

Merging the Labor and Education departments won't accomplish much, experts say

Danielle Douglas-Gabriel

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As President Donald Trump sets out to shake up a bureaucracy he has derided as unwieldy, his proposal to merge the Education and Labor departments is being greeted by education policy analysts with a collective shrug.

Many said they see the value in more closely aligning workforce development and career education, especially sharing the expertise of staff at the agencies. But some said they doubt the administration could effectively pull off the consolidation, and question the motives.

"If you take the proposal at face value, better coordination among the career education programs at both agencies could better target assistance and promote quality," said James Kvaal, president of the Institute for College Access & Success, a liberal think tank.

"But . . . I doubt this proposal started with a debate over how to make career education more effective," said Kvaal, who was a policy adviser to President Barack Obama. "It's about eliminating the Department of Education."

Trump called for the elimination of the Education Department during his presidential campaign. He selected an education secretary, Betsy DeVos, who has sought to shrink the agency through buyouts and restructuring agency divisions, such as the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. The strategy aligns with conservative ideology that education policy is the purview of states, not the federal government.

"This proposal will make the federal government more responsive to the full range of needs faced by American students, workers, and schools," DeVos said in a statement Thursday. "I urge Congress to work with the Administration to make this proposal a reality."

But some conservatives don't believe the Trump administration could execute the proposed merger, announced Thursday as part of a broader government reorganization, in a way that would save money and make the agencies more efficient.

"The federal government is bloated, and cuts and consolidation are wholly appropriate for Education and Labor. Combining [them] is fine by me, but doesn't actually accomplish much," said Frederick M. Hess, director of education policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, a think tank. "Major savings require major cuts to programs, and the

administration hasn't had any success on that count. It's actually signed off on a dramatic expansion of federal spending."

Neal McCluskey, an education analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute, agreed that merging the departments wouldn't amount to much if all of the "unconstitutional, ineffective, expensive programs" the Education Department now runs are folded into a "new, more expansive bureaucratic machine."

Education and Labor, despite some overlap, have very different objectives, said Amy Laitinen, director for higher education at the New America Foundation, a left-leaning think tank. Labor, she said, handles a significant amount of work that has no relation to education, such as unemployment insurance and occupational safety. The Education Department is responsible for managing a \$1.4 trillion portfolio of federal student loans; the Labor Department has no expertise in that field.

Although some of each agency's activities may be a better fit at the other, a merger would do little to improve performance or produce benefits, said Barmak Nassirian, director of federal relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, a trade group.

"By grouping vastly disparate programs under one Cabinet secretary, a merger is likely to degrade the quality of federal policy for most of them," he said. "Cabinet agencies can only administer federal programs as Congress has designed them, and putting two agencies together would produce nothing beyond new letterheads unless the administration proposes and Congress authorizes changes that significantly overhaul and streamline the numerous programs involved."

Nassirian doubts Congress, which must approve the reorganization, has the will to seriously entertain a merger. In the current political climate, even modest tasks such as reauthorizing the Higher Education Act, the law governing almost every aspect of the sector, have become impossible, he said.

The Education Department has struggled even to get Congress to bite on proposals to consolidate offices within the agency, making a wholesale merger highly unlikely, said Tamara Hiler, deputy director of Education at the think tank Third Way.

"It also seems like it would be terrible optics to close down the Department of Education in an era of teacher strikes, middling college outcomes and a student debt crisis - all making this plan pretty politically unpalatable," Hiler said. Instead, she said the administration should seek ways to integrate data from the agencies "to create a more streamlined education-to-workforce pipeline."

With midterm elections looming, political analysts said there's little chance of Trump's reorganization plan gaining traction. Still, top Republicans on education and labor issues are willing to give the merger serious consideration.

"It's always wise to look for greater efficiency in how our government operates and I will study the proposal carefully," Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., chairman of the Senate education and labor panel, said in an email.

Alexander's counterpart on the House Education and Workforce Committee, Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., said that "the federal government is long overdue for a serious overhaul" and that she welcomes "the administration's focus on education and workforce issues together."

Democratic leaders on the education and labor committees, however, dismissed the proposed merger as a distraction from the Trump administration's efforts to gut investments in education and workers.

"Rather than spending their energy proposing unrealistic, unhelpful, and futile reorganizations of the federal government just to have a new talking point, President Trump and Secretaries DeVos, Azar and Acosta should start undoing some of the chaos and harm they have caused to children, students, workers, patients, and families across the country," Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., the top Democrat on the Senate education panel, said in a statement. Alex Azar is health and human services secretary, and Alexander Acosta is labor secretary.