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Trump once called for the Department of Education to be eliminated — here's what the federal agency actually does

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During his campaign, President-elect Trump repeatedly hit out at the role of federal government in education, arguing instead for increased local control of schools, and hinting that the Department of Education (ED) should be abolished.

In his book "Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America," Trump writes: "A lot of people believe the Department of Education should just be eliminated. Get rid of it. If we don't eliminate it completely, we certainly need to cut its power and reach."

Last week, Trump tapped Betsy DeVos for secretary of education, signaling that the department will likely remain, though the cabinet-level position will be steered by an advocate for alternatives to traditional public schooling.

The secretary of education, as the head of the ED, advises and executes legislation over education policy at both the K-12 and post-secondary level.

Created in 1979 under President Jimmy Carter, the ED is the smallest cabinet-level department. Its main functions include administering federal assistance to schools and enforcing federal education laws. The secretary of education is fifteenth in line for succession to the presidency.

The department collects data and does research on student outcomes and success, providing national figures which allow comparison between states.

It also provides funding to local school districts. The Title I program, for example, provides federal funding to schools with large numbers of low-income students.

The ED, through its sub-agency the Office for Civil Rights, also ensures that discrimination does not occur in schools based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other characteristics.

For example, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a federal discrimination complaint with the Department of Education on behalf of Gavin Grimm. Grimm, a transgender student, claims he was discriminated against by his school district who will not allow him to use the bathroom that corresponds with his gender identity.

At the collegiate level, too, the ED handles issues of discrimination. Last year, a alliance of Asian American groups filed a federal complaint with the ED against Harvard University. The groups claim that Harvard and other Ivy League schools use racial quotas that discriminate against Asians in the admissions process.

The Office for Civil Rights is also responsible for investigating Title IX — the federal law that prohibits gender discrimination — violations. The ED currently has more than 200 open investigations into sexual assaults on college campuses.

Lastly, one of the largest, and certainly the most costly, areas of responsibility for the ED is the administering of federal student aid. The Pell Grant program — student aid that does not need to be repaid — was the largest area of spending for the department for 2016 with about \$22.5 billion spent.

In her home state of Michigan, DeVos has championed charter school and school voucher initiatives, but has not waded into any issues of higher education. She is the first choice for secretary of education without any substantial higher education experience.

While it is possible to predict some of the primary and secondary schooling issues that DeVos will support in her role, it is less apparent the direction she will take in higher education.

"I have no idea where DeVos stands on early childhood or higher education issues, and the latter, especially, is gigantic, with Washington furnishing tens-of-billions of dollars in student loans, among other higher ed matters," Neal McCluskey, at the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, wrote in a blog post.