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Norton attack on education "dated target" The Senate hopeful reportedly wants to kill the federal agency.

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Democrats last week pounced on a report that Republican U.S. Senate candidate Jane Norton wants to abolish the U.S. Department of Education as part of her push to reduce the size of government.

They accused her of embracing a "far-right Tea Party agenda" and pandering to a small group of voters.

Even a leading political consultant questioned why Norton would go after such a "dated target" when President Barack Obama has given the GOP plenty of ammunition.

Norton's comments came at a campaign stop earlier this month in Alamosa attended by several Tea Party activists, including Randall Smith.

"One thing I found especially interesting was that she felt that the federal Department of Education was part of the bloat that should be cut. Completely," Smith wrote in his blog.

Norton's campaign manager, Norm Cummings, declined Thursday to comment on her remarks or the reaction to them.

"We're going to have more to say about this and other issues related to budgetary restraints and out-of-control spending after the first of the year," Cummings said.

"It's a holiday. Nobody cares."

But clearly Democrats do, including the man Norton wants to unseat, U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet. He was the Denver Public Schools superintendent when President Barack Obama considered him to head the Education Department.

"At a time when we are falling behind countries around the world in literacy, math and science, the last thing we need to do is abandon our national commitment to education," Bennet said.

"The Department of Education provides much needed resources to local schools, student loans and grants to kids who want to go to college.

"Eliminating the Department of Education is a step backwards, not forwards."

Bennet's Democratic primary rival, former House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, was equally vocal.

"The best way to bring and keep good jobs in America is not to abandon our national commitment to public education," Romanoff said. "It's to make good on the words too many in Washington merely mouth, like 'no child left behind.'"

Political consultant Eric Sondermann was puzzled why Norton would go after the Department of Education when Republicans long ago abandoned the idea.

"If the motive is to secure a few nice mentions on Tea Party blogs, it's a fool's errand," Sondermann said.

"Moreover, Obama's Department of Education is actually a voice of reform, a first for a Democratic administration. That's something reform-minded Republicans ought to encourage along with all Americans who care about the deeply troubled state of our public schools."

Weld County District Attorney Ken Buck, who also is running for the GOP nomination for Senate, does not support dismantling the department, his campaign said. The other GOP contender, former state lawmaker Tom Wiens, could not be reached for comment.

Norton's proposal isn't groundbreaking among Colorado Republicans.

Tom Tancredo pushed the idea during the 12 years he collected a paycheck from the Education Department as its regional director and again when he was elected to Congress in 1998. And Bob Schaffer supported abolishing the department when he successfully campaigned for Congress in 1996.

Tancredo said that when a Reagan administration official first approached him about a job, he warned them he opposed the idea of a Department of Education.

"They said, 'That's why we called you,'" he recalled with a laugh.

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of Education

1979 - President Jimmy Carter, left, splits off education functions from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, creating a separate Education Department that begins operation in 1980.

1980 - Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan calls the department "President Carter's new bureaucratic boondoggle" but his efforts to eliminate it, once elected, go nowhere.

1990 - President George H.W. Bush pushes for the creation of "national goals" for K-12 schools, leading to criticism that the federal government is trying to micromanage education.

1994 - President Bill Clinton signs into law an act that requires states to develop federally approved education plans and to adopt a system of tests to ensure that students make yearly progress.

1996 - Presidential candidate Bob Dole promises to abolish the Department of

Education but loses the election.

2002 - The No Child Left Behind Act is signed into law by President George W. Bush, triggering an expansion in K-12 spending from \$20 billion in 2000 to \$37 billion by 2005.

2009 - President Barack Obama's economic stimulus bill provides college students and state and local governments with \$45 billion in extra education funding.

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