

Trump again promises to abolish the U.S. Department of Education



Credit: Evan Vucci/AP

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FILE - President Donald Trump (right) talks with Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk at the White House in Washington, Feb. 3, 2017. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File)

Republican presidential candidates have been running against the U.S. Department of Education since it was created, so when former President Donald Trump proposed the idea in a recent talk with Elon Musk, he was traveling a hardened path.

During a live discussion on Musk's X platform Monday night, the candidate told the billionaire that abolishing the agency would be job one if he were to win the presidency again.

"I want to close up the Department of Education, move education back to the states," Trump said. "Not every state will do great," he added, singling out California and its "terrible" (Democratic) governor, Gavin Newsom.

It's a popular move among many Trump supporters, given the agency's recent missteps. The rollout of the new financial aid system for college students was [plagued with glitches](#) that caused delays. The Biden administration's decision to [write off college student loan debt](#) further enraged conservatives. And the agency's role in delaying the return to in-person learning during the pandemic, at the behest of teachers unions, wasn't endearing for Republicans either (or many Democrats for that matter).

Indeed, the education agency has had a target on its back since months after its inception, when Ronald Reagan campaigned for abolishing it during the Republican's successful bid for the presidency in 1980.

Georgia Republicans such as [David Perdue](#) and Jody Hice supported the idea during their days in Congress. U.S. Rep. Thomas Massie, R-Ky., [introduced legislation](#) in 2017 to dismantle the department. He reintroduced the legislation [last year](#).

“States and local communities are best positioned to shape curricula that meet the needs of their students,” Massie said in a news release announcing his bill, echoing the talking points of many conservative critics.

Rick Hess, from the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute, said he wouldn’t mind seeing the agency abolished. But he noted that Trump didn’t do it when he was president the first time.

The big hitch: Congress would have to be involved.

After all, Congress created the agency for then-President Jimmy Carter more than four decades ago [after his campaign promise](#) to gain the support of a teachers union.

And to get it through Congress, Trump would need the support of the Senate, the divided body where it takes 60 votes to overcome a filibuster.

“The likelihood of either party having 60 votes in the Senate is nil,” Hess said.

He noted that Republicans have blown hot and cold on the agency. President George W. Bush harnessed it for accountability, imposing the testing requirements that linger in schools today.

Besides the technical hurdles, there are the pragmatic and political ones: The Education Department sends billions of dollars to school districts to help them serve less fortunate students. There are programs for foster children, for students with disabilities, for those who can’t speak English and for kids in poverty.

Those programs serve both red and blue states, noted Thomas Toch, who runs an education think tank at Georgetown University called [FutureEd](#).

So even if the broader arguments for eliminating the agency — namely that it’s a multitentacled, bloated bureaucracy — resonate with Trump’s base, any resulting cuts might not be popular.

The federal government is sending \$2 billion to Georgia’s K-12 schools this year.

It amounts to 8% to 10% of school budgets, said Dana Rickman, president of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education.

“That’s a big hit to districts,” she said.

That doesn’t count the federal aid for student loans and other higher education funding.

The funding streams that flow through the agency date way back to President Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty in the mid-1960s. Undoing the Education Department would merely force the government to figure out how to channel that money through other agencies, said Matthew Chingos, of the left-leaning Urban Institute.

“You can’t just pass a law that says ‘we close the Department of Education,’” he said. “You’d have to decide what would happen to the things that are in it.”

That, he said, would also require an act of Congress.

“This is an idea that’s definitely been bounced around for a while,” he said.

