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Introduction

Although primarily a state and local responsibility, the federal government has significant governing roles and responsibilities when it comes to K-12 education. Established in 1979, the U.S. Department of Education, which includes over 15 offices with varying roles across all levels of education, is the federal agency responsible for overseeing and implementing education laws, policies, and programs, as well as allocating federal education funding to states and school districts across the country.¹

On March 20, 2025, President Donald Trump signed an executive order titled “Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities” with the expressed purpose of closing the U.S. Department of Education and “return[ing] authority over education to the States.”² This unprecedented action, in combination with massive layoffs and the closure of some offices under the Department’s purview, was initiated to dismantle the Department and ultimately end its operations.

The U.S. Department of Education cannot be abolished without congressional action. However, significant reductions to staffing and services, along with the elimination of offices critical to protecting the rights of students and families, can be — and in some cases have been — made, which will have a direct impact on student learning and equal access to a safe and high-quality public education.

This frequently asked questions document provides an overview of the federal government’s role in K-12 education and explains the how the policies, programs, and funding under the purview of the U.S. Department of Education impact Connecticut’s students, families, and schools.

What is the Department’s role in K-12 education?

Established in 1979 under the federal Department of Education Organization Act, the U.S. Department of Education is a federal agency responsible for overseeing and implementing laws, policies, and programs, as well as allocating federal funding for education.³ The Department’s mission has remained the same since it was founded: to serve America’s students by promoting student achievement and preparing them for global competitiveness, fostering educational excellence, and ensuring equal access.⁴

The Department includes over 15 offices with varying roles across all levels of education, from early care to adult education. Table 1, found in the Appendix of this FAQ, highlights some of the key offices within the Department that have a direct impact K-12 education in Connecticut.

On March 11, 2025, President Trump and Secretary of Education Linda McMahon initiated a reduction in force that laid off approximately 1,300 Department employees (nearly 50% of the Department’s total workforce) and led to the reduction, restructuring, or

elimination of key positions and offices within the Department. As a result of these personnel cuts, the Department's Office of English Language Acquisition was transferred to the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.⁵ At the same time, staffing was reduced in the Department's Office for Civil Rights and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services.

What is the role of the Department in schools?

The primary roles of the Department of Education are oversight, providing protections to student rights, and funding federal programs to aid education at the state and local levels. State education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) retain control over their educational systems. Things like the development of curricula, establishment of academic standards and graduation requirements, and teacher licensure are all determined by individual SEAs and LEAs, not the Department of Education.⁶

What laws is the Department responsible for implementing?

The Department oversees many policies that affect state and local programs for K-12 education. Notable laws include the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Established under the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the ESSA is a law enacted to provide all children with significant opportunities to receive fair, equitable, and high-quality education.⁷ The Department provides financial support and guidance for K-12 education under nine different titles, each with its own role, requirements, and funding.⁸ Of these titles, Title I, Part A: Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies, is one of the largest categorical grants provided to LEAs nationwide. Its expressed purpose is to target economically disadvantaged schools by supporting historically underfunded areas to help ensure students have significant opportunities to receive a high-quality, equitable education.⁹

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The IDEA was enacted to ensure all eligible students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. It also guarantees special education and related services are provided to these students, supports early intervention services for infants and toddlers, and awards competitive grants to their families. Comprised of four parts, IDEA Parts A through D provide aid to SEAs and LEAs for children with disabilities from birth through school age, with IDEA Part B focusing on students aged 3 to 21.¹⁰

What programs does the Department oversee that impact K-12 education?

While other federal agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, oversee initiatives such as the child nutrition programs and Head Start, the Department of Education is responsible for implementing and overseeing programs that range from early childhood education to higher education. However,

special education and support for economically disadvantaged students comprise a significant portion of the K-12 programs managed by the Department. As mentioned above, Title I, Part A and IDEA, Part B are grant programs that provide resources to school-aged children.

What type of funding does the Department allocate for K-12 education?^A

For fiscal year 2024, the Department of Education received \$241.7 billion out of the \$6.8 trillion federal budget for all educational obligations — accounting for just 4% of total federal spending.^{11,12}

The second and third largest portions of this funding were directed toward the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, which received \$83 billion, and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, which received \$20.7 billion for grant programs.¹³ Among these two departments, the largest grant programs funded through the Department are Title I, Part A and IDEA, Part B. In FY 2024, Title I, Part A was allocated approximately \$9.7 billion in funding, of which Connecticut received roughly \$155 million. For FY 2024, IDEA, Part B was allocated \$14.6 billion for various Title programs to SEAs and LEAs, with Connecticut receiving \$159.2 million.¹⁴

For FY 2024, Connecticut received approximately \$886.6 million in federal education funding, approximately \$1,642 per student, which accounted for 7.4% of the state's total education funding.^{15,16}

What rights is the Department's Office for Civil Rights charged with protecting?

The Office for Civil Rights is charged with safeguarding students' rights against discrimination through specific laws and policies.¹⁷ Table 2 in the Appendix briefly describes federal laws regarding the rights of K-12 students.

What would happen if the Department were dismantled, and what would that mean for Connecticut?

At this time, it is unclear what will happen to the programs overseen by the various offices in the Department. While the Department cannot be eliminated without congressional action, significant steps are being taken by the current administration to reduce or limit Department functions.

On March 20, 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order 14242, "Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities," which called for the closing of the Department of Education and has so far resulted in the cutting of Department staff, elimination of offices, and restructuring of Department functions.

^A For a look at the federal education funding Connecticut receives both statewide and district-by-district, visit <https://schoolstatefinance.org/issues/federal-funding>.

Since the president's inauguration, the staff for the Department's Office of Civil Rights has been cut by as many as 240 employees, and field offices in seven major cities across the country have been closed — reducing oversight and protection of student rights.¹⁸ Additionally, on March 28, 2025, Secretary McMahon abruptly ended the existing Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund liquidation period extension, which resulted in the freezing of over \$1 billion in federal funding for academic and other programmatic needs for districts across the country. In Connecticut, nearly \$14 million in funding was frozen — impacting over 20 school districts throughout the state.¹⁹ The funding has yet to be restored

Aside from the freezing of remaining ESSER funds, further widespread or substantial reductions in federal funding to states and school districts have yet to be made. However, the threat of funding reductions still looms, particularly if states or districts do not comply with the administration's efforts to remove any programming and policies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).²⁰

What can the State of Connecticut do to protect its students in response to federal changes to the Department?

The current state of K-12 education policy at the federal level presents a unique opportunity for Connecticut to lead and proactively ensure all students enrolled in its public schools receive a high-quality education that values and protects their rights and is equitably and adequately funded.

The following recommendations are not meant to be an exhaustive list of steps the State can take. Instead, it is a list of possible steps Connecticut can take to proactively respond to changes in federal K-12 education policy.

1. **Increase Transparency of Federal Impacts:** As funding and policy changes at the federal level impact Connecticut students and school districts, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) can help make stakeholders aware of changes and their effects, and serve as a trusted source of information, by:
 - Creating a publicly accessible resource hub that offers regular updates on federal changes impacting the education of Connecticut's students.
 - Organizing information sessions and town halls throughout the state for engaged education stakeholders.
 - Using social media, news outlets, and other public communication channels to relay how federal policy changes and/or cuts to federal funding will impact the education of Connecticut students.
2. **Protect and Increase K-12 Funding:** As federal funding for K-12 education may be reduced or redirected, Connecticut must proactively protect and expand programs that benefit all students, particularly those attending schools in under-resourced areas or from economically disadvantaged households that may be disproportionately impacted by reduced federal funding. To respond, the State can:

- Fully phase in a student-centered funding model.
- Establish a weight in the Education Cost Sharing formula to drive greater resources to students with disabilities.
- Increase funding for social programs (ex. school meal programs and after-school initiatives) that support students, particularly those attending under-resourced districts or coming from economically disadvantaged households.
- Fully fund the Excess Cost grant to its statutory tiers to better support districts and services for students with disabilities.
- Expand the Bilingual Grant Program grant for multilingual learner students.

3. Increase Federal-level Education Advocacy: As the rollout of federal policy changes impacting the U.S. Department of Education has been at times disorganized and tumultuous, it is essential for the State to take an active role in protecting its students. The State can achieve this through:

- Supporting nonprofit organizations that provide advocacy training for vested education stakeholders.
- Coordinating with Connecticut's Office of the Attorney General to protect education laws and policies established by the State that are being impacted or targeted by federal actions.
- Taking legislative action by reaffirming or establishing laws and policies that will protect the education of Connecticut's students.

4. Proactively Affirm Student Rights and Protections: Separate from federal education funding, a major role of the U.S. Department of Education is to ensure equal access to education and oppose discriminatory practices through the Office for Civil Rights. Should the Office of Civil Rights be weakened or potentially drift from its historical mission, the State can assume a larger role in ensuring all students are welcome in schools and receive a high-quality education. Specifically, the State can:

- Increase the investment and staffing levels at the CSDE related to civil rights oversight and investigations.
- Enshrine existing federal protections into state law to guard against possible changes in federal law.
- Communicate existing avenues for students, parents, and guardians to identify and report possible civil rights violations.

5. Create a Federal Reserve Fund to Prepare for Possible Revenue Loss: While federal education revenues are significant, funding for K-12 education is far from the only type of investment made by the federal government in Connecticut. Given federal funding to Connecticut may be reduced or eliminated in future years, the State can set aside revenues to prepare for a potential loss in federal revenue. Through the creation of a Federal Reserve Fund, the State could:

- Identify the programs and grant recipients that **would be affected by the reduction or elimination of federal funds**.
- Identify and divert specific revenue sources from the state budget's General Fund in a manner similar to the existing Volatility Cap transfer.^B
- **Develop a flexible resource** to address a broad range of scenarios concerning federal reductions or eliminations.
- **Preserve the existing Budget Reserve Fund** (commonly referred to as the Rainy Day Fund) for use in supplementing the General Fund during a potential economic downturn.

^B Connecticut's Volatility Cap was intended to limit volatility in the state budget process by capturing irregular or one-time revenue. The revenue collected under this cap is separated from other General Fund revenue sources and deposited into the State's Budget Reserve Fund. When the Budget Reserve Fund is filled to its statutory maximum level, Volatility Cap revenue is used to pay down the State's pension debt. For more information on the Volatility Cap, please visit <https://files.schoolstatefinance.org/hubfs/Reports/Connecticuts%20State%20Budget%20Controls.pdf>.

Appendix

Table 1: Key K-12 Education Offices in the U.S. Department of Education

Office Name	Description	Role
<u>Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) and English Language Acquisition</u> ^{21,C}	The OESE strives to improve the achievement of Pre-K-12 students by ensuring equal access to educational opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports equal access to educational opportunities that help students achieve success. • Aids and advances the educational improvements of SEAs and LEAs. • Provides financial assistance to SEAs and LEAs whose revenues are impacted by implementing federal policies.
<u>Office for Civil Rights (OCR)</u> ²²	The OCR aims to protect students from discrimination based on race, national origin, sex, age, and disability, ensuring equal access to education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enforces federal civil rights laws that protect students against discrimination in programs and activities in which federal funding is provided by the U.S. Department of Education.
<u>Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS)</u> ²³	The OSERS provides supports to students, parents, LEAs, and SEAs in special education, vocational rehabilitation, and research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improves the early childhood, educational, and employment outcomes for all people with disabilities and their families, as well as for state and local educational agencies.
<u>Institute of Education Sciences (IES)</u> ²⁴	IES provides independent education research, evaluation, and statistics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides data on how well students are educated in the United States. • Conducts surveys and research to better understand the educational needs of students and how improvements can be made. • Provides resources to increase the use of data and research in education policymaking decisions.

^C The Office of English Language Acquisition has been moved to under the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Table 2: K-12 Education Laws and the Office for Civil Rights

Name of Law	What is Protected
<u>Civil Rights Act of 1964: Title VI</u> ²⁵	Prohibits any public school from denying the enrollment of students based on race, color, or national origin.
<u>Rehabilitation Act of 1972 (Section 504) and Americans with Disabilities Act (Title II)</u> ^{26,27}	Prohibits the discrimination of students with specific illnesses and medical conditions. It also requires all public elementary and secondary schools provide a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities regardless of the nature or severity of their disability.
<u>Title IV: Equal Education Opportunities for English Learners</u> ²⁸	Requires schools, LEAs, and SEAs to take the necessary steps to address language barriers for multilingual learners, allowing for meaningful participation in educational programs.
<u>The Education Amendments of 1972: Title IX</u> ²⁹	Prohibits any education programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance to discriminate based on sex. This includes issues such as pregnant or parenting students, harassment and bullying, athletic opportunities and benefits, and retaliation.
<u>Boy Scouts of America Equal Access Act</u> ³⁰	Prohibits schools, LEAs, and SEAs that allow one or more outside youth or community groups to meet on school grounds from denying any group affiliated with the Boy Scouts of America, or any youth group listed in Title 36 of the U.S. Code as a patriotic society that wishes to meet in the school.

Resources

As this FAQ is not an exhaustive source, the table below provides information on some additional available resources to better understand the current federal environment as it pertains to K-12 education.

Table 3: Education Resources at the Federal and State Levels

	Linked Resource	Resource Description
Federal Resources	<u>U.S. Department of Education</u>	Homepage of the U.S. Department of Education website.
	<u>USA Facts: What does the Department of Education do?</u>	Webpage providing federal level data on what the Department does.
	<u>School Support Accountability</u>	Federal webpage providing state-level information on ESEA compliance.
	<u>FutureEd</u>	Independent analyses of education policy topics at the federal and state levels.
	<u>Trump 2.0 Federal Revenue Tool</u>	Revenue tracking tool that provides information on how much federal education funding could be cut in each state.
	<u>The74</u>	Nonprofit news organization that provides up-to-date news and research on education issues from early childhood through college and career.
State and Local Resources	<u>Connecticut State Department of Education</u>	Homepage of the Connecticut State Department of Education website.
	<u>EdSight</u>	Portal from the CSDE that provides education data at state and local levels.
	<u>School and State Finance Project</u> <u>Federal Education Resources</u> <u>Linktree</u>	Compilation of resources and important information on federal changes impacting K-12 education.

Endnotes

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² Exec. Order No. 12,242,90 Fed. Reg. 13,679 (March 25, 2025).

³ Meyer, K., Perera, R., & Valant, J. (2025, February 20). What does the US Department of Education do. *The Brookings Institution*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-does-the-us-department-of-education-do/>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education. (2025, May 7). Federal Role in Education. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/federal-role-in-education>.

⁵ Turner, C. (2025, March 12). The Education Department is being cut in half. Here's what's being lost. *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/12/nx-s1-5325854/trump-education-department-layoffs-civil-rights-student-loans>.

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⁸ Ibid.

⁹ U.S. Department of Education (n.d.). Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Title I – Improving Basic Programs Operated by State and Local Educational Agencies. Retrieved from <https://www.everystudentsucceedsact.org/title-1->.

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¹¹ USASPENDING.gov. (2024). Department of Education (ED) [Data Visualization]. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.usaspending.gov/agency/departments-of-education?fy=2024>.

¹² USA Facts. (2025). What does the Department of Education do? Retrieved from <https://usafacts.org/explainers/what-does-the-us-government-do/agency/us-department-of-education/>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education. (2025, March 20). Department of Education Budget Tables. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/annual-performance-reports/budget/budget-tables/departments-of-education-budget-tables>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). EdSight: Percentage of Revenue by Source (Excluding School Construction) Trend All Districts. Retrieved from <https://public-edsight.ct.gov/overview/per-pupil-expenditures-by-function---district/revenue-sources>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Education. (2025, January 29). Protecting Students. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/civil-rights-laws/protecting-students>.

¹⁸ Turner, C. (2025, March 13). The Education Department is being cut in half. Here's what's being lost. *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/12/nx-s1-5325854/trump-education-department-layoffs-civil-rights-student-loans>.

¹⁹ Phaneuf, K.M. (2025, March 31). Trump freezes \$14 million in aid for K-12 education in CT. *CT Mirror*. Retrieved from <https://ctmirror.org/2025/03/31/ct-education-aid-esser-funds-frozen/>.

²⁰ Mehta, J. (2025, April 3). Education Dept. warns schools: Eliminate DEI programs or lose funding. *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/03/nx-s1-5350978/trump-administration-warns-schools-about-dei-programs>.

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²² U.S. Department of Education. (2025, April 11). Office for Civil Rights (OCR). Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/ocr>.

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²⁹ U.S. Department of Education. (2025, April 14). Sex Discrimination Issues. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/civil-rights-laws/protecting-students/sex-discrimination-issues>.

³⁰ U.S. Department of Education. (2025, January 14). Boy Scouts of America Equal Access Act. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/laws-preschool-grade-12-education/boy-scouts-of-america-equal-access-act>.