

End the Department of Education

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The education of the young is among the highest duties of a free people. It is a task that belongs first to the student and his family, then to the school and to the community. Millions of Americans have long understood this truth. The founders provided generously for education, not by central decree, but by granting land — first one sixty-fourth, then one-eighth of the national territory — for states and townships to use to support local schools. They did not seek to control learning from a distant capital but entrusted it to those nearest the student. They knew that education, to be effective, must be free.

The modern Department of Education is a repudiation of this principle. Created by Congress in 1867, it was quickly demoted to an office of the Department of the Interior after public resistance. The modest bureau was to be a clearinghouse of information by which citizens and statesmen could learn from one another. Resurrected as a Cabinet department in 1979, the Education Department has grown into a sprawling bureaucracy that weakens rather than strengthens American learning. It governs by detailed and impenetrable rules, by mandates that burden schools, diminish teachers, and estrange education from the purposes it was meant to serve.

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The scale of this failure is plain. The department oversees \$1.6 trillion in student loans — 92% of all student loan debt. Employing 4,400 bureaucrats to enforce ever-shifting social policies, it issues thousands of regulations that entangle every level of schooling. Among the 23 million civilian government employees in America, 11 million work in public education — yet fewer than half of them, only 4.7 million, are teachers or their assistants. The rest are administrators and regulators, consuming more than half the system's resources while standing apart from the classroom. The system is not designed for learning but control.

American students, once the best in the world, now lag their international peers. Teachers, previously symbols and conveyors of wisdom in every community, become compliance officers. Universities, grown dependent on federal aid, serve bureaucratic imperatives rather than their students. The Department of Education has not elevated but corrupted learning.

The Department of Education should be abolished. Its destruction is long overdue. Its powers and resources must be returned to the students themselves and to those who know and love them: parents, teachers, and schools. If schools are responsive to parents and students instead of distant bureaucrats, their natural and paramount interest in excellence will assert itself. The money that funds education must be placed in the hands of those who learn and teach, rather than those who regulate.

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Twenty-five years ago, I wrote that government cannot make us learned any more than it can make us courageous or just. We want to be these things by nature, and if we are to become so we must strive. Give us a chance, and we will do it. Subject us to constant intrusion from above, and we will be impeded. Nowhere is our entitlement to freedom clearer than in the way we learn.

The federal experiment in education has failed. It is time for an act of restoration.

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