

What It Would Mean to Abolish the U.S. Department of Education

by **FREDERICK HESS**

IN THE FIRST GOP PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE of the 2024 campaign cycle, four candidates called for eliminating the U.S. Department of Education—embracing the same position as front-runner Donald Trump. The pledges generated the predictable passel of calls from reporters and muckety-mucks wondering how this would work and what it might mean. It seems worth taking a moment to examine the proposal and how likely it is to come to fruition if a Republican claims the White House.

Eliminating the Department is hardly a new notion. National figures' promising to abolish the Department (and then not doing so) has been a staple of GOP politics for four decades. In 1980, the year after Jimmy Carter fulfilled a campaign pledge to the National Education Association by creating the Department, Ronald Reagan pledged to dismantle it. In 1994, Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" advocated eliminating the Department. In 1996, Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole did the same. In 2011, the GOP presidential debates featured an infamous moment when ED was one of three cabinet departments that Rick Perry promised to eliminate—and one of the two he could recall.

Republicans have yet to follow through on any of this. In fact, the most significant expansion of federal education authority in decades occurred under the administration of Republican George W. Bush. Even as Trump pledges to abolish the Department if elected in 2024, the closest he came to doing so while in office was to muse on the possibility of merging the Department of Education and the Department of Labor.

So, how seriously should observers take today's calls to eliminate the Department of Education? To judge what candidates have to say on this score, we should ask three questions.

What do you mean by "abolish"?

Congress could vote to "abolish" the Department and simply move all its programs, funds, and personnel to other departments or agencies. Indeed, this seems most likely to happen, since none of the candidates have voiced enthusiasm for eliminating (or even cutting) Department of Education funding for Title I, special education, or Pell Grants.

So, does "abolishing the Department" mean getting the federal government out of education by eliminating programs and staff? That course seems truest to the plain meaning of the promise but also the toughest to honor. Might it just mean

handing programs to other agencies or cabinet departments? That seems truer to the letter than the spirit of the pledge.

If you downsize, which programs will you cut?

Given the outsized role of student lending in its finances and operations, the U.S. Department of Education has been wryly described as a big bank with a small policy shop attached. So, by eliminating the Department, are candidates committing to downsize, phase out, or put an end to federal student lending? Aside from student loans, the biggest federal education expenditures last year were Title I funds for high-poverty schools (\$18 billion a year), special education funding (\$15 billion a year), and Pell Grants (\$28 billion a year). Does "eliminating the Department" mean slashing these outlays?

Absent clear answers, it's safe to assume that education spending would continue on its current course—which means that "eliminating ED" would likely entail jamming these programs into another cabinet department. It's not obvious how this would change the nature or scope of Washington's role.



How will you convince the public and policymakers?

Calls to eliminate the Department of Education play well in a GOP primary because ED is massively unpopular with Republicans. This summer, Pew reported that the Department's favorable-to-unfavorable ratio among Republicans was an abysmal 29–65. Back in March, however, AP-NORC reported that 65 percent of adults said the federal government spends too little on education (just 12 percent said it's spending too much). Fifty-two percent of *Republicans* said the federal government should spend more on education.

When even Republicans say they want Washington to spend more on education, it's hard to see how any administration—no matter how sincere its ambitions—will find the resolve to substantially shrink the federal role.

So, what's the plan to rally popular support, marshal the votes on Capitol Hill, and overcome the filibuster? Without answers, talk of eliminating the Department is little more than hollow chatter. Anyone hoping to rein in federal educrats will need to offer more than symbolic gestures.

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