

EDUCATION

Project 2025's Plan to Dismantle Public Education —And Screw Over Disabled Kids

Nearly nine million students rely on DOE-backed disability accommodations.

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Project 2025's stance on the Department of Education is clear: "Federal education policy should be limited and, ultimately, the federal Department of Education should be eliminated."

Donald Trump's imminent presidency has raised concerns among disabled advocates, kids, their parents, and others about the federal government's role in making sure disabled students get an equitable education. Not that it's clear how a Trump DOE would dismantle itself, or whether enough Republicans in Congress would agree to risk their seats over such a proposal.

"There is a growing concern within the education field," says Fred Buglione of All In for Inclusive Education, which helps train districts and provides individual consultations on how to support disabled students, of "how deep the cuts might be, what that means for the field, and at the end of the day, what that means for children"—even if the Trump administration, Buglione says, seems to only have "concepts of a plan" of how that would happen.

Equitable education for disabled people is inherently part of the current of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that Trump and allies like Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who himself has a disability, seem to oppose. (This past October, Texas cut \$600 million in Medicaid funding for disability education services.) The federal Department of Education regularly gives important guidance to state departments of education, says Michael Gilberg, an autistic attorney who focuses on special education law.

"States have a patchwork of laws, and things are enforced differently," Gilberg said. "You need the federal government to oversee and make sure all the states are doing the same"—in other words, to ensure through funding and oversight that disabled kids in Massachusetts and Oklahoma receive the same access to education.

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The Department currently funds, supports, or regulates countless aspects of disabled kids’ education in public schools, particularly those who receive accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Those acts protect all students’ right to disability accommodations known as 504 plans and Individualized Education Plans, respectively—a right 8.4 million students count on—and, in the case of the IDEA Act, fund up to 40 percent of the costs.

“If you take away those federal funds, you’re taking away qualified teachers,” said Kyla Bishop, an attorney with Disability Rights Arkansas. “It would be a domino effect.”

In rural areas of the state, Bishop said, meeting the needs of students with disabilities is already a challenge—some districts can already only afford a four-day school week, and face shortages of staff like occupational therapists and mental health providers.

During his previous administration, Trump and then-Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos touted school vouchers, which transfer funding from public to private schools. Voucher programs, which do not have any formal federal oversight, are perhaps a key example of the costs and dangers of leaving disability education to the states. They may seem promising to parents, but parents who use vouchers to attend private schools forfeit their kids’ right to an IEP, which also protects students’ rights to be educated in the least restrictive environment. A child who is autistic can be isolated in a classroom, alone, if a private school decides that is what it wants to do; a private school doesn’t have to provide speech therapy if it doesn’t want to, or could keep kids from participating in gym class because the school doesn’t want to modify activities to be accessible. The list goes on.

“When a voucher is used for a school that does not provide sufficient services, parents have no recourse,” states a 2018 report from the National Council on Disability. “If a private school fails to meet a student’s needs, the student will not be entitled to compensatory services.”

Cheryl Theis, of the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, said that many families who choose school vouchers for their kids with disabilities are encouraged to believe it will help them succeed. “It has backfired for so many families who feel like they were promised something better and different, only to realize that their children have essentially been dumped in cottage industries.”

Bishop, of Disability Rights Arkansas, is critical of her state’s school voucher law, which she says pulls money from public schools that are under law required to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

“You can’t keep taking money away and then expect a better result,” Bishop said. “That doesn’t make sense.”

For Elena Hung, the executive director of Little Lobbyists, which advocates for children who have complex medical needs, her 10-year-old daughter Xiomara’s individualized education plan is the only way she can attend school at all: it allows Xiomara, who has had a tracheostomy and requires a feeding tube, to have a nurse with her on the school bus and in the classroom.

“Not just for my daughter, but for many children with medical needs, if they don’t have a dedicated nurse who’s trained in their care, then they can’t go to school, because it’s just not safe,” Hung said. Hung is concerned that a gutted DOE may lead to more kids with complex medical needs being institutionalized, as many working parents cannot afford around-the-clock care.

Gilberg, the special education attorney, says that “getting rid of the federal Department of Education will really curb IDEA and 504 enforcement, which ultimately leads to more litigation, which ultimately [would lead to] clogging of the courts.”

An increased reliance on litigation would also drive inequities: many parents cannot afford a lawyer, or may not know where to turn to pursue lawsuits. Nationwide, close to 100 Parent Training and Information Centers, which can help parents understand the rights their children with disabilities have in public schools, are also funded through the Department of Education; with the DOE dismantled, many would likely cease to exist if funding falls by the wayside.

Project 2025 does not directly attack federal funding for students with disabilities, as it does with abortion rights. Instead, it suggests that IDEA funds “should be converted into a no-strings formula block grant targeted at students with disabilities and distributed directly to local education agencies.”

To Tammy Kolbe, a principal investigator at the American Institutes for Research, that claim is incredibly vague. “It remains uncertain what they might do with respect to both the level of appropriations for IDEA and the formula that they might use to distribute those funds to states and districts,” Kolbe said.

IDEA funding is already unequal; one report Kolbe worked on highlighted differences in funding for students receiving disability education services via its grants. In 2020, the formulas used to calculate funding meant that Wyoming received about \$2,826 in IDEA funds per student, whereas Nevada received \$1,384 per student—less than half.

The Department of Education is also a crucial source of data about education and disability, including how disabled students of color are treated—data used, for example, to order districts to take action if Black disabled youth are suspended much more often than white ones.

When such figures “are significantly disproportionate for three years or more, then [districts] have to dedicate 15 percent of their funds to a corrective action-type program to address those issues and investigate why it’s happening,” said Theis.

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A lack of federal data would prevent that kind of corrective action, even if the funds remain. Even if the collection of data persists, Project 2025’s dictates against “critical race theory” in civil rights enforcement, including in education, indicate that the Trump Department of Education may not take action against the discrimination that students of color, particularly disabled ones, face.

New Disabled South CEO Dom Kelly, who lives with cerebral palsy, says that data from the Department of Education leads to more innovation, which helps disabled kids succeed.

“I also worry that lack of data collection will impact federal grants that fund research that directly impacts some disabled students,” Kelly said, including research on “assistive technologies in the classroom.”

While the possibility of the Department of Education dissipating is worrisome, it will not happen overnight, and it’s not guaranteed to fall.

“Anything that happens in the federal government takes time, planning and strategy,” said Jill Jacobs, the executive director of the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities. Before coming to NACDD, Jacobs was a commissioner in the Department of Health and Human Services.

Kelly also says organizers need to turn to state-level officials to work together, if, as many expect, Trump's education department leaves key issues to states.

"We need to prepare state elected [officials] for the fights that are going to be ahead with [Georgia] Gov. Brian Kemp or Greg Abbott, or whoever, to be able to make sure that there's oversight [and] that there's funding," Kelly said.

Hung, of Little Lobbyists, encourages parents to form a united front with the teachers and other school staff who already help guard kids' access to education.

"I would advise families to work closely with their schools. There is a partnership there that should be leveraged," Hung said. "Schools should be just as concerned about this as families are."

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