News
Analysis



Aria Valvano, left, and Milania Phillips, third graders at St. Ephrem Catholic Academy in the Dyker Heights section of Brooklyn, N.Y., sing during a Mass marking the opening of national Catholic Schools Week at St. Ephrem Church Jan. 26, 2025. The Department of Education said March 11 it planned to cut about 50% of its workforce. Such cuts could also impact Catholic education, experts told OSV News. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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The U.S. Department of Education said March 11 it planned to cut about 50% of its workforce. Such cuts could also impact Catholic education, experts told OSV News.

Charles Russo, the Joseph Panzer Chair in education and research professor of law at Marianist-run University of Dayton in Ohio, told OSV News, "this is a significant shift that raises questions about the federal role in education."

"While the department has long been criticized for inefficiency, cutting half its workforce will undoubtedly disrupt programs that provide oversight and funding, particularly for students with disabilities and those in need," Russo said.

Sr. Dale McDonald, vice president of public policy at the National Catholic Educational Association and a sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, told OSV News that possible impacts on Catholic education will hinge on the details of the cuts.

"A lot depends on: What are they cutting?" she said. "Are they cutting funding as well as the services, or are they just shifting it around?"

The announcement from the Department of Education cast the reduction in its workforce as part of its "final mission."

"Today's reduction in force reflects the Department of Education's commitment to efficiency, accountability and ensuring that resources are directed where they matter most: to students, parents and teachers," Secretary of Education Linda McMahon said in a statement. "I appreciate the work of the dedicated public servants and their contributions to the Department. This is a significant step toward restoring the greatness of the United States education system."

President Donald Trump has long argued that his administration wants to "move education back to the states where it belongs."

In a subsequent interview with Fox News host Laura Ingraham, McMahon confirmed the move was part of a directive from Trump on a campaign-trail promise to shutter the department.

"That was the president's mandate, his directive to me, clearly, is to shut down the Department of Education, which we know we'll have to work with Congress, you know, to get that accomplished," McMahon said, casting the layoffs as "eliminating what I think is bureaucratic bloat."

Closing the department would require congressional authorization. Legislation to do so would be unlikely to clear the Senate's 60-vote filibuster threshold.

McMahon said that the agency's remaining staff will continue to oversee money appropriated by Congress for the agency's expenditures and key programs such as Title I, which grants some financial aid to school districts for children from low-income families, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, which provides resources for children with disabilities to receive a public education.

But when asked by Ingraham what IDEA meant, McMahon replied, "I'm not sure I can tell you exactly what it stands for, except that it's the programs for disabled and needs (students)."

"This is my fifth day on the job," McMahon, who was confirmed by the Senate on March 3, said.

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Russo said that for students in public schools, which rely on federal funding and oversight in areas such as special education, Title IX protections, and low-income student support, a "weakened department could mean further reduced funding and enforcement, shifting greater responsibility to states."

"Some may step up, but others may struggle, leading to uneven educational opportunities," he said.

Catholic education, although a type of private school, will not be unaffected, he added.

"Catholic schools benefit from federal programs such as Title I funding for low-income students, already very limited IDEA support for students with disabilities, and grants for technology and teacher training," he said. "While Catholic schools operate independently, they still depend on federal resources, often administered through state agencies."

If education funding and programs were scaled back, Russo said, "Catholic schools could face challenges accessing resources for their most vulnerable students."

"At the same time, if the department's influence over education policy diminishes, fewer parents may opt to send their children to Catholic schools," he said.

Dale expressed concern that if the department were ultimately closed, and some of the programs it oversees were shifted to other departments, the grant structures of the other departments would differ in a way that could negatively impact private education.

"Our participation has always been different from public school participation," she explained about Catholic schools. "And you know, we don't get any money, we get equitable services under the law."

For some programs, Dale said, "equitable services" means that Catholic schools are given a portion of funding requisite with their percentage of the area's overall student population.

"So that's something we have to pay attention to," she said. "We don't want to be subjected to everything that the public schools are because of the money. But, you know, our kids, parents, taxpayers' money is in that pot of money, and so they should get some services for it."

Some states have been more or less friendly to Catholic education, she added.

"Don't forget, we're 10% of the whole (student) population, but that 10% is, you know, it's about 5 million students," Dale said. "So it's important that we don't just get swept away, if it just goes to a state and they just decide to throw all the money into some program that we can't participate in."

Senate Democrats and Republicans alternately criticized and praised the move.

"This appalling move will hurt kids & teachers everywhere — in red & blue states, in urban & rural communities, in kindergarten classrooms & on college campuses," Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., wrote on X.

But Sen. Markwayne Mullin, R-Okla., wrote, "I fully support President Trump's mission to tackle the U.S. Department of Education to better serve America's students. DC control isn't working. We're going backwards. Test scores haven't improved. Let's try something different."

Russo argued that education policy "should prioritize student needs over bureaucracy."

"If the goal is reform, a balanced approach — reducing inefficiencies while maintaining support for key programs — would serve students best," he said. "At this point, of course, it still remains to be seen how this all plays out as the nation seeks to continue to provide all students with the equal educational opportunities to which they are entitled."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.