

Education Leadership and Policies During Trump Administration

Introduction

The Education Department's [mandate](#) is to establish policy for and administer federal assistance to education systems nationwide, and specifically to help ensure "access to equal educational opportunity for every individual." The responsibilities of the agency's leadership [include](#) setting educational standards, providing funding and grants, supporting special education, research and data analysis, and assessing student performance.

When the Department does not fulfill its mandate, access to educational opportunities and quality control of education being provided to K-12 and college students across the country are limited.

Trump's Education Department

The Education Department under Trump was staffed by shamelessly anti-student corporate revolvers, led by his Secretary of Education **Betsy DeVos**, who was joined by Assistant Secretaries **Kenneth L Marcus** and **Jim Blew**. Across the board, Trump appointed conservative political operatives, many with corporate ties, who aimed to reduce the role of the federal government in supporting equity of and access to education, and instead frequently criticized teachers, students, and families.

Chief among these was Trump's Education Secretary **Betsy DeVos**. DeVos is a [billionaire](#) heir and [longtime GOP donor](#) who was [wholly unqualified](#) for the role. She had never held a role in public schools, as a teacher, an administrator, or a board member, and she did not attend or [send her children to public schools](#), according to the [National Education Association](#). DeVos also had personal investments that compromised her impartiality in the Education Secretary role. At the time of DeVos' appointment, her personal investments included the parent company of a collections agency, [Performant](#), that pursues federal student loan borrowers' payments, and firms that invest in the private for-profit college industry. Outrageously but unsurprisingly, while DeVos was Secretary, the Department [awarded millions in federal contracts](#) to Performant, though DeVos had been [required to divest](#) from parent company LMF "within 90 days of her confirmation as secretary."

DeVos is better described as a political operative (she was the former [Republican Party chair](#) in Michigan) and education [lobbyist](#) – "someone who has used her extraordinary wealth to influence the conversation about education reform." She and her family have

been a consistent advocate of “[school choice](#),” trying to privatize the public education system by promoting charter schools and private school vouchers over investment in public schools. The DeVos family has been particularly active in shaping the school system in Michigan, where they started the [Great Lakes Education Project](#), a political action committee that “does the most prolific and aggressive lobbying for charter schools.”

In fact, before her appointment as Education Secretary, DeVos [made a name for herself](#) as “one of the architects of Detroit’s charter school system,” spending millions of dollars including in family wealth to privatize and drain resources from public schools. Due to DeVos and her family’s lobbying, Michigan’s public education system has low standards for charter school performance, “tolerat[ing] [more low-performing charter schools](#) than just about any other state.” Michigan charter schools can be started by “[just about anyone](#),” even with no proven track record in the education industry, and can be run for profit. These and other policy decisions mean that many students in Michigan, and in Detroit in particular (where [79%](#) of the state’s charter schools are located), are left without viable education options that are accessible from where they live, with low standards meaning many students [fall behind](#) in their education from an early age.

DeVos also became a [household name](#) as Education Secretary for her outlandish political stances and apparent corruption. She made numerous outrageous statements, including advocating for guns in schools and arguing repeatedly for a decrease in her department’s budget—an effort that fortunately failed to pass in Congress. She also pocketed at least \$225 million while she held the office, according to [Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington](#). Her financial disclosures indicate that a substantial portion of this sum came from [Alticor](#) (the parent company of her father-in-law’s massive [multi-level marketing scheme](#)). DeVos also retained shares in [Neurocore](#), a “brain performance company targeting children” without recusing herself from matters related to the company while in office.

DeVos also exhibited a clear disregard for the appearance of corruption by filling a number of roles with revolvers from the for-profit college industry, including **Diane Auer Jones** (a lobbyist and former Senior Vice President at a for-profit college operation) and **Julian Schmoke Jr.** (“a former DeVry University dean with no legal or investigative expertise [whom she appointed to] lead the student-aid enforcement unit at the Education Department”), [among others](#).

Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights from August 2018 to July 2020 **Kenneth L. Marcus** invited the ire of numerous groups for using his role to reopen a seven-year-old investigation into Rutgers University concerning allegations of antisemitism. Advocacy groups argued that Marcus had abused his authority and made a politically motivated choice in the case, [violating](#) federal policy¹ obligating the impartiality of executive

¹ Specifically, the letter cites the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch, 5 C.F.R. pt. 2635.

branch officials by elevating a case by the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) “[ahead](#) of hundreds of appeals that had been awaiting review prior to the ZOA appeal,” and using a “highly contested definition of antisemitism,” among other forms of “preferential treatment” he gave the organization.

Jim Blew, Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development from August 2018 to January 2021, spent a career in “[education reform](#)” advocating for “school choice,” promoting charter schools and private schools over investment in public school systems across the country. Specifically, Blew was the [president](#) of Students First, a national lobbying organization that pushes for expansion of charter schools. He was also [director](#) of Student Success California, an affiliate of the national lobbying network [50CAN](#), which has supported school choice legislation in many states. Blew was also employed by the Walton Family Foundation for [almost ten years](#), which has historically focused on creating and [expanding charter schools](#).

Harms Under Trump

Trump’s appointees to the Education Department used their positions to advocate for shrinking the federal government’s role in overseeing public education, the promotion of charter schools and private schools, and reduced focus on promoting equity and access to quality education. Some of these efforts had a more [long-lasting impact](#); others, which involved changes to guidelines issued by the federal government to school systems, were more easily [repealable](#) by a new administration. (For instance, the Biden administration repealed DeVos’ [student loan servicing guidelines, overhauled Title IX regulations](#) to address changes her administration made, and reinstated guidelines to address the discriminatory impact of school discipline on Black and brown students, though with [critics saying](#) he did not go far enough.)

In July 2017, DeVos was [sued](#) for her efforts to rewrite an Obama-era rule intended to protect students and borrowers from predatory for-profit colleges: the Borrower Defense to Repayment rule. Under DeVos, the administration stopped reviewing cases brought under the rule, and “hundreds of thousands” of student complaints [accumulated](#), as the administration rewrote the rule again, making the standards [stricter](#) than they had been under the Obama administration’s update. Critics argued that this delay in loan forgiveness was [intentional and illegal](#)—a class action lawsuit against DeVos (carrying over to her successor, Miguel Cardona, under Biden) was settled in November 2022, though some class members [still had not received payment](#) as of the January 2024 deadline.

In another instance of protecting disreputable for-profit educational institutions, DeVos “[dismantled](#) the unit that investigates fraud at for-profit colleges just weeks after hiring former for-profit college officials [like those listed in the previous section] to sit in top positions at the Department of Education.”

In March 2019, DeVos made the striking announcement that the Education Department would *not enforce* a provision of federal law [requiring](#) that “federally funded services be provided only by public employees or contractors independent of private schools and religious organizations”—a bold statement for a federal official to make, given that their role is to uphold the legal functions of the federal government. Additionally, DeVos also routinely supported budget proposals by President Trump that would significantly [cut](#) the Education Department’s funding, though Congress rejected these efforts.

Beyond these material policy stances and updates, DeVos made many changes to Education Department guidelines for educational standards and enforcement of Department policy. Under the argument that states, rather than the federal government, should make education policy, DeVos [reversed](#) Obama-era rules intended to protect transgender students; communicated that the Department would enforce a much narrower version of Title IX, a policy intended to protect students from sex-based discrimination, in addition to updating it to give more protections to those accused of sexual assault; and [dropped guidance](#) to protect students of color from discriminatory applications of discipline in schools.

These reversals ignored public opinion and created serious potential for harm of students and color and transgender students. The Title IX guidance in particular enjoyed widespread [public support](#), with over 99% of public comments being in support. Removing protections for transgender students is actively dangerous, and contributes to an environment in schools where many trans students are subject to bullying and [violence from peers](#), leading to [mental health struggles, injuries](#), and even [deaths](#). Further, rescinding the protections around discriminatory discipline could exacerbate race-based disparities in academic success and graduation rates—even a [single suspension](#) can lead to “higher dropout rates and lifelong negative consequences,” and Black and brown students are [disproportionately](#) targeted for suspension and expulsion relative to their actual conduct.

In addition to changing guidance, DeVos directed the Department’s Office of Civil Rights to move through a backlog of discrimination claims very quickly. **Kenneth L. Marcus** oversaw this effort, which led [advocates to point out](#) that closing thousands of discrimination and other cases without fully considering whether individuals’ rights were violated is an attack on civil rights protections.

Conclusion

DeVos’ policies and statements as Education Secretary, and the priorities of her Assistant Secretaries, communicated a staunchly anti-public education agenda, support for privatization, and rejection of protections for student loan holders, transgender students, and students of color. While some of DeVos’s efforts had lasting impacts—like the changes to the Borrower Defense to Repayment rule, which the Biden administration

has met [legal challenges](#) in changing—other policy priorities were communicated as guidelines, which could more easily be reversed by subsequent administrations.

For more on this issue, contact Emma Marsano (marsano@therevolvingdoorproject.org) or Timi Iwayemi (iwayemi@therevolvingdoorproject.org)