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Trump Preparing Executive Order to Dismantle U.S. Department of Education, Shifting Control to States and Territories

If the U.S. Department of Education is reduced or eliminated, the U.S. Virgin Islands and other territories may need to manage federal education programs independently.

Federal / **Published On February 05, 2025 06:24 AM /**

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President Donald Trump is reportedly preparing an executive order that would significantly alter the structure and responsibilities of the U.S. Department of Education, with the ultimate goal of returning educational control back to individual states. This move comes in response to what Trump describes as the nation's poor educational performance despite high expenditure.

The president has made it clear through recent statements and actions that his administration's focus is not on destroying education but rather on restructuring how it is managed. On February 4, when questioned about nominating Linda McMahon to lead the Department he aims to dismantle, Trump responded, "Because I told Linda, Linda I hope you do a great job in putting yourself out of a job. I want her to put herself out of a job. Education Department — we're ranked number 40 out of 40 schools, we're ranked number 1 in cost per pupil, so we spend more per pupil than any other country in the world, and we're ranked at the bottom of the list, we're ranked very badly. And what I want to do is let the states run schools. I believe strongly in school choice, but in addition to that, I want the states to run [public] schools, and I want Linda to put herself out of a job."

He further elaborated on his vision for educational reform by saying, "Look, if I could give the schools back to Iowa and Idaho, and Indian and all these places that run properly, the outcomes would be much better for students, the president contended.

The proposed executive order would initiate a process where the Department of Education would either be diminished or entirely abolished, with its functions potentially redistributed to other federal departments or returned to state control. This includes the nearly \$242 billion in funding allocated to the department, which would then be directed to states and U.S. territories for their discretionary use in educational programs.

The U.S. Virgin Islands, like other U.S. territories, would see a direct impact from such a policy shift. The territory currently benefits from federal funds, including those for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Title I funds for schools with high poverty rates, and federal student aid programs. If the Department is abolished, these funds would need to be managed directly by local governments, potentially altering how educational resources are distributed and utilized in the islands.

Legally, while President Trump has expressed a desire to dissolve the Department via executive action, this would require Congressional approval as only Congress can legally eliminate a federal agency. The executive order might instead focus on reducing the department's size and scope, with the hope that legislative action would follow to complete the dissolution. This strategy has historical precedence, as seen with Trump's efforts to influence other federal departments and agencies.

Public and political reactions are mixed. Republican support for dismantling the department has been consistent since its inception under President Jimmy Carter in 1979, with recent legislative efforts by figures like Representatives Thomas Massie and David Rouzer introducing bills to do so. However, the Senate's filibuster rules, requiring 60 votes to advance significant legislative changes, pose a significant barrier, making bipartisan support necessary for any major reform.

The education sector has voiced concerns over the potential disruptions this could cause. Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association, highlighted the potential negative impacts, stating that Mr. Trump's move would "steal resources for our most vulnerable students, explode class sizes, cut job training programs, make higher education more expensive and out of reach for middle-class families, take away special education services for students with disabilities, and gut student civil rights protections."

Moreover, the administration's actions have already begun, with dozens of Education Department employees being placed on administrative leave, signaling the start of a reduction in departmental staffing and influence.

