

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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“Michigan school districts should be able to operate as usual no matter what happens at the federal level.”

How Michigan schools can thrive as U.S. Dept. of Ed. evolves

Federal changes will have little impact on state

By Molly Macek | April 2025

Public school officials in Michigan have pounced on recent layoffs at the U.S. Department of Education, but these changes will have less impact than the high-flown rhetoric suggests. Lawmakers should tune out that shouting when they decide how to spend state education funds.

The federal department's workforce was reduced in March from 4,133 to 2,183 employees, according to a U.S. Department of Education press release. The staff reduction “reflects the Department of Education's commitment to efficiency, accountability, and ensuring that resources are directed where they matter most: to students, parents, and teachers,” Secretary of Education Linda McMahon stated.

But the workforce reduction does not reduce the more than \$2 billion in funding for Michigan programs the federal department administers by law. Nor does it mean the department will be eliminated.

It would require an act of Congress to make budgetary changes or close the Department of Education, which was created by statute during the Carter administration.

In the press release, the federal department confirmed its intent to administer its programs with a leaner workforce. “The Department of Education will continue to deliver on all statutory programs that fall under the agency's purview, including formula funding, student loans, Pell Grants, funding for special needs students, and competitive grantmaking.”

Responsibility for administering funds for certain programs could be shifted to other federal departments. Some sources suggest Title I and special education, which receive the bulk of federal tax dollars earmarked for K-12 education, could be transferred to the Department of Health and Human Services or the Department of Justice.

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Michigan school districts should be able to operate as usual no matter what happens at the federal level. They receive about 10% of their funding from the federal government, and amending this amount in the budget would require federal legislation.

This does not mean we should expect the ongoing provision of federal dollars to produce higher student achievement in the Great Lakes State. The federal department's total spending on education more than doubled from 2011 to 2021. Yet Michigan's performance in reading and math continues to suffer — students have yet to return to pre-lockdown proficiency levels in these critical subjects.

Even so, Michigan, not the federal government, bears the responsibility for improving student outcomes in our state's school districts. About 90% of district funding comes from state and local taxpayers, and state spending has increased to record levels. When adjusted for inflation, education spending has increased by 30% since 2013. But Michigan still trails most states in reading and math proficiency.

School officials and lawmakers ought to be more concerned about the performance trajectory of Michigan students and how state funds are being used to improve it. Michigan legislators must ensure taxpayer dollars are allocated to policies that target student achievement, and district leaders must ensure they're implemented effectively.

State lawmakers recently passed legislation that targets literacy, and bills that address teacher recruitment and other areas of need have been introduced. But Michigan must do more to recover the significant learning losses incurred during the COVID lockdowns. A funding mechanism that gives K-12 students access to better educational options when their current school doesn't make the grade would be a big step in the right direction. More than 30 states have adopted programs like tax credits and education savings accounts that do just that.

Changes to the federal education department will have little impact on Michigan's schools. How lawmakers decide to spend state tax dollars to improve student outcomes will have a much greater impact. Efficient spending on K-12 programs that give students more educational opportunities would make the biggest difference.

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