

EDUCATION WEEK

Trump Budget Would Make Massive Cuts to Ed. Dept., But Boost School Choice

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President Donald Trump's first budget seeks to slash the Education Department's roughly \$68 billion budget by \$9 billion, or 13 percent in the coming fiscal year, whacking popular programs that help districts offer after-school programs, and hire and train teachers.

At the same time, it seeks a historic \$1.4 billion federal investment in school choice, including new money for private school vouchers and charter schools, as well as directing \$1 billion to follow students to the school of their choice.

But the proposal would completely scrap two big programs Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants, or Title II, which is currently funded at \$2.25 billion and helps states and districts hire and provide professional development for teachers. The budget proposal would also get rid of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, which is funded at more than \$1 billion currently and finances after-school and extended-learning programs. Trump's budget says both programs are spread too thin to be effective.

The federal spending plan still need to go through Congress for approval, and cuts of this magnitude will almost certainly be a tough political lift. And it could be months before lawmakers decide which of these cuts to accept or reject. The proposal would set spending levels for federal fiscal year 2018, which begins Oct. 1 and generally impacts the 2018-19 school year.

The budget numbers were first reported by the Washington Post. [You can find them online at the White House Office of Management here.](#)

School Choice

Trump is also pitching a \$1.4 billion boost for school choice, which budget documents call a down payment on Trump's campaign promise to pour \$20 billion into expanding student options.

The charter school grant program, currently funded at \$333 million, would get a sizeable increase of \$168 million. The program helps states and charter organization start up, replicate, and expand schools, with a special focus on helping Charter Management Organizations with a track record of success open new campuses.

Trump is also proposing a new \$250 million private school choice initiative that could provide vouchers for use at private schools, including religious schools.

As part of the school choice push, the budget would include a \$1 billion increase for Title I grants for disadvantaged students, currently funded at nearly \$15 billion. But that money would come up with a twist: States and districts would be encouraged to use the funds for a system of "student-based budgeting and open enrollment that enables Federal, State, and Local funding to follow the student to the public school of his or her choice."

Lawmakers debated that policy—known as "portability"—in crafting the Every Student Succeeds Act. It was part of a bill passed by the House in the summer of 2015, but didn't make it into the final legislation.

But the proposal could be aided by a new pilot program created under ESSA that allows up to 50 districts to adopt a "weighted student funding formula", combining federal, state, and local dollars into a single funding stream tied to individual students. English-language learners, kids in poverty, students in special education—who cost more to educate—would carry with them more money than other students.

What's more, it's not clear that the increase for Title I grants to districts would truly amount to much of an increase, if it's used for a portability program. That's because ESSA got rid of the School Improvement Grant program, which was used to help fix low-performing schools. The law moved the money—about \$400 million—into Title I, a nearly \$15 billion program.

And school districts won't get much mileage out of a funding hike that's slated to go to choice programs, said the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents urban districts, in a statement. "Increasing Title I only to fund a 'portability' effort that is likely to dilute the targeting of federal aid for high-poverty schools," the Council said.

Deep Cuts

The cuts to long-standing programs and new school choice proposals are sure to face major opposition from Democrats, who have made it clear that they don't want to see public funds diverted to private schools. And the school choice initiatives could be a tough sell with Senate Republicans from rural states, where districts are too isolated to offer any high-quality alternative options to their students.

Trump's budget would reduce or eliminate more than 20 other programs, including the \$190 Comprehensive Literacy Development Grant program, the successor to Striving Readers. It would also shrink or scrap \$66.8 million in payments for federal property to districts that receive Impact Aid. The Obama administration proposed a similar cut last year. It would also shrink or scrap \$66.8 million in payments to districts that receive Impact Aid, which help those with a big federal presence, such as a military base or American Indian reservation.

College Access

And the budget would keep level-funding for Pell Grants, which help low-income students cover the cost of college at \$22 billion, nixing nearly \$4 billion in surplus funding that both Republicans and Democrats had hoped to use to help students cover the cost of summer courses.

The proposal also takes aim at other college access programs. It would cut TRIO, which provides services to low-income children and first-generation college students, currently funded at to \$808 million. And it would slash Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (known as GEAR UP) from its current level of \$322.8 million to \$219 million.

But not all programs would be slashed. Spending for students in special education, which is provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, would remain level at about \$13 billion.

Trump and his team "went looking for the most wasteful, most indefensible programs" and eliminated them to make room for big increases to defense spending, law enforcement, and building a wall along the border with Mexico, Mick Mulvaney, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, told reporters Wednesday.

The Education Department wouldn't be the biggest loser, budgetwise, among federal agencies. The U.S. State Department and the Environmental Protection Agency each are slated for cuts of roughly 30 percent under the proposal.

The blueprint released by the White House did not include details on a host of other programs, including the \$1 billion Career and Technical Education program, the largest source of federal funding for high schools, or Head Start, which helps provide early-childhood education programs for kids from low-income families and is housed in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It also makes no mention of a proposal for a federal tax-credit scholarship program.

Reactions Vary

In a statement, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos said the budget proposal was the "first step in investing in education programs that work." She also said the budget would help states and districts provide "equal opportunity for a quality education for all students."

"The budget places power in the hands of parents and families to choose schools that are best for their children by investing an additional \$1.4 billion in school choice programs. It continues support for the nation's most vulnerable populations, such as students with disabilities," DeVos said.

And a department official said that many of the programs slated for elimination haven't been found to be effective. Instead of measuring dollars when they look at programs, school officials should be measuring a program's impact on student achievement.

Already, though, some Republicans appear reluctant to embrace the cuts.

Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., the chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee that deals with education spending, indicated he wasn't totally sold on the plan, although he didn't single out education spending.

"The president's budget is the first step in the appropriations process. There are many concerns with non-defense discretionary cuts," Blunt said in a statement, referring to the category that includes K-12 programs.

And Democrats quickly signaled that they plan to fight the proposal. The "cuts for programs that serve America's middle and working class are an assault to our values," said Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the House panel that oversees education spending, in a statement released early Thursday.

And a slew of education groups decried the cuts as hurtful and draconian.

Trump's budget blueprint would harm not just public schools, but the future of the American workforce, said former Secretary of Education John B. King Jr., now the president of the Education Trust, an advocacy group for disadvantaged students.

"If this proposal were enacted, all students, particularly students of color and low-income students, throughout the entire continuum of our education system would suffer, as would the nation's businesses who desperately need a skilled workforce to be successful," King said in a statement.

Other groups to criticize the budget included the National Education Association, which said the budget plan "also undermines our core values by depleting public education while wasting taxpayer money to implement his discriminatory and hateful anti-immigrant agenda," and AASA, the School Superintendents Association, which said the proposal would "deeply undercut state and local efforts" to meet the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act.

But others reacted positively to the budget plan.

Lindsey Burke, the director of the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation, which promotes limited government and school choice, hailed the budget's emphasis on shrinking the federal footprint. And she said the \$1 billion in Title I money that would be portable to public schools' of students choosing is a step in the right directions towards more flexibility for federal money, Burke said: "This is a pretty thoughtful approach."

But she expressed concerns about the \$168 million in additional money for charter grants, saying, "Folks need to be careful that we're not crowding out the private market through federal investments in charters." And she said the voucher program, despite its potential boost to school choice, was still a new federal program and as such should be viewed with suspicion.

Neal McCluskey, the director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said the 21st Century Community Learning Centers was a "deservedly prime target" for its \$1.2 billion in federal aid to be eliminated. He's previously weighed in against the center for failing to improve outcomes for students. Burke also applauded Trump's proposal to toss that program overboard.