

Anna Gassman-Pines:

A good education has always been seen as a building block for success in America. And since the 1980s, the US Department of Education has been a big part of that. The department was established by Congress and they're in charge of education policy, setting the big picture for schools nationwide, but changes are coming.

President Trump:

We're going to be returning education, very simply back to the states, where it belongs...

Anna Gassman-Pines:

President Trump has signed an executive order to begin dismantling the Department of Education. Here to talk about this extraordinary news is Leslie Babinski, a researcher who focuses on education. She formerly led the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. My name is Anna Gassman-Pines. I'm filling in as host today. I lead faculty affairs at the Sanford School of Public Policy here at Duke. Welcome to Policy 360, Leslie.

Leslie Babinski:

Thank you, Anna.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Now, this sounds really dramatic, the closing of the US Department of Education, this is a big move, right?

Leslie Babinski:

This is a really big move, and it's not the closing per se. It's to begin eliminating the Department of Education. As you mentioned, it was started by Congress and it can only be ended by Congress. So the executive order itself doesn't close the Department of Education, which I think is a really important thing for people to remember.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Okay, so let's back up. Can you help us just to get our heads around how big of a deal this is, can you help us understand what the US Department of Education actually does?

Leslie Babinski:

Yeah, and it's not surprising that people wouldn't really know what it does because it does lots of different things. So it provides funding to states for schools with low-income students, it provides funding to states for students with disabilities. It also administers the federal support for college students through Pell Grants, the federal work-study program, Federal Student Loans. It also tracks and monitors educational progress across the United States, so comparing states to one another and how we're doing compared to other countries. And it also ensures equal access to students through the Office of Civil Rights, so many, many different functions, and really in a way that I think a lot of people don't realize touches many students and their families.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So Leslie, can you help us get a sense of what the scale of closing this department might look like or mean for people across the United States?

Leslie Babinski:

Yeah, certainly. It's massive. We're looking at 7.4 million students with disabilities who could potentially be impacted by changes with funding through the IDEA, or Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. That's money that goes from the federal governments to states to support those students in schools. This includes over 200,000 students in North Carolina alone who are at risk for losing access to some of that funding. We have 26 million students from low-income backgrounds in all areas in urban, rural, and suburban communities that on federal Title I funding to improve their achievement in schools. We know that there are six states where more than 20% of their budgets come from federal sources, and those states are particularly going to be impacted if those federal dollars are changed up in any way. There are 9.8 million students in rural schools who depend on federal support for bridge funding in communities with more limited local tax bases. There is 6.6 million Pell Grant recipients who rely on student federal aid to attend college, and 40 million Americans have student loans that are managed by the federal government.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So the scale is really huge here.

Leslie Babinski:

Really, it's going to impact so many people. If it doesn't impact you and your family directly, you'll know someone who is impacted. And I'm not saying that all these things are going away, but the lack of clarity and the high level of uncertainty about what federal agencies will manage these programs, who will be in charge of them, who are the staff, we've lost a lot of our expertise in these programs at the federal level. There are definitely going to be bumps in the road in how these are administered as we make any transition, and that's what I'm worried about.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

And can you help us just make this a little bit concrete? So for example, there are millions of children with disabilities who are served through the IDEA, as you mentioned. Can you give us a sense of how school districts might use those extra dollars to make sure that kids with disabilities can get a high quality education?

Leslie Babinski:

Yeah, so children with disabilities need to be served in the least restrictive educational environment that meets their needs. But there's some students who need separate special education classrooms, for example, and that requires a highly skilled teacher to work with a smaller number of students with severe disabilities. And so, I wonder with these changes, are districts going to choose to fund those teachers for a small number of students who may need intensive levels of educational support? That's one thing that's I think up in the air right now.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

What are some of the things that people might not realize about the Department of Education?

Leslie Babinski:

Well, there are a number of things that I think are misunderstandings maybe about the Department of Education. One is that it doesn't employ any teachers. It doesn't run any schools. So it does not dictate what is taught in our public schools. It does not dictate when it is taught. It does not dictate how we teach it. So the US Department of Education really has no role in the curriculum that's being implemented in our public schools. And I think because of the name maybe, people think Department of Education, that it's really going to be influencing curriculum and the everyday teaching practices in our public schools, but that's not what it does at all. And then the other thing that I think is really surprising to people that only about 10% of funding for our public schools comes from federal sources. And people think that when you hear, "We're going to return education to the states." Well, actually the states have always had control of education, along with local districts.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So that's what I wanted to talk to you about next. When we hear this idea about handing the power back to the states, if more power is handed to the states, from your research, what should we be concerned about that might be missing or overlooked there? How do we think about this increasing the power that's going back to the states, if you will?

Leslie Babinski:

Yeah, so two of those things that I mentioned earlier that the federal government does provide funding for are really critical. The funding to low-income schools through Title I, and also the funding for students with disabilities. So if we think about handing that funding over to the states to make their own decisions, they may or may not prioritize those groups in terms of enhancing the educational opportunities for students from low-income communities or students with a range of disabilities. And so, those are some really big concerns about maybe how states are going to make different decisions about how to spend their education funding for those two groups in particular.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

I also want to circle back to something you mentioned earlier about keeping track of how we're doing on education. So one opinion writer wrote in Education Week that they were concerned about data, and I'm quoting here, this writer said, "The erosion of our federal statistical infrastructure would create immediate blind spots in education policy." Do you agree with that or can you say a little bit more about what you think about the statistical infrastructure?

Leslie Babinski:

Yeah, absolutely. The National Center for Education Statistics, often called NCES, is what tracks and monitors education progress across the United States. Most, if not all of those staff have been laid off. We're also losing access to national and longitudinal data sets that include that really essential information so we could track progress over time. And so, there are some real concerns right now with that loss of technical expertise, who's going to be able to do that? That's really a national level effort. You can't do that within any individual state. And so, it's really important that we get some clarity about how those functions of the federal government will happen going forward. It's a huge concern right now, and I think a lot of people are worried about it and what it means for the quality of our public education system.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Can you say a little bit more about how the kinds of education professionals that you work with use those data that come out of the National Center for Education Statistics?

Leslie Babinski:

Sure. And there are lots of things that really get down to the ground in terms of the influence of the Department of Ed on local school districts and teachers and students. The statistics are just one. I think it's important to remember that there are lots of other functions influence what happens in classrooms. And I'll just mention a couple and then get back to your question about statistics, but there's a lot of research and development that happens funded by the Federal Department of Education, and that effort is focused on learning what works in teaching and learning. And we're going to lose a lot of that expertise and innovation and efficiencies to help states and districts know which programs, policies, products are worth investing in. Without that effort at the federal level, each state's going to be up to themselves to figure out should we be doing rigorous research on what this educational program or product does for our students?

And so, there are going to be a lot of inefficiencies in that, but the education statistics really help us compare across districts and across states, and that's a really important role for the federal government as well. I think it's educating the public about what a quality education looks like and whether or not what's happening in your local district is meeting that standard of quality. Otherwise, how are families going to know if the opportunities available to their children are the best they can be in making a difference for their futures.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

How does your work connect with the US Department of Education?

Leslie Babinski:

So my research takes place in schools, and it's been funded through the Institute of Education Sciences. And I've been working on a teacher professional learning program to help kindergarten, first grade, and second grade teachers along with ESL or English as a second language teachers improve their instructional approaches for working with multilingual learners. This is really essential because about 15% of students who enter kindergarten and US public schools speak a language other than English at home. And so, our educators are tasked with teaching not only early literacy skills, but also early language skills. And if you think about it, really every kindergarten, first, and second grade teacher is both a reading teacher and a language teacher because all kids, even if they're native English speakers, are accelerating in their language development in their early years. And so, our program is showing that an intentional focus on coordination between ESL teachers and classroom teachers really accelerates learning for children who are learning English at school, along with all their other classmates who are also developing early literacy and early language skills.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So it sounds like this executive order is likely to affect your work.

Leslie Babinski:

All of that remains uncertain at this time. Although the US Department of Education has canceled lots of contracts, they have not yet made any declaration about what's happening with the grant funded research and development through the Department of Education. We're all waiting to hear. We don't

know if it's going to be transferred to another agency. We do know that all the program officers have been fired, and there's little infrastructure left to monitor those grants.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So you mentioned that your focuses on students who are English language learners. Are there concerns for other specific populations that are being raised due to these proposed changes at the US Department of Education?

Leslie Babinski:

Absolutely. I would say one of the biggest concerns is around students with disabilities. And if you think about it, every family either has someone in their family or knows someone who has something that maybe needs some accommodation in the public school, say ADHD, or a learning disability, or maybe a more severe developmental disorder. All of these students require accommodations and specialized educational practices to help them be successful in school. And that's what the federal government funds, and we're just waiting to see what's going to happen when it's up to states to decide specifically how those programs are administered within the local school systems.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So can you give us an example of something you're worried about that we might be losing with the closure of the research functions of the US Department of Education?

Leslie Babinski:

Sure. Yeah. The Institute of Education Sciences or IES has played a really vital role in the development of new educational technologies, learning what works and learning about the cost benefits of the different programs and policies and approaches in education. And one of the things that we all know that's going to be impacting teaching and learning in schools is the use of AI, both in teachers in terms of planning their lessons and modifying their instruction for their specific students' educational needs, as well as students themselves using AI as part of their learning process. It's exploding right now.

There are many companies that are working on this, and one question I have is how will districts and state superintendents know which programs are worth investing in, where the guardrails for those programs, we know there are going to be serious potential safety concerns about personal identity and data security and all things like that. And it just seems overwhelming to leave that up to individual districts to figure out. And a coordinated research and development effort at the federal level can really go a long way in helping schools do what's right for children and provide the kinds of support that teachers need as they embrace these new technologies.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Is there a particular thing that you've been thinking about in regards to these changes that is really kind of keeping you up at night when you think about what the impact is going to be of abolishing the US Department of Education?

Leslie Babinski:

So many things. I think right now what I'm feeling is the loss of expertise and institutional knowledge. So seeing colleagues that I know and admire who've dedicated decades to the educational research enterprise being laid off from their positions and no one to replace them. And so I think the abrupt

transition is really impacting the way all of us do our work. It's creating uncertainty among states and districts. Districts right now have lost millions of dollars in funding from grant programs to support teachers or recruit teachers or specialized areas. They've lost that funding. I know it's being litigated in the courts and it remains to be seen where that's going to end up, but it's super concerning. I can't imagine right now how superintendents are doing their budget planning for next year with this level of uncertainty.

So I think the abrupt nature of these changes without a clear plan for how we're going to all work going forward without the expertise of our colleagues at the federal level who really were very competent and skilled and had tons of experience, it's unclear who's going to pick up that baton and smooth over the processes that we know can be really complicated and challenging at the federal level. So I think right now, it's the loss of the people who make things work and run smoothly that worries me. Along those same lines, just think about the number of students who have federal student loans and they're in the middle of repaying those loans. That is a tremendous effort. I just heard today that that's being transferred to the small business administration, and I don't know how you do that so quickly without advanced planning. And every single person who's repaying their student loan is going to feel the impact of that transition one way or the other.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

It's a sobering picture. And before we sign off, I just want to make sure I give you a chance to share with our listeners anything else about the US Department of Education you think they should know or anything else you think these changes might affect that listeners might not have been thinking about?

Leslie Babinski:

For me, the most important thing to remember is that every child deserves access to a high quality education, that as we change the way public schools are funded, and we think about changing funding for particularly the most vulnerable populations, students with disabilities, students from low income communities, to really think about our collective responsibility for ensuring that all of our children have a high quality education. It's really to everyone's benefit for every child to be as successful as they can be, and this is an extraordinary time in education where some groups who maybe don't have a voice or don't have advocates might get overlooked. And I think it's going to be really important for all of us to be committed to providing support for our teachers who work extremely hard, and support for our public education system so that all children have access to that quality education.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Thank you so much, Leslie, for your time today. Leslie Babinski is a research professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, where she's also a professor of psychology and neuroscience. She formerly led the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. I'm Anna Gassman-Pines. Thanks for listening. We'll be back soon with another conversation.