

Why conversation about education in the U.S. has picked up recently

Brendan Schnoebelen

Education policy has recently become a major talking point in the United States after Donald Trump's electoral college victory over Vice-President Kamala Harris in November. Many are talking about the potential for significant changes to education in the U.S. once Trump reassumes power in January, including the shuttering of the Department of Education (DOE).

The buzz around the country comes after Trump [campaigned](#) on a message that he would be "closing up" the DOE, and would be "sending all education and education work it needs back to the states." At the Democratic National Convention in August, former First Lady Michelle Obama [made a comment](#) about Trump's campaign promise to shut down the DOE in her remarks to the convention audience in Chicago. "Shutting down the Department of Education, banning our books – none of that will prepare our kids for the future."

Trump has already made a noteworthy move regarding education just over a month away from his inauguration. Trump selected Linda McMahon as his education secretary late last month. [According to the U.S. Small Business Administration](#) (SBA), McMahon served under Trump in his first administration as the 25th Administrator of the SBA. She is also the co-founder of World Wrestling Entertainment, or WWE.

In the Oval Office, President Joe Biden is winding down his term after pulling out of the race for president in July after age-related concerns stemming from a poor debate performance against Trump in late June. Some of the education policy talk has escalated into anxiety for many who preferred Biden or Harris over Trump.

Can Trump actually shut down the Department of Education right now?

The simple answer is no. Trump cannot officially take action as president until he takes the oath of office on January 20th of next year. However, even though Trump will have a Republican majority in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, the task of simply shutting down the DOE will not be easy. [According to CBS News](#), the Senate would need at least 60 votes in favor of a bill that would close the department due to filibuster rules. Republicans will officially govern with 53 seats when Trump assumes office, meaning that at least seven Democrats will have to be on board with the idea. Michigan State University education policy professor Joshua Cowen told CBS News "It's going to be hard."

What did Biden and Trump already do with education policy?

President Biden campaigned on an ambitious education agenda before becoming president. Perhaps the biggest [promise](#) he made was covering at least \$10,000 of student loans for those making less than \$125,000 per year. The loan forgiveness plan moved forward, but was stalled by the Supreme Court in June of 2023. [According to The Hill](#), a White House spokesperson said "The Biden-Harris Administration has cancelled more than \$127 billion in loan debt for nearly 3.6 million borrowers...". That number could be higher since we are more than a year after the spokesperson's comment.

During his first term, Trump repealed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that was passed by the Obama Administration. [According to Brookings](#), the repeal removed the State Plan and Accountability rules under the ESSA. By repealing the ESSA, the Trump Administration signaled that they would likely be taking a more hands-off approach to monitoring what states do under ESSA from the federal level.

Besides the altering of the ESSA, Trump and then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos also [championed](#) the idea of school choice, or giving families more options of where to send their children to school. At least in their first 100 days, no significant school choice policy was passed by the first Trump Administration.

What did K-12 and college education look like under both administrations?

Using data compiled by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), [USA Facts](#) reports a drop in mathematics and reading proficiency in both 4th and 8th graders in the U.S. between the years of 2019 and 2022. However, this may be due to the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) that permeated the U.S. in 2020 and 2021. Many schools were forced to halt in-person learning to stop the spread of the disease, stunting the education progress of K-12 students around the country due to a lack of traditional learning methods. Nonetheless, the challenge has remained in the U.S. of getting proficiency rates back to pre-pandemic levels.

One area of success both campaigns can point toward when it comes to education has been the steady rise of people aged 25+ with at least a bachelor's degree. According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), during the heart of the first Trump Administration in 2018, 32.6 percent of people aged 25+ had at least a bachelor's degree, up more than four percent from 2010. The steady climb has continued under the Biden Administration too. In 2023, 36.2 percent of people aged 25+ had at least a bachelor's degree, which is up a full eight percent from 2010.

What will Trump try to do with education in his second term?

One good source we can look to for answers on this is Project 2025. [According to the Project 2025 website](#), Project 2025 is “A historic movement, brought together by over 100 respected organizations from across the conservative movement, to take down the Deep State and return the government to the people.” President-elect Trump has been linked to Project 2025 because some members of his first administration have contributed to Project 2025's *Mandate for Leadership* book.

Mandate for Leadership's chapter on the DOE is 44 pages total, covering a wide range of issues within education. [According to Mandate for Leadership](#), Project 2025 seeks to provide education choice for children, rescind the current administration's Title IX regulations and perhaps most telling, end many student loan forgiveness practices by the Biden Administration.

Given *Mandate for Leadership's* ambitious 44-page chapter on education policy alone, Trump's second term has the opportunity to be very active in signing significant education legislation. However, the decisions the first Trump Administration made on education could also signal a move of putting each individual state in the driver's seat of crafting their own education policy. This would align more with the hands-off approach to education Trump took when he [repealed the ESSA](#) early in his first term.

References

- Hansen, M., Mann Levesque, E., & Valant, J. (2017, May 2). *Reflecting on education policy during Trump's first 100 days—and predicting what's next*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/reflecting-on-education-policy-during-trumps-first-100-days-and-predicting-whats-next/>
- The Heritage Foundation. (2023). *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*. https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-11.pdf
- The Heritage Foundation. (n.d.). *Project 2025*. Project 2025 | Presidential Transition Project. <https://www.project2025.org/>
- Jones II, A. (2024, August 21). *Democrats at DNC attack Trump on how they say Project 2025 would hurt education in states*. ABC 11. <https://abc11.com/democrats-dnc-attack-trump-how-say-project-2025-would-hurt-education-states/15213019/>
- Kates, G. (2024, November 15). *Can Trump dismantle the Department of Education? It won't be easy, experts say*. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-dismantle-education-department/>
- Lonas Cochran, L. (2023, November 28). *Where Biden stands on his education campaign promises*. The Hill. <https://thehill.com/homenews/education/4323542-biden-education-student-loans/>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a part of the U.S. Department of Education*. <https://nces.ed.gov/>
- USA Facts. (2023, January 23). *Education*. <https://usafacts.org/topics/education/>
- U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (2023). Educational Attainment. *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1501*. Retrieved December 13, 2024, from [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1501?q=EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1501?q=EDUCATIONAL%20ATTAINMENT).
- U.S. Small Business Administration. (n.d.). *Linda McMahon*. <https://www.sba.gov/person/linda-mcmahon>
- World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)*. https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1