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Rand Paul's idea to kill education agency would affect poor most

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By Halimah Abdullah | Lexington Herald-Leader

WASHINGTON — Students from poor families would feel the most pain if calls by Kentucky Republican U.S. Senate candidate Rand Paul and fellow Tea Party movement conservatives to abolish the U.S. Department of Education are successful, officials and policy experts say.

"Although federal funding makes up a comparatively small portion of the total funding for public (preschool-12th grade) education in Kentucky, many of our schools rely heavily on these monies to serve their most at-risk students," said Lisa Gross, spokeswoman with the Kentucky Department of Education.

States traditionally get 10 percent of their education dollars from the federal government — \$429 million in Kentucky, according to the state.

In Fayette County, that translates to \$25 million, nearly 65 percent of which is used to help level the academic playing field for disadvantaged and challenged students through smaller class sizes, reading and math enrichment programs, and classroom assistants.

"The other really major thing the Department of Education has done is focus schools and educators on all children. We can't afford to educate only some of our children," said Cindy Heine, interim executive director of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence in Lexington. "If we take away the push to help all children and then you take away the financial support that provides extra targeting, then you are really going to leave those children in a very poor situation."

Doing away with the U.S. Department of Education, which administers a budget of \$63.7 billion and serves 56 million students, would force officials to determine whether to downsize, reassign or eliminate an array of programs.

Programs on the chopping block would include Title I, which distributes funds to schools and districts with high numbers of low-income students; Pell Grants for low-income college students; and Head Start, an early childhood education program for lower-income children.

Dismantling the Department of Education also would be a herculean and politically unpopular task, said Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington think tank.

"It's not realistic. If there is any official in Obama's cabinet who has gotten more praise from The Wall Street Journal and conservative corners it is the secretary of education," Hess said of Arne Duncan. "Republicans have spoken relatively kindly about what's being done with education."

Paul has seemed conflicted at times on the matter. He didn't respond to repeated requests to clarify how, if the education department were abolished, he envisions retooled education policy and funding.

At a gathering last week for young Republicans at Henry Clay High School in Lexington, Paul reiterated his support for "sending less money to Washington" and returning control of education solely to states and local communities. Paul made similar comments earlier this month at a Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce function in Covington.

"The Department of Education, I think, should be done away with," Paul told the chamber in a speech recorded by cn|2 Politics. "It doesn't mean we won't still be involved with education, it would just be done at the local and state level. There is no constitutional mandate for the federal government to be involved in education."

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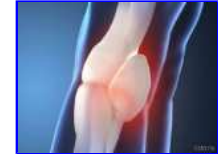
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In May, however, Paul was asked by WHAS-TV in Louisville whether he wanted to abolish the Department of Education. "No," he replied, before saying he wants to "look at every department" for potential cuts.

Democratic opponent and state Attorney General Jack Conway has criticized Paul in the past for wanting to abolish the Department of Education, saying young people who need Pell Grants for college "can't afford Rand Paul."

There is certainly room to trim the Department of Education while keeping major programs such as student lending and the No Child Left Behind law in place, said Hess of the American Enterprise Institute. Smaller programs could be consolidated into block grants to states administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Labor or other agencies — which would result in fewer officials overseeing how people comply.

Andrew Coulson, director of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute's Center for Education Freedom, estimates that abolishing the Department of Education and its related programs would save \$150 billion.

"There would be a reduction of funding to districts that have funding for low-income kids," Coulson said. "Programs like Head Start would cease to be funded, so parents would have to seek alternatives in the private sector or skip preschool altogether. Many states have their own preschool programs, and I strongly suspect that the states that don't have them would stand up and create them."

While the benefits of early childhood education are generally lauded in education circles, experts disagree on the long-range effects. Coulson argues that several studies have shown the benefits of programs like Head Start diminish by the time children reach first grade. Heine, on the other hand, points to studies that have shown the cognitive and emotional benefits of such programs last through high school.

Calls to abolish the Department of Education are part of a broader belief among conservatives that the federal government must be downsized. It's a refrain that has roots in Ronald Reagan-era politics, Coulson, said.

Though the Department of Education was established under Democratic President Jimmy Carter, its reach was expanded dramatically during Republican President George W. Bush's administration with the inception of the No Child Left Behind law, or NCLB.

Holding schools accountable for every child's progress is the law's broad goal, but many conservatives, including Paul, see NCLB, with its focus on mandated testing to ensure improved student achievement, as an unprecedented intrusion into what had been a local matter.

"We as Republicans, not me, but the ones that were elected in 2002, 2003, passed increasing federal control over schools with No Child Left Behind," Paul told students last week. "I oppose that because I think it inflicts too many rules from Washington down. There's too much testing going on, and the right amount of tests that go on I think should be decided by your teachers, your school board, your principals and your parents, but not from Washington on down. So I believe in more local control."

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