



Opponents Take Aim at Eliminating Department of Education

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Abolishing the U.S. Department of Education in the name of saving taxpayer dollars is just a “shell game” that would not save any money but hurt millions of students who rely on federal student aid, an opponent of a proposed measure to get rid of the agency by the end of next year said Wednesday.

“I get that it would score points for Republicans,” said Catherine Brown, vice president of education policy at the left-leaning Center for American Progress.

However, as a practical matter, Brown said, scrapping the department would harm the 7.5 million students who rely on federal Pell Grants — which are disbursed by the department — and “who could not get to college otherwise.”

“They would have no access to college and we’ve never had another time in our history, our world, when we’ve seen a better return on education,” Brown said. “It really is a ticket to the middle class.”

Brown also said that the Department of Education serves an important function when it comes to protecting the civil rights of vulnerable minority groups.

But proponents of getting rid of the Department of Education — including a Republican lawmaker from Kentucky who has introduced a bill that would abolish the Department of Education by the end of 2018 — say disbursement of federal student aid and other functions of the department could be delegated to other federal agencies or to states.

Pell Grants, for instance, could be issued by the Treasury Department. Teacher training grants could be administered by the Department of Labor and the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education could be moved to the Department of Justice, they say.

Proponents also argued at a forum Wednesday that the Department of Education is a behemoth that has outlived its usefulness, sucks taxpayer dollars that could be put to better use by individuals and states, and involves the federal government in education — which they say should be left to states and localities — despite no clear constitutional authority to do so.

“It doesn’t seem the Department of Education and federal role in education has been very productive,” said Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at Cato, a libertarian thinktank that espouses limited government. “You might even say it’s been counterproductive.”

To bolster his point, McCluskey noted that national math and reading test scores for 17-year-olds have remained flat for four decades despite the agency's involvement, although he conceded modest gains have been made at lower grade levels.

"Our children are not doing better today than they were doing before the Department of Education," said Vicki E. Alger, a research fellow at the Independent Institute and author of "Failure: The Federal Misedukation of America's Children."

The Department of Education was established during the tail end of the administration of President Jimmy Carter.

"It may tickle some people's sense of self-importance to have a Department of Education, but it has not accomplished any of its goals," Alger said. "It's time to end it once and for all."

McCluskey also argued that federal Pell Grants — disbursed by the department — often lead institutions of higher education to charge higher tuition, which undermines the Pell Grants' intended purpose.

"We say we're helping people but we're often making the situation worse," McCluskey said. "And what's most alarming, is it's low-income people who get scared by high sticker prices.

"Those people that the aid is supposed to help are the ones most taken aback by this and say, 'I can't afford that. I can't go to college.'"

The debate over the usefulness of the Department of Education came on the same day that President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order that directs U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to study whether the Department of Education has overstepped its authority.

The order also gives DeVos the authority to, "if necessary, modify and repeal regulations and guidance issued by the Department of Education with a clear mandate to identify places where D.C. has overstepped its legal authority," according to Rob Goad, a senior official at the Department of Education.

"Today's executive order puts an end to this overreach, ensuring that states and localities are free to make educational decisions as required by law," Goad said. "Parents will no longer have to worry about the federal government enacting overreaching mandates or requiring states to adopt a federal curriculum at the expense of local education innovation."

However, critics noted that the department doesn't dictate what takes place in America's classrooms.

"This order is clearly an attempt to beat the 100-day clock that doesn't accomplish anything," said Neil Campbell, director of innovation and education at the Center for American Progress, referring to President Trump's effort to get certain things done within the first 100 days of his administration.

"The secretary already has the authority to review and change regulations and guidance," Campbell said. In addition, he noted that, since its inception, the Department of Education has been "prohibited from directing what curriculum states and districts use."

"And the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act included further restrictions on the Secretary to prohibit directing the use of particular standards or assessments," Campbell said.

Opponents also voiced concerns about leaving educational matters entirely to states and localities.

“History has repeatedly shown that state and local decision-makers too often shortchange students of color and those from low-income families. And that even the strongest among them need support and leverage to root out long-standing inequities,” said Kelly McManus, interim director of legislative affairs at The Education Trust.

“That’s why the role of the U.S. Department of Education is so important,” McManus said. “Today’s executive order sends a dangerous message that the Department is abdicating its responsibility to protect our most vulnerable students.”

The task force delegated to conduct the regulatory review will be headed by Bob Eitel, a lawyer with ties to the for-profit college industry, which has fought the “gainful employment” regulation meant to hold for-profit colleges accountable for poor job placement outcomes among students.

Eitel has reportedly volunteered to recuse himself from weighing in on the gainful employment regulation.

If anything, even if it doesn’t lead to the outright abolishment of the Department of Education, Wednesday’s events — particularly viewed in light of a Trump proposal to cut \$9 billion from the department, or 13 percent of its current budget — helped set in motion a process that could lead to a scaled back version of the agency.

U.S. Rep. Thomas Massie, R-Ky., said he is heartened by the idea that President Trump is far more likely than his predecessor to sign a bill he introduced to abolish the Department of Education no later than Dec. 31, 2018, even though he acknowledged that congressional support for the bill is “probably about 25 percent.”

“It’s a slim chance, but it begins a discussion, and what might end up happening is that we cut parts of the Department of Education,” Massie said.