

# Policy Backgrounder: A Brief History of the US Department of Education

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## Key Insights

Congress established the current US Department of Education in 1979, although a federal agency with a sole focus on education was first formed in 1867 as part of Reconstruction-era policies. However, dissent and apprehension around the first Department forced its downgrade into an office a year later and continues to fuel modern opposition regarding the federal role in education.

- The contemporary US Department of Education was established by a narrow margin of four votes in 1979. The agency's existence and purpose remain a topic of debate, and it is currently a target for closure as part of the President-elect's policy agenda.
- The federal government provides just 8 percent of funding for K-12 education in the states. K-12 education in the United States remains under local control, primarily funded and directed by state and local governments.
- A [recent proposal](#), introduced in the Senate last month, would close the Department by transferring most programs to other agencies and replacing the primary federal funding vehicle and other initiatives with block grants to states for K-12 education and higher education.

## To Promote the Cause of Education

While the modern US Department of Education has been operational since 1980, the subject of education was first the basis of a federal agency in 1867. The initial agency was established to gather national education data and uplift best practices to increase and strengthen school systems in states. The one-page [legislation outlined](#) the purpose as "collecting such statistics and facts as shall show the condition and progress of education in the several States and Territories, and of diffusing such information respecting the organization and management of schools and school systems, and methods of teaching, as shall aid the people of the United States in the establishment and maintenance of efficient school systems, and otherwise promote the cause of education through the country."

The effort was led in Congress by Ohio Representative (and future US President) James Garfield. Garfield presented the effort as an imperative to help educate the country for the sake of democracy in the aftermath of the American Civil War. He pointed to high illiteracy levels, especially among new immigrants from Europe and the formerly enslaved. In a floor [speech to support the legislation](#), he said "our system of government is based upon the intelligence of the people . . . the alternatives are not education or no education; but shall the power of the citizen be directed aright towards industry, liberty, and patriotism? Or, under the baneful influence of false theories and evil influences, shall it lead him continually downward, and work out anarchy and ruin, both to him and the government? If he is not educated in the school of virtue and integrity, he will be educated in the school of vice and iniquity."

As part of Reconstruction efforts, Confederate [states were required](#) to include the right to education in their rewritten state constitutions. Some negatively viewed the US Department of Education as a tool to monitor the states' adherence to this rule and implementation. One New Jersey Representative [worried](#)

that the authority to collect “statistics . . . will give a controlling power over the schools systems of the states.” This view was held by a large number of leaders in Congress and persists as a concern today. Consequently, the initial Department was downgraded to an Office of Education within the Department of the Interior just one year after being established. Yet its work and mission continued.

## An Increasing Federal Role in Education

In the 112-year period between the demotion of the first US Department of Education and the establishment of the present Department, a considerable number of [federal policies shaped](#) and contributed to education. In 1917, the Smith-Hughes Act provided federal match funding to states for vocational education in agriculture, home economics, and trade and industrial education. In 1934, during the Great Depression, federal [New Deal funding](#) supported 70 percent of all new school construction, supported teacher pay which prevented layoffs, and through the Works Progress Administration expanded child care access for workers and school lunch for students in need. The Lanham Act of 1941 provided funding for schooling in military impacted communities and [established](#) child care programs for working women during World War II. In 1950, the [Impact Aid Program](#) was established to provide assistance to local schools with a significant population of children who reside on federal properties, including military bases and Indian lands, and with parents in the uniformed services. In 1958, following the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik, Congress passed the [National Defense Education Act \(NDEA\)](#) to strengthen education on all levels, particularly in math, science, engineering, and foreign languages. The law also promoted higher education and included funding for college scholarships and loans. The passage of NDEA also demonstrated an increased appetite for a larger federal role in education.

By 1963, Congress passed several laws relating to education, including the Higher Education Facilities Act and the Vocational Education Act leading President Lyndon Johnson to label the session as the [Education Congress of 1963](#). In 1964, President Johnson made education one of the cornerstones of his [War on Poverty](#), partly influenced by insights gained from his teaching experience. He secured the passage of several new federal programs and policies impacting education including the national Head Start program, the Higher Education Act, and the school integration provisions of the Civil Rights Act.

In 1965, Congress and President Johnson passed one of the most notable, unprecedented, and comprehensive federal policies relating to education, the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#) (ESEA). The law significantly expanded federal involvement in education. ESEA authorized significant funding to States, particularly for the education of underserved students, and has served as the primary vehicle for federal education efforts for decades through various reauthorizations. At the time, ESEA was under the jurisdiction of the US Office of Education, which had moved from the Department of the Interior in 1972 to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The new law propelled the [office’s budget to \\$4 billion](#) from \$1.5 billion.

The federal role in education continued to expand through new laws, including the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975](#). By 1979, the Office of Education was restored to the rank of a Department, [heralded by President Carter](#) as “a significant milestone in my effort to make the Federal Government more efficient.” However, the move only cleared passage in the US House of Representatives by 4 votes. Those opposed presented arguments harkening back to the suspicions surrounding the Department in the prior century – the federal role in education and fiscal austerity.

## Prolonged Opposition

These two issues have continued to frame the debate for decades and fueled the promise to abolish the Department by several US presidential candidates and Members of Congress. President Reagan [sought to close the Department](#) arguing “Welfare and education are two functions that should be primarily carried out at the state and local levels.” Ironically, his first education Secretary was [ambivalent about the matter](#),

stating “We talk about giving more responsibility to the states, and I think we should. But we shouldn’t do it because of their record in education. It’s been terrible.”

Still, in 1996, Republican leaders honed in on the [effort to shutter](#) the Department. The party’s platform stated “The Federal government has no constitutional authority to be involved in school curricula or to control jobs in the marketplace. This is why we will abolish the Department of Education.” The statement made almost 30 years ago is akin to present day arguments, including a statement from current US House of Education and Workforce Committee [Chair Virginia Foxx](#) (R-NC) who asserted “The word education is not in the Constitution as a responsibility of the federal government. And so, what we need to do is devolve the work that’s being done now at the Department of Education in Washington back down to the states and the localities.”

Five years later, however, spending through the Department significantly increased under President George W. Bush with the passage of No Child Left Behind (a reauthorization of ESEA). Expanded federal spending on education during this period [increased local revenue](#) from the federal government by an average of 60 percent (before inflation) and outpaced local property tax revenue as a source of funding.

In actuality, the Department does not directly dictate what states and schools do, especially regarding standards, assessments, teaching, and curriculum. K-12 education in the United States remains under local control and primarily funded by state and local governments. The federal government only provides 8 percent of [funding for K-12 education](#) in the states. However, federal programs and funding stipulations have a history of influencing local action in education to different degrees. Most notably, the Department has [served as a source](#) to address disparities across the country granting funds specifically for students and schools impacted by poverty and challenging civil rights offenses, from segregated schools in the 1950s and 1960s to the [school discipline imbalances](#) of the present day.

Currently, the Department [manages](#) programs across every level and area of education, serving over 50 million K-12 students across the country. In addition to elementary and secondary school support, the agency directs financial assistance programs for more than 12 million postsecondary students. The department has the third largest budget among federal agencies, after the Departments of Defense and Health and Human Services, yet the smallest number of staff.

Efforts to close the Department throughout the years have often [proposed a similar approach](#) – to move programs and offices to alternative federal agencies. The most [recent proposal](#), introduced in the US Senate last month in November, would transfer most programs to various agencies and replace ESEA and other initiatives with block grants to states for K-12 education and higher education. The legislation is aligned with a renewed [campaign promise](#) of President-elect Trump to close the Department.

## Conclusion

The importance of education has remained central to the US since its founding, as has the federal government’s evolving role and level of investments. As such, the Department of Education has received varied approval from political leaders and continued threats to close it. While outright abolishing the Department has proven an uphill battle, Congress and the President have the ability to both increase and decrease its reach. Formal structure aside, questions remain about the ability to meet the Department’s initial goal of elevating the quality of education and its historical goal of promoting equity for all in the absence of a stand-alone federal agency.

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