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# EDUCATION WEEK

## Trump Ed. Dept. Has Yet to Hit the Accelerator

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Under the last two presidents, the U.S. Department of Education was a mighty—and mighty well-funded—agency. But, all signs point to it being much sleepier under President Donald Trump.

For one thing, the department's bottom line may be about to plummet. Trump has **proposed a 13 percent cut in funding for the agency**, to \$59 billion for the coming fiscal year. That could mean serious reductions to the department's current workforce of about 4,000 employees.

The Trump administration also has been slow to hire a support team—even though the department is about to face the mammoth task of reviewing dozens of state plans to implement the new **Every Student Succeeds Act**. Those plans are due to start rolling in the beginning of next month.

Some educators and advocates—and even a few career staffers working inside the agency—say that Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos' priorities remain hazy, beyond a push for school choice.

The picture is a sharp contrast to the early days of the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Under Obama in 2009, Secretary Arne Duncan and his team were burning the midnight oil just weeks after taking office, trying to figure out how to help school districts and states make the best use of \$100 billion in new money for education amid the nation's dire economic circumstances.

And in early 2001, Bush's Education Department was busily laying the groundwork for what became the No Child Left Behind Act, which passed later that year and gave the federal government new authority over K-12 education, added billions of dollars in new grant funding, and created other big programs for the agency to administer.

Marshall Smith, who served at the department during the Carter, Clinton, and Obama administrations, attributes what he sees as the Trump education team's sluggish start to a lack of vision and preparation.

### **Early Arrivals**

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has yet to fill key top policy posts at the Education Department, including deputy secretary, and the assistant secretaries overseeing K-12 education, higher education, and the office for civil rights. But the Trump administration has a preliminary team in place on education at the department, and the White House, including some with experience in education policy. Those staffers include:

- **Jason Botel:** Former founder of a KIPP charter school and executive director of the advocacy group MarylandCAN. Working as a senior White House aide on education.
- **Michael Brickman:** Policy adviser to Gov. Scott Walker, R-Wis., and staffer at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.
- **Rob Goad:** A former top aide to Rep. Luke Messer, R-Ind., one of the biggest champions of school choice in Congress. Goad is a White House aide on education.
- **Andrew Kossack:** Served as deputy chief of staff to former Indiana state chief Tony Bennett, and as an education aide to former Indiana Gov.-turned-Vice President Mike Pence.
- **Ebony Lee:** Served at the department during the Bush administration, worked on charter policy at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- **Neil Ruddock:** Served as the regional advocacy director for the Foundation for Excellence in Education, founded by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush.
- **Josh Venable:** Former national director of advocacy and legislation at the Foundation for Educational Excellence.

Sources: ProPublica, *Education Week*

“They weren’t ready for anything,” said Smith, who was acting deputy secretary under President Bill Clinton.

But Neal McCluskey, the director of the CATO Center for Education Freedom, a libertarian think tank, said that a less muscular department is in keeping with the Every Student Succeeds Act, which passed with bipartisan support in 2015 and scaled back the federal footprint on K-12.

“For the first time in a long time, the federal government has been less influential in education,” he said. “I think a lot of that is what the country was really asking for and seemed to want.”

DeVos’ priorities are clear, a department official said: She wants to return the agency to its core mission of serving disadvantaged students and students in special education.

And he referred to the secretary's remarks last week to the **Council of the Great City Schools**, in which she said, "Too often the Department of Education has gone outside its established authority and created roadblocks, wittingly or unwittingly, for parents and educators alike. This isn't right, nor is it acceptable. Under this administration, we will break this habit."

Department on a Diet?

Trump made no secret of his plans for the department on the campaign trail, saying he'd like to get rid of the agency or cut it "way, way down." And last week, his budget director, Mick Mulvaney, directed all federal agencies to find ways of eliminating "unnecessary offices" and functions.

Even before that notice, DeVos and her team were considering some moves to slim down the department, including getting rid of the No. 3 position—undersecretary—and possibly eliminating some assistant and deputy assistant secretary positions, sources said.

But, pulling off a massive reorganization of the kind that the White House is asking for also means filling some top political positions. And for now, Trump hasn't tapped a deputy secretary, or assistant secretaries overseeing K-12 education, civil rights and planning, evaluation, and policy. It's not clear when, or even if, nominees will be tapped for some of those roles.

"Restructuring is usually a luxury," big-picture work that agency heads can focus on when there aren't vacant positions or fires to put out, said Andy Smarick, who served in the agency under President George W. Bush. "If the secretary hasn't been able to hire the team she wants yet, it seems like reorganization needs to be put on the back burner."

Some Republican education policy experts, including those who have worked in past GOP administrations, for GOP education leaders on Capitol Hill, or in states are wary of jumping into jobs in President Donald Trump's Education Department.

These observers, who declined to speak for attribution given the sensitivity of the subject, worry that the administration has yet to find its organizational footing, citing reports of a chaotic governing process at the White House.

Others aren't sure they want to put in long hours for a secretary with a narrow area of focus who is already facing backlash among educators. And a few fear DeVos may not stick around.

"There's a lot of speculation about how long DeVos is going to last," said one Republican who had mulled joining the administration. "Potential staff may question whether it's worth the risk, whether taking a job for this secretary could cause collateral damage to reputations and future opportunities in education."

But a department official said DeVos is dedicated to ensuring that she identifies and brings aboard talented public servants.

## The 'Landing Team'

Once the White House does fill those positions, they will have to go through Senate confirmation. That process may not be easy. Democrats on the Senate education committee have said they want to hold hearings on these nominees, because DeVos herself doesn't have much policy expertise on a host of areas under the department's purview, including higher education.

To be sure, there are some political appointees already at work at the department. The list of names on the "landing team"—the initial group of policy staffers—that has been circulated to civil servants is heavy on people whose background is primarily in politics or communications, including more than a half-dozen Trump campaign staffers, state GOP party staffers, and Washington-based professionals.

There aren't as many whose background is primarily education policy or who have deep experience at a state education agency or school district. But several of those with a policy focus hail from the Foundation for Excellence in Education, started by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush. DeVos sat on the organization's board before she was tapped as secretary.

For now, Ebony Lee, who worked at the department during the Bush administration, and Jason Botel, a senior White House aide and one-time charter school founder, are said to be helping to lead the policy work, including issues related to ESSA.

And aides to Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., an architect of the law and a pivotal player in shepherding DeVos through a bruising Senate confirmation process, are lending her skeletal staff a hand with aspects of the law's implementation.

## ESSA Impact

But, in the meantime, the temporary leadership vacuum has left some school district officials in the dark when it comes to questions about how a new school choice program might work, or how the department will approach implementation of ESSA.

"We have heard recently the secretary of education stating [she] want[s] more local control, but we're not actually sure what that means," Merv Daugherty, the superintendent of the Red Clay Consolidated School District in Wilmington, Del., said.

ESSA, he said, may prioritize flexibility but there are still plenty of requirements for states and districts. "Everybody is on the edge of their seat right now waiting for some clear direction from the feds."

Daugherty sent staff to the National Title I conference in California last month, a meeting where federal officials typically field districts' nuts-and-bolts questions. This year, though, district staffers heard a lot of "we'll get back to you."

But others say the hands-off approach isn't a problem.

"So far, we haven't needed anything particular from them, and they haven't needed anything particular from us," said Mike Kirst, the president of the California State Board of Education.

The Golden State, which clashed with the Obama administration on everything from teacher evaluation to state data systems, has spent the past several years creating a new accountability system that Kirst said is aligned to ESSA, without much federal direction or input.

### Adjusting Expectations

Local education officials aren't the only ones with questions. Some career staff members say they don't have a clear handle on where their new boss wants to take the agency, or individual offices within it.

That lack of a clear vision has “put the career staff in a really awkward position,” said Deborah S. Delisle, who served as the assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education during the Obama administration. “They are implementing the policies of the prior administration without knowing where the new administration is going to be heading.”

DeVos was conciliatory in her first all-staff speech to department employees, confessing to them that she's the “newbie” at the agency and would be relying on their expertise.

But she struck a different tone in an interview with a conservative columnist for the news site Townhall.

DeVos said she would “not be surprised if there are also those that would try to subvert the mission of this organization and this department.” She said they would be dealt with “swiftly and surely.”

That has career staffers worried that DeVos isn't going to stick up for them. Some staffers—especially those still early in their federal careers—are heading for the exits, or at least polishing their resumes, multiple career employees said. Some had lent a hand in implementing the Obama administration's signature competitive grants and say it isn't as rewarding to shut down a grant program as it is to help build one up.

If staffers leave, they're not likely to be replaced anytime soon. The White House has put in place a federal hiring freeze, with exemptions for defense, homeland security, and public safety employees.

And a slimmer workforce at the department could end up having an impact on everything from monitoring of federal grants to fielding questions from state and district officials. What's more, current staffers could be deployed to help implement a new school choice program **outlined in the federal budget**.

“If you're going to reduce the workforce by a certain percentage, you need to adjust expectations of the people already there,” Delisle said.