and parents to navigate. In fact, it already has for states seeking career and technical education funds transferred to DOL this summer, which has forced some states to now manage numerous grant systems and different reporting requirements to access essential federal support — funding that reportedly as many as nine states *still* cannot access. It is worth noting that the funding and programs contemplated here are notably only a fraction of what ED is trying to push to other agencies now. This will lead to an explosion of red tape and even greater confusion and inefficiencies.

Furthermore, DOL, Health and Human Services (HHS), and other receiving agencies do not have the staffing, relationships, or expertise to effectively administer these programs, which will deny students and families the services they are legally entitled to receive. Pretending otherwise will damage education in America. For example, moving programs to help children experiencing homelessness to the Employment and Training Office within DOL, despite those staff having little to no expertise or relationships in this sensitive field, makes no sense and jeopardizes the delivery of critical supports and resources to this already underserved group. Splintering programs also makes it more difficult for expertise to be shared, and accurate and consistent technical assistance to be provided. For example, students with disabilities participate in and are served across all programs at ED, not just those within the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). OSERS' expertise helps inform grants and fulfill crucial oversight responsibilities for numerous offices across ED that would now be housed within separate, different agencies. This will not improve services and support for students and families, and will, in fact, jeopardize students' and parents' rights.

This administration does not have a plan. To the extent they do, the plan is to move employees into another agency where they do a version of what they were doing, but under unclear authorities, multiple layers of career leadership and political appointees, and with no guidance about who is in charge. ED's own after-action report reinforces the significant logistical challenges facing the Department, noting, "the size and scope of OCTAE's

programs are miniscule [sic] compared to other [Education Principal Operating Components] and programs.... Larger formula grants and competitive grants are going to be much more difficult to migrate.” Recent [reporting](#) further underscores the chaos facing ED due to the absence of a thoughtful plan, with one employee sharing that there have been, “little-to-no answers for staff on logistics on how this will work and when...leaving staff with lots of anxiety and a sense that the admin is clueless.” It naturally raises the question of whether the desired outcome is not to improve services and supports, but rather to sabotage federal programs to justify the draconian cuts proposed in both the House and administration’s budgets, as detailed throughout Project 2025.

Rather than engage in a thoughtful, deliberate process about how to modernize and make ED’s operations more efficient — as well as how to improve the quality and delivery of services for students and families — they have instead upended the entire federal education system. Their moves, such as transferring the education of Native American children and college students to other agencies without any consultation with Tribes, as legally required by the Department of Interior or Education, is emblematic of their incompetence and total disregard for the federal role in education and for the real human beings impacted by these actions.

Congress must act to assert their authority and stop these dangerous, illegal moves by including language to reverse already announced transfers and prevent future transfers in any upcoming FY 2026 appropriations agreement.

This recent action by the administration builds on a litany of additional illegal and extremely damaging moves that have taken place this year that this caucus has pushed back on, such as: 1) mass firings at the Department of Education, illegally performed without any regard to job performance; 2) the illegal and unconstitutional impoundment of Congressionally appropriated education funds; and 3) exclusionary policies successfully included in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act that will create a funding stream potentially larger than Title I and Pell combined for private and religious school vouchers for the wealthy.

ED’s workforce continues to whipsaw between unilateral reductions in force (RIFs) and court orders. While the RIFs announced during the shutdown, as well as those yet to be fully executed as of the end of the shutdown, were reversed and forestalled in the deal to reopen the government, these protections expire in February. We should all be prepared to see the administration continue terminating highly qualified civil servants in their efforts to shutter the Department of Education. This is outright appalling, considering the recent news that as a result of struggling to address mounting civil rights complaints, ED is asking staff at the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to come back and pitch in temporarily — the same staff that the administration has attempted to eliminate for months, and are still working to

eliminate, based on reporting. The damage done and ongoing is evident with thousands of summarily dismissed civil rights complaints and millions of delayed student loan repayment plan applications.

These are intentional policies that undermine the ability of students experiencing racial harassment, gender discrimination, or denial of disability accommodations to receive legal redress and justice. The policies also limit student borrowers' access to plans that increase their financial stability.

The responsibility of ED to execute basic oversight of vital funding streams like Title I, IDEA, and Pell Grants has been thrown into question. Cuts to Federal Student Aid will harm student loan borrowers from the lowest-income brackets as they struggle to navigate a system with ever-changing complexities. The destruction of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) eliminates measures of impact and evidence that should inform policy. The cancellation of contracts and "freezing" of key grant competitions without explanation undermines our ability to address national problems like maintaining and strengthening the development of a high-quality teacher and principal workforce, school safety, college student success, and other vital priorities.

Despite the chaos injected into the system, we must not lose focus on the wildly unpopular funding proposals made by the administration. The [Trump budget proposal](#) would implement a 15% overall cut to the federal education budget by eliminating numerous programs designed to invest in our nation's youth and address affordability and improve retention and completion for college students. Programs like TRIO, GEAR UP, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), the Child Care Access Means Parents In School Program (CCAMPIS), Teacher Quality Partnerships (TQP), Hawkins Centers of Excellence, English Language Acquisition, and more would all be on the chopping block. The budget would also convert 18 federal K-12 programs into a single block grant, while reducing the total funding of the block-granted programs from \$6.5 billion to \$2 billion. This would not only reduce education services overall but open the door to districts with no legal obligation to target resources — abandoning certain families, students, and schools.

Furthermore, the president's budget would slash the maximum Pell award by nearly \$1,700, a cruel policy choice that, if enacted, would have devastating consequences for millions of low-income, college-aspiring students for decades to come.

The [House Labor-H bill](#) regrettably takes a similar approach and proposes double-digit percentage cuts to federal education spending for the last three years. The House bill

would also notably cut Title I — a lifeline for schools across the nation's high-poverty communities — by \$5 billion.

[Public polling repeatedly shows](#) that Americans want more federal spending on education programs, not less. These cuts must be rejected, and negotiations should align around the funding levels set by the [bipartisan Senate Labor-H bill](#) reported out of committee earlier this year by a vote of 26-3.

Finally, we are now seeing the Treasury Department begin implementing a wasteful and uncapped 1-to-1 tax credit for vouchers for wealthy families. This voucher policy, which could cost the federal governments tens of billions of dollars annually, will allow those families to continue sending their children to private and religious schools while siphoning funds from public resources. The private institutions propped up by these subsidies are often not bound by civil rights laws, not subject to public reporting requirements, not required to serve students from low-income backgrounds or students with disabilities, nor are they subject to the same state level oversight as public schools. Early indications are that the Treasury will not require any aforementioned safeguards and will likely prevent state governors from doing so as well — meaning that any state that opts into the program will likely be barred from basic oversight protections, such as determining which scholarship granting organizations (SGOs) do and don't participate to protect against waste, fraud, and abuse.

We continue to label these actions the [Great American Heist](#) — where public resources are deliberately being taken from the masses and handed to the privileged few. These tactics are cruelly designed to leave behind millions of students and families to fend for themselves while a small group of wealthy families receive the educational investment we should expect for all. It is a shocking and immoral failure not to maximize and develop the innate talent and potential of all children and young people in this country.

We remain ready to fight for the future of public education, and articulate a vision where investments are increased, civil rights are enforced, privatization is rejected, and opportunities are expanded for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds at every level, in every ZIP code.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions and to working together to defend education equity and civil rights for all students.