

**Make Education Great Again?  
The Controversial Plan to Kill the US Department of Education**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the contentious debate surrounding proposals to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), established in 1979 to elevate education as a national priority and centralize federal education policy (Radin & Hawley, 1988). It critically analyzes historical and contemporary arguments through a comparative lens, examining Ronald Reagan's and Donald Trump's distinct motivations and strategies to eliminate or significantly reduce the DOE's influence (McGuinn, 2006; Troy, 2005; Sides, Tesler, & Vavreck, 2018). Supporters argue dismantling the DOE would enhance local control, reduce bureaucracy, and foster educational innovation (Friedman, 1962; Chubb & Moe, 1990). Conversely, opponents highlight the department's essential role in maintaining national educational standards, promoting equity, and ensuring accountability (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Ravitch, 2010). Through an examination of legal, political, practical, and historical contexts, this analysis demonstrates the significant barriers to fully dismantling the DOE, suggesting that despite ongoing political advocacy, its abolition remains unlikely (Kagan, 2001; McGuinn, 2006).

**Keywords:** Department of Education, federalism, education policy, decentralization, educational equity, bureaucracy, Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump

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## Introduction

The slogan "Make America Great Again" was first prominently used by Ronald Reagan during his 1980 presidential campaign (Troy, 2005). Reagan employed this powerful rhetorical tool to capture his vision of restoring economic prosperity, bolstering national defense, and reaffirming traditional American values after a period characterized by economic hardship, inflation, and perceived political weakness (Wilentz, 2008). The slogan encapsulated Reagan's broader conservative agenda, including deregulation, tax cuts, a stronger military posture, and reduced federal government involvement (Brands, 2015). The message resonated with voters disillusioned by the economic stagnation and perceived loss of global standing that marked the late 1970s, tapping into widespread nostalgia for an earlier era of American prosperity and confidence (Pemberton, 2015).

Decades later, Donald Trump revived "Make America Great Again" during his 2016 presidential campaign, revitalizing its appeal by focusing on themes of nationalism, economic revitalization, stricter immigration policies, and a shift toward America-first policies both domestically and internationally (Sides, Tesler, & Vavreck, 2018).

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) is a federal agency tasked with establishing educational policies, administering federal assistance to schools, collecting data on American educational institutions, and enforcing federal education laws. The primary goal of the DOE is to guarantee equal access to education and to promote educational excellence nationwide (Cross, 2014). The department plays a crucial role in shaping national education policy, distributing federal funds, and ensuring accountability through programs such as Title I for low-income students and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (McGuinn, 2006).

The DOE was officially established in 1979 under the Carter administration with the signing of the Department of Education Organization Act. Before its formation, federal education responsibilities were managed by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The creation of the DOE aimed to elevate education as a national priority, enhance the coordination of federal education programs, and provide a more centralized approach to addressing educational challenges (Radin & Hawley, 1988). However, the department's establishment faced political controversy, as critics feared it would result in increased federal overreach and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Peterson, 2003).

This article aims to critically examine the ongoing debate over dismantling the Department of Education (DOE), exploring arguments both for and against its existence. Advocates for dismantling the DOE argue that education should be a state and local responsibility, emphasizing decentralization, school choice, and reduced federal intervention (Friedman, 1962). Conversely, opponents contend that the DOE plays an essential role in maintaining national education standards, ensuring equity, and supporting disadvantaged communities (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003). By evaluating historical attempts to eliminate or reduce the DOE's influence, along with legal, political, and practical considerations, this article will assess whether dismantling the department is a feasible policy objective or merely a political talking point.

## **II. Arguments in Favor of Dismantling the DOE**

### **Comparative Analysis of Reagan's and Trump's Efforts to Dismantle the Department of Education**

Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump both advocated dismantling the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), but their motivations and political environments differed significantly.

#### **Ronald Reagan's Perspective**

Reagan's stance on dismantling the DOE was rooted in a federalist philosophy emphasizing state and local control over education (McGuinn, 2006). Reagan criticized federal oversight as excessive and counterproductive, arguing that the newly established department created unnecessary bureaucracy and restricted local educational autonomy (Cross, 2014). Despite Reagan's clear ideological commitment and repeated advocacy, his proposals encountered significant political resistance from a Democratic-controlled Congress, ultimately limiting his ability to achieve this goal (Reagan, 1982; Manna, 2006).

#### **Donald Trump's Perspective**

Trump's advocacy for dismantling the DOE centers around ideological criticisms of federal oversight, perceived indoctrination, and inefficiencies that, in his view, have compromised educational standards and traditional values (Ravitch, 2010). Unlike Reagan, Trump's efforts benefited from stronger political support in Congress, facilitating greater potential for implementing his agenda (Heritage Foundation, 2022). Trump's strategy included significant decentralization of education policy, promotion of school choice, and reallocation or reduction of federal educational responsibilities and funding (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015).

While both Reagan and Trump advocated reducing federal educational oversight, Reagan emphasized federalist principles of state autonomy, whereas Trump highlighted ideological concerns and practical inefficiencies. The differences in their political contexts, Reagan facing substantial Congressional opposition and Trump benefiting from more favorable conditions, underline the complexities and evolving nature of debates over the federal role in education.

Critics argue that federal involvement in education leads to unnecessary bureaucracy and undermines state and local control. Federal oversight often imposes one-size-fits-all policies that may not align with local educational needs, leading to inefficiencies and constraints on state-driven innovation (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). The DOE's top-down approach has been criticized for limiting local autonomy and fostering dependency on federal funding rather than encouraging self-sufficient state policies.

Concerns about the DOE's budget allocation and the effectiveness of its programs also fuel the debate over its dismantling. Many scholars argue that the department's spending does not translate effectively into improved educational outcomes, leading to questions about its efficiency (Friedman, 1962). Critics contend that funds could be better utilized if allocated directly to states and local school districts, reducing administrative costs and increasing educational impact at the community level.

Proponents believe that reducing federal control could enhance educational quality through competition. Decentralization and school choice initiatives, including charter schools and voucher programs, have been advocated as mechanisms to improve educational outcomes by fostering a competitive environment that incentivizes schools to perform better (Chubb & Moe, 1990). This perspective asserts that a more market-driven approach to education would yield innovation and responsiveness to student needs, which is often hindered by federal regulations.

Some assert that education should be a state responsibility, as per the 10th Amendment. The Constitution does not explicitly grant the federal government authority over education, and critics argue that the DOE's existence is an overreach into state jurisdiction (Viteritti, 1999). This argument maintains that state and local governments are better positioned to address the specific needs of their educational systems without unnecessary federal intervention.

### **III. Arguments Against Dismantling the DOE**

The federal role in enforcing civil rights laws and providing equal educational opportunities remains a critical function of the DOE. Programs such as Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and initiatives under the Civil Rights Act ensure that historically disadvantaged groups receive equal access to education (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003). The elimination of the DOE raises concerns about whether states would uniformly uphold these protections without federal oversight.

Another argument against dismantling the DOE is the importance of national standards in maintaining educational quality. Federal initiatives such as Common Core, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and standardized accountability measures help ensure consistency in education across states (Ravitch, 2010). Without these federal frameworks, disparities in state curricula and educational outcomes could widen, potentially leading to a decline in overall academic performance.

Federal funding plays a crucial role in supporting low-income and special education students. Title I funding for disadvantaged schools and grants for special education ensure that students from underprivileged backgrounds receive necessary resources (Kozol, 1991). The potential loss or reduction of these funds, should the DOE be dismantled, could exacerbate educational inequities and limit opportunities for vulnerable populations.

The DOE also plays an essential role in overseeing federal student aid programs, which provide financial assistance to millions of college students. The department manages Pell Grants, federal student loans, and work-study programs that enable access to higher education for low- and middle-income families (Baum & McPherson, 2019). Without a centralized federal agency, these programs could become fragmented, making higher education less accessible and affordable for many Americans.

### **IV. Current Administration's Efforts Towards Dismantling the Department of Education**

The current administration has initiated significant efforts to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), reflecting a broader agenda to reduce federal involvement in education and enhance state autonomy (Peterson, 2010). These efforts encompass policy announcements and budgetary restructuring and have elicited diverse reactions from policymakers, educators, and the public (McGuinn, 2006).

The Trump administration reintroduced discussions about abolishing the DOE, a long-standing goal of conservative policymakers since the department's creation in 1979 (McGuinn, 2006). The appointment of Secretary of Education Linda McMahon marked a significant shift in policy direction, with the administration tasking her with the objective of significantly reducing the DOE's footprint (Cross, 2014). This initiative was presented as part of a broader effort to shift educational oversight back to state and local governments, aligning with the principles of federalism (Viteritti, 1999).

Advocates for dismantling the DOE cite concerns over bureaucratic inefficiencies and argue that federal education policies have failed to improve student outcomes despite increasing funding (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Critics of federal oversight claim that returning control to states would encourage localized innovation, allowing education systems to tailor curricula and policies to the specific needs of their communities (Manna, 2006).

The administration's strategy to reduce the DOE's influence included significant budget cuts and the reassignment of its responsibilities to other agencies or state governments (Radin & Hawley, 1988). Proposals have been made to eliminate federal funding for programs deemed ineffective, shifting financial responsibilities to state governments (Friedman, 1962). Additionally, restructuring plans have been proposed that would merge certain DOE functions with other federal agencies, such as transferring the Office for Civil Rights to the Department of Justice (McGuinn, 2006).

Historically, previous efforts to curtail the DOE's influence have faced substantial resistance. The Reagan administration made similar proposals, though political opposition prevented their enactment (Peterson, 2010). The contemporary movement to reduce federal involvement in education mirrors these earlier attempts, though the current political climate remains deeply polarized on the issue (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003).

The efforts to dismantle the DOE have sparked intense debate among policymakers, educators, and the general public. Supporters of the initiative argue that eliminating federal oversight would lead to greater efficiency, increased school choice, and more responsive local governance (Friedman, 1962). Opponents, however, contend that dismantling the DOE would exacerbate educational disparities, as federal funding and policies play a crucial role in ensuring equity for disadvantaged students (Kozol, 1991).

Public opinion remains divided, with conservative policymakers and advocacy groups championing the movement for decentralization, while civil rights organizations, teacher unions, and progressive policymakers argue that dismantling the DOE would be detrimental to national educational standards and equality (Ravitch, 2010). Research suggests that the DOE plays a critical role in maintaining accountability and protecting vulnerable student populations, raising concerns about the long-term consequences of eliminating the department (Baum & McPherson, 2019).

A central component of the administration's restructuring plan is the Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025*, which outlines a comprehensive framework for overhauling federal education policies (Heritage Foundation, 2022). The initiative proposes the transfer of DOE responsibilities to other departments and significant funding cuts to federal education programs. Critics argue that *Project 2025* would disproportionately harm marginalized communities by reducing federal protections and resources (Ravitch, 2010).

In summary, the current administration's efforts to dismantle the DOE represent a major shift in federal education policy. While proponents argue that decentralization would lead to improved efficiency and innovation, critics warn that eliminating federal oversight could deepen educational inequalities. As political debates continue, the future of the DOE remains uncertain, with significant legal, financial, and logistical challenges standing in the way of its dissolution.

## **V. The Reality: Can the Department of Education Be Dismantled?**

The prospect of dismantling the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) involves navigating a complex landscape of legal, political, practical, and historical considerations. This section examines these multifaceted challenges to assess the feasibility of such an endeavor.

### **Presidential Authority and Executive Orders**

One of the central questions in the debate over dismantling the DOE is whether a president has the authority to do so through an executive order. While the president possesses significant executive power, this authority does not extend to unilaterally eliminating an executive department created by Congress. Under Article II of the U.S. Constitution, the president can issue executive orders to manage the operations of the federal government (Kagan, 2001). However, such orders must align with existing laws and cannot override or repeal congressional statutes (Shane, 2009).

The DOE was established by the Department of Education Organization Act of 1979, which means that only Congress has the legal authority to repeal or amend its governing statute (Department of Education Organization Act, 1979). While a president could issue an executive order to reduce the DOE's budget, reorganize its internal structure, or shift certain responsibilities to other agencies, a complete dissolution of the department would require legislative approval (McGuinn, 2006). Additionally, any executive order attempting to bypass Congress in dismantling the DOE would likely face immediate legal challenges, as courts have historically ruled against executive actions that conflict with statutory mandates (Fisher, 2014).

### **Legal and Constitutional Barriers**

Abolishing a federal department like the DOE necessitates legislative action by Congress. The Department of Education was established through the Department of Education Organization Act of 1979, a statute that only Congress has the authority to repeal or amend (Department of Education Organization Act, 1979). Therefore, any attempt to dismantle the DOE would require the passage of new legislation—a process that demands majority approval in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, followed by the President's signature (McGuinn, 2006).

In Congress, dismantling the DOE would require introducing and passing a bill to either eliminate or merge the department with another agency. The standard legislative process mandates that a bill must receive a simple majority vote (50% +1) in both the House of Representatives and the Senate (Davidson, Oleszek, Lee, & Schickler, 2020). However, in the Senate, such a measure would likely be subject to a filibuster, which requires a supermajority of 60 votes to invoke cloture and proceed to a final vote (Schickler, 2020).

If the measure passes both chambers, the president would need to sign it into law. Since Trump actively supports dismantling the DOE, a veto would not be a concern. However, if future administrations oppose the measure, achieving a two-thirds majority in both chambers (67 votes in the Senate and 290 in the House) would be necessary to override a presidential veto (Davidson et al., 2020).

Moreover, certain functions of the DOE are intertwined with mandates from other federal laws. For instance, the enforcement of civil rights in education is governed by statutes such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Civil Rights Act, 1964; Education Amendments, 1972). Eliminating the DOE would necessitate reassigning these enforcement responsibilities to other federal entities, a process that could face legal challenges if not meticulously executed (Peterson, 2010).

### **Political and Institutional Resistance**

The proposal to dismantle the DOE is likely to encounter substantial opposition from various stakeholders. Educators' unions, such as the National Education Association (NEA), have historically advocated for federal involvement in education to ensure equitable funding and standardized policies across states (National Education Association, n.d.). Civil rights organizations may also resist dismantling efforts, given the DOE's role in enforcing anti-discrimination laws in educational settings (Ravitch, 2010).

Additionally, many state and local education agencies rely on federal funding and guidance to support programs for disadvantaged populations, including low-income students and those with disabilities. The potential loss of federal support could prompt resistance from state governments and local school districts concerned about filling the resultant resource gaps (Kozol, 1991).

### **Practical Considerations**

Beyond legal and political hurdles, practical challenges abound in redistributing the DOE's functions. The department oversees a wide array of programs, from federal student loans to special education services. Transferring these responsibilities to other federal agencies or devolving them to states would require careful planning to prevent service disruptions (Manna, 2006).

For example, the administration of federal student aid, currently managed by the DOE's Office of Federal Student Aid, involves complex systems and processes. Reassigning this function to another agency, such as the Department of the Treasury, would necessitate extensive coordination to maintain continuity for borrowers and educational institutions (McGuinn, 2006).

### **Historical Attempts and Lessons Learned**

Historical precedents illustrate the difficulties inherent in attempts to abolish the DOE. During the 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan advocated for the department's elimination, reflecting a broader conservative critique of federal involvement in education (Reagan, 1982). However, despite these intentions, the DOE remained intact throughout Reagan's presidency, largely due to political opposition and the complexities associated with dismantling an established federal agency (McGuinn, 2006).

Similarly, in the mid-1990s, the Republican Party included the abolition of the DOE in its platform. Yet, despite holding a majority in Congress, the party was unable to garner sufficient support to pass legislation effecting the department's dissolution (Republican Party Platform, 1996). These historical episodes underscore the formidable challenges—both political and practical—associated with efforts to dismantle the DOE (Peterson, 2010).

As the debate over the role of the federal government in education continues, the challenges associated with dismantling the DOE remain significant. The intersection of legal barriers, political resistance, logistical hurdles, and historical precedent suggests that any serious effort to eliminate the department would require an unprecedented degree of coordination and support. The following section will explore the broader implications of this debate and consider potential alternatives to full-scale abolition.

## **Conclusion**

The debate over dismantling the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) encapsulates broader tensions within American governance regarding federalism, states' rights, and the role of government in society. Ronald Reagan initially popularized the notion of dismantling the department as part of a broader philosophical commitment to federalism, decentralization, and limited government involvement in education (Brands, 2015; Troy, 2005). While political realities constrained Reagan's administration, his advocacy laid the foundation for ongoing debates regarding the appropriate scope of federal educational oversight.

Decades later, Donald Trump revived Reagan's call to dismantle the DOE but with an ideological emphasis more explicitly centered on combating perceived federal overreach, inefficiencies, and ideological biases in education (Sides, Tesler, & Vavreck, 2018). Trump's administration leveraged a more supportive political environment, increasing the possibility of achieving substantial structural changes. Despite the favorable conditions, however, significant legal, constitutional, and practical barriers remain, underscoring the complexity inherent in altering federal institutions established by Congress (Kagan, 2001; Shane, 2009).

Arguments for dismantling the DOE highlight the benefits of decentralization, school choice, and enhanced local control as mechanisms to foster educational innovation and efficiency (Friedman, 1962; Chubb & Moe, 1990). Advocates contend that states and local communities are better positioned to address specific educational needs, reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, and tailor education policies that reflect local priorities and values (Viteritti, 1999).

Conversely, opponents emphasize the critical role of the DOE in ensuring educational equity, maintaining national standards, protecting civil rights, and supporting vulnerable student populations through federal funding and oversight (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Ravitch, 2010). They argue that dismantling the DOE could exacerbate educational disparities, fragment accountability systems, and undermine nationwide efforts to maintain consistent quality and access in education (Kozol, 1991; Baum & McPherson, 2019).

Historical attempts and ongoing policy debates demonstrate the substantial challenges associated with dismantling or significantly reducing the DOE's influence. The complexity of federal law, the political landscape, institutional resistance, and practical implementation concerns collectively suggest that the complete abolition of the DOE remains politically and logistically daunting (McGuinn, 2006; Manna, 2006; Peterson, 2010).



Ultimately, the future of the Department of Education will likely continue to reflect the dynamic interplay of ideology, policy effectiveness, legal constraints, and public opinion. Whether dismantling the DOE is achievable or remains largely symbolic, depends on the capacity of political coalitions to navigate these multifaceted barriers and articulate clear, practical alternatives that convincingly address the educational needs and equity concerns of the American populace.

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