

Trump can't unilaterally abolish the US Department of Education. But mass layoffs can get him close.

By [Mandy McLaren](#), [Christopher Huffaker](#) and [John Hilliard](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 12, 2025, 12:51 p.m.



Carolyn Grim found out on Wednesday that she was laid off from the National Center for Education Statistics in the Education Department. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

President Trump this week began to make good on his campaign promise to [dismantle the US Department of Education](#) by cutting nearly half its staff, a move experts said would leave parents and students without vital oversight of schools.

While Trump cannot on his own abolish the department, his move on Tuesday to slash some 2,000 of the agency's roughly 4,100 employees is enough to hamper its core functions, such as helping students pay for college, collecting and publishing [basic facts about the nation's schools](#), and enforcing civil rights laws by ensuring institutions treat all students equitably.

The sweeping cuts may bring an end to data collection the federal government has conducted for decades, denying Americans the ability to know [how their schools are doing](#) — the very data the Trump administration has relied on to argue for dismantling the department. Restarting that work would be expensive or impossible, education specialists said, with expertise drained out of both the department and the private testing firms that have seen mass layoffs after their contracts have been cut.

Massachusetts Education Secretary Patrick Tutwiler said that the federal agency is a crucial backstop and that states don't have the resources to provide such oversight on their own.

"They protect the rights of some of our most vulnerable students," Tutwiler said. "Who's going to ensure their rights are met? Who's going to ensure that someone has their back from the federal government?"

Even supporters of the cuts acknowledged their intended purpose: to halt the department's work.

"Where do you reach the point where you've fired so many people that you can't do the job that the law requires you to do?" said Neal McCluskey, director for the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that has advocated for abolition of the department.

From its creation in 1979, the Cabinet-level department has been targeted by small-government advocates for elimination, arguing that local governments and parents should control all aspects of K-12 education.

Trump allies view the department as overly ideological and say it has failed to improve education outcomes despite its large budget. Education advocates, however, say the department has critical functions, such as providing funding to low-income school districts and special education programs.

Most decisions about public schooling in the United States are made by states and local districts, and [federal funding](#) has accounted for 13 percent of all K-12 spending in recent years. Still, the federal agency exercises sweeping oversight authority, requiring school districts to take corrective action when they've been found to be violating federal civil rights laws.

For example, [federal officials recently cited Massachusetts](#) for failing to ensure local school districts provide special education students with the protections and services they're entitled to. The federal government also oversees the student loan portfolio and Pell Grants, which give low-income students access to higher education.

Tutwiler said he was especially alarmed by mass layoffs in the civil rights division.

There are more than 300 education-related civil rights cases pending in Massachusetts, most of which involve disability-based discrimination, according to federal data.

Currently, the federal government allocates more than \$18 billion in Title I and roughly \$15 billion in IDEA funds to states based on formulas considering the number of low-income and special education students living there.

Speaking last week about the anticipated executive order, Governor Healey expressed alarm. "What does it mean to Massachusetts?" Healey said. "Well, is your child on an IEP? Does your child have a disability? The services that your family gets for your child in Massachusetts go away."

McCluskey, of the Cato Institute, believes the Education Department is unconstitutional.

“The founders would never have thought that education, which is very specific to individual children, families, and communities, should be managed by this distant national government,” he said.

Most of the staff reductions are at the agency’s Washington, D.C., headquarters, though a spokesperson for the Education Department said Wednesday that a regional Boston office was closed and “all employees in the office were impacted by the reduction in force.”

There were at least 25 workers in Massachusetts laid off, and another eight from around New England, according to spreadsheet obtained by the Globe showing American Federation of Government Employee members affected by the cuts. It’s unclear whether nonunionized employees were also laid off.

Carolyn Grim, a Boston-based employee with the National Center for Education Statistics, was among those laid off. Grim, employed by the Education Department for nearly 15 years, conducted work that supported the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the “Nation’s Report Card.”

Her main research, though, was a longitudinal study tracking middle school students over multiple years to measure their progress. Her study, for example, provided important evidence that eighth-grade students can succeed in Algebra 1 — a question that has riven communities around Boston.

Other long-term studies dating back decades were also cut, she said.

“This is throwing away taxpayer money that is used to make education better in this country,” Grim said from her home in Charlestown.

All but three of the laid-off unionized staff in New England worked in either federal student aid or the Office for Civil Rights, according to the union spreadsheet. Among the nearly 1,000 workers nationwide listed on the spreadsheet, the majority worked in one of

those two departments. More than 100 were part of the department's research arm, the Institute for Education Sciences.

No employees at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education were affected by the cuts, said Jacqueline Reis, department spokesperson.

The education department has also shut offices in Boston, as well as in Dallas, Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and San Francisco.

Visited by Globe reporters on Wednesday, the department's eighth- and ninth-floor offices at the John W. McCormack Federal Building in Post Office Square were vacant, with empty rooms devoid of furniture, and wires for computers cut on the floor. But much of that office space, said Paul Hughes, a spokesperson for the US General Services Administration, was actually vacated in February, 2024.

In one empty room, a wallet-sized card had been left behind, pinned to a cork board. The card listed questions for Education Department staff to ask themselves throughout the workday, including: "Is it consistent with my agency's mission?" and "Am I using my time wisely?"

On the flip side, it said: "You have the authority and the responsibility to make government work better and cost less."

It was a quote from former vice president, Al Gore, a Democrat.

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