

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 27, 2025

René L. Rocque  
Acting Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Inspector General  
400 Maryland Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Acting Inspector General Rocque:

We write to request that the U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General (ED IG) conduct an evaluation to determine whether the Trump Administration's attempts to dismantle the Department of Education (ED or the Department) will impede "the efficiency, effectiveness, and integrity of the Department's programs and operations,"<sup>1</sup> harming students, parents, and teachers around the country.

## **The Trump Administration's Attempts to Dismantle the Department of Education Through a Reduction in Force**

On March 11, 2025, ED initiated a "reduction in force" (RIF) impacting nearly 50 percent of the Department's workforce. As Education Secretary Linda McMahon's announcement boasted, "When President Trump was inaugurated, the Department's workforce stood at 4,133 workers. After today's actions, the Department's workforce will total roughly 2,183."<sup>2</sup> Secretary McMahon claimed that the layoffs reflect the Department's "commitment to efficiency, accountability, and ensuring that resources are directed where they matter most: to students, parents, and teachers."<sup>3</sup> Yet, these cuts threaten to hurt the very groups that the Department is purportedly aiming to serve: the roughly 1,300 layoffs disproportionately target employees who served on teams that facilitate financial aid for tens of millions of families, enforce our civil rights laws, and ensure that every student has a place to learn in our K-12 public schools.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General, "About," <https://oig.ed.gov/about>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "U.S. Department of Education Initiates Reduction in Force," press release, March 11, 2025, <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-initiates-reduction-force>; *Note*: included in the reduction in force are nearly 600 employees who accepted voluntary resignation opportunities and retirement over the last seven weeks, including 259 employees accepted the Deferred Resignation Program and 313 employees accepted the Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Inside Higher Ed, "Assessing the Damage After the Education Department's Mass Layoffs," Liam Knox and Jessica Blake, March 13, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2025/03/13/how-education-department-layoffs-could-affect-higher>; NPR, "The Education Department is being cut in half. Here's what's being lost," Cory Turner, March 13, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/12/nx-s1-5325854/trump-education-department-layoffs-civil-rights-student-loans>.

First, the Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA), which manages the federal student aid system,<sup>5</sup> will lose more than 450 employees as a result of the reduction in force, severely impeding its ability to administer federal student loans, oversee unscrupulous lenders, ensure the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is working properly, and provide customer support to families navigating the student loan system.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the cuts at FSA appear to have been “particularly severe among technological support staff,”<sup>7</sup> jeopardizing the FAFSA’s functionality and cybersecurity compliance; on the day immediately following ED’s RIF, FAFSA was unusable to families for hours.<sup>8</sup> The cuts also “decimated” support infrastructure that “helped students, families and college financial aid staff navigate the complicated student aid and loan systems,” including “call center support, the ombudsman office’s community support division, and the support services division for institutes of higher education.”<sup>9</sup> When factoring in the probationary staff who have already been terminated and veteran workers who have agreed to retire or leave voluntarily, in just a few weeks, FSA staffing will stand at half its September 2024 levels<sup>10</sup>—leaving the Department with disastrously insufficient capacity to support borrowers navigating a constantly changing student loan servicing and repayment landscape.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), which “enforce[s] Federal civil rights laws”<sup>12</sup> and fields tens of thousands of complaints about discrimination and harassment each year, lost at least 240 out of 568 employees and seven out of twelve regional offices as a result of the RIF.<sup>13</sup> According to reports, most of the laid off employees were attorneys that investigate complaints from parents and families who believe a school has discriminated against their child.<sup>14</sup> OCR’s field offices in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, San Francisco, and Dallas were also shuttered. These seven offices were responsible for handling civil rights cases for over half of the country, including 6,000 open investigations.<sup>15</sup> OCR received 19,201 complaints in 2023—nearly triple the number of complaints it received in 2009. Thus, the RIF

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> NPR, “The Education Department is being cut in half. Here’s what’s being lost,” Cory Turner, March 13, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/12/nx-s1-5325854/trump-education-department-layoffs-civil-rights-student-loans>.

<sup>7</sup> Inside Higher Ed, “Assessing the Damage After the Education Department’s Mass Layoffs,” Liam Knox and Jessica Blake, March 13, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2025/03/13/how-education-department-layoffs-could-affect-higher>.

<sup>8</sup> ABC News, “Federal student loan site down Wednesday, a day after layoffs gutted Education Department,” Collin Binkley and Jocelyn Gecker, March 12, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/federal-student-loan-site-wednesday-day-after-layoffs-119735933>.

<sup>9</sup> Inside Higher Ed, “Assessing the Damage After the Education Department’s Mass Layoffs,” Liam Knox and Jessica Blake, March 13, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2025/03/13/how-education-department-layoffs-could-affect-higher>.

<sup>10</sup> NPR, “The Education Department is being cut in half. Here’s what’s being lost,” Cory Turner, March 13, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/12/nx-s1-5325854/trump-education-department-layoffs-civil-rights-student-loans>.

<sup>11</sup> NPR, “What a Trump presidency might mean for student loan forgiveness,” Cory Turner, November 14, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/14/nx-s1-5188122/trump-biden-debt-student-loans>.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Education, “Office for Civil Rights (OCR),” <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/ocr>.

<sup>13</sup> NPR, “The Education Department is being cut in half. Here’s what’s being lost,” Cory Turner, March 13, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/12/nx-s1-5325854/trump-education-department-layoffs-civil-rights-student-loans>.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> Higher Ed Dive, “Half of OCR eliminated after Trump Education Department layoffs,” Naaz Modan, March 13, 2025, <https://www.highereddive.com/news/half-of-ocr-fired-after-trump-education-department-layoffs/742384/>.

will dramatically impede the Department's ability to be responsive to civil rights violations<sup>16</sup> and navigate the rapid changes to federal guidance on civil rights, Title IX, and more.<sup>17</sup>

Third, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) shed nearly 90 percent of its employees, leaving “the statistics, research, and evaluation arm of the U.S. Department of Education”<sup>18</sup> with a skeletal workforce of about 20.<sup>19</sup> IES tracks students' educational outcomes and provides the research backbone for education policy by “conduct[ing] large-scale evaluations of federal education programs and policies,” “sponsor[ing] research projects to understand where education needs improvement,” and “fund[ing] the development...of new approaches for improving education outcomes for all students.”<sup>20</sup> It is unfathomable that IES would be able to accomplish these essential tasks with a mere 20 employees.

Finally, the Trump Administration fired “every attorney responsible for helping states and school districts understand how they can and cannot use their federal K-12 money, and who raise red flags when a state or district appears to be in violation of these funding laws.”<sup>21</sup> These cuts severely restrict the Department's ability to guarantee that grants are being used to help the students they were intended to serve. As James Kvaal, former Under Secretary of Education, explained, “these are the people who make sure federal dollars are spent according to the rules and as effectively as possible...Eliminating that capacity is not going to reduce government waste; it's going to create more confusion.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The Trump Administration's Attempts to Dismantle the Department of Education by Executive Order**

Last week, the Trump Administration escalated its attempts to illegally dismantle the Department of Education. On March 20, 2025, President Trump signed an Executive Order (EO) ordering that Secretary McMahon, to “the maximum extent appropriate and permitted by law, take all necessary steps to facilitate the closure of the Department of Education.”<sup>23</sup> The next day, on March 21, 2025, the President announced that he was “immediately” moving the handling of

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> Inside Higher Ed, “Assessing the Damage After the Education Department's Mass Layoffs,” Liam Knox and Jessica Blake, March 11, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2025/03/13/how-education-department-layoffs-could-affect-higher>.

<sup>18</sup> Institute of Educational Sciences, “About IES,” <https://ies.ed.gov/about>.

<sup>19</sup> Inside Higher Ed, “Assessing the Damage After the Education Department's Mass Layoffs,” Liam Knox and Jessica Blake, March 11, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2025/03/13/how-education-department-layoffs-could-affect-higher>.

<sup>20</sup> Institute of Educational Sciences, “About IES,” <https://ies.ed.gov/about>.

<sup>21</sup> NPR, “The Education Department is being cut in half. Here's what's being lost,” Cory Turner, March 13, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/12/nx-s1-5325854/trump-education-department-layoffs-civil-rights-student-loans>.

<sup>22</sup> Inside Higher Ed, “Assessing the Damage After the Education Department's Mass Layoffs,” Liam Knox and Jessica Blake, March 11, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2025/03/13/how-education-department-layoffs-could-affect-higher>.

<sup>23</sup> Executive Order 14242, “Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities,” March 20, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/03/25/2025-05213/improving-education-outcomes-by-empowering-parents-states-and-communities>.

federal student loans to the Small Business Administration (SBA) and shifting programs for students with disabilities to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).<sup>24</sup>

These actions likely contravene the law and will hurt students and families everywhere. Only Congress can choose to abolish the Department of Education; the President cannot shut down the Department by decree.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the *Higher Education Act*, a federal law passed by Congress and signed by the President, explicitly requires the Department of Education to manage student financial assistance under Title IV, including student loans.<sup>26</sup> Congress created the Department of Education to manage critical federal functions like distributing federal funding to public schools, administering federal financial aid for tens of millions of families, and defending the federal civil rights of students from marginalized backgrounds, including students with disabilities. We have serious concerns that, in addition to being illegal, the President's actions to shutter the Department and transfer its functions to agencies with no expertise in education policy will seriously inhibit the "the effective and uninterrupted delivery of services, programs, and benefits on which Americans rely."<sup>27</sup>

### **Request for an Investigation by the ED IG**

Decimating the Department of Education's abilities to administer financial aid, investigate civil rights violations, conduct research on educational outcomes, and oversee the use of federal education grants threatens to have disastrous consequences for American students, teachers, and families. The Trump Administration's further attempts to close the Department entirely and transfer its responsibilities over to other agencies will likely interrupt and degrade education programs and services, causing additional pain for the 62 million students across the country that the Department serves.<sup>28</sup>

Given the adverse impact that the Trump Administration's actions may have on the Education Department's ability to administer and improve education programs around the country, an evaluation by your office would be consistent with your goal to "drive continuous improvement in Federal education programs."<sup>29</sup> We therefore request that you conduct an evaluation into whether the Trump Administration's attempts to dismantle the Department of Education will undermine its ability to "promote student achievement...by fostering educational excellence and

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<sup>24</sup> The Hill, "Trump says student loans moving to SBA, 'special needs' to HHS," Lexi Lonas Cochran, March 21, 2025, <https://thehill.com/homenews/education/5207597-trump-student-loans-sba-special-needs-disabled-students-hhs-mcmahon-kennedy/>.

<sup>25</sup> New York Times, "Trump Signs Order Aimed at Eliminating Education Dept. 'Once and for All,'" Michael C. Bender, Erica L. Green and Alan Blinder, March 20, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/20/us/politics/trump-education-department.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Federal Student Aid, "All Title IV Federal Student Aid Programs," <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/program/All%20Title%20IV%20Federal%20Student%20Aid%20Programs>.


<sup>27</sup> Executive Order 14242, "Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities," March 20, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/03/25/2025-05213/improving-education-outcomes-by-empowering-parents-states-and-communities>.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "Federal Role in Education," <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/federal-role-in-education>.

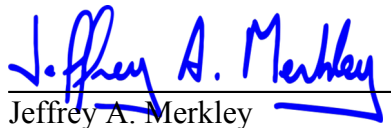
<sup>29</sup> U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General, "About," <https://oig.ed.gov/about>.

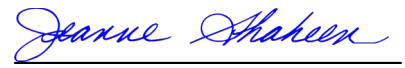
ensuring equal access” for students of all ages.<sup>30</sup> We further request that you evaluate how these efforts will undermine the federal government’s ability to support state and local governments’ educational systems and the extent to which state and local governments have the capacity to replace federal education funding, support, and program administration.

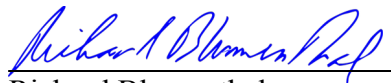
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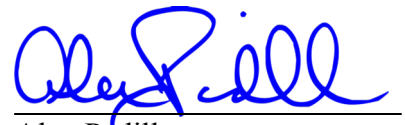
  
Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator


  
Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator


  
Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator

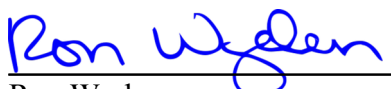
  
Jeanne Shaheen  
United States Senator


  
Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

  
Alex Padilla  
United States Senator

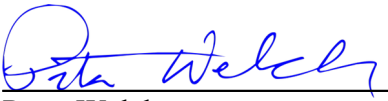
  
Angela Alsobrooks  
United States Senator

  
Charles E. Schumer  
United States Senator

  
Ron Wyden  
United States Senator

  
Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Department of Education, “Mission of the U.S. Department of Education,” <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/mission-of-the-us-department-of-education>.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Peter Welch", is positioned above a horizontal line.

Peter Welch

United States Senator