

Protect—don't wreck—our children's futures

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As President Donald Trump and Elon Musk swing a wrecking ball at the U.S. Department of Education, I'm wondering if it's due to a lack of understanding of the department's vital functions, or because funding tax cuts for the wealthy is more important to them than building our future, or because they simply don't care about the collateral damage to our students, public schools and country. As a civics teacher, I want to use this teachable moment to describe what the Education Department does (and doesn't do)—and what's at risk if Trump and Musk succeed.

Trump and Musk are swinging a wrecking ball at public schooling.

Let's look at some of the core functions of the Education Department. It supports 7.5 million students with disabilities—roughly 15 percent of students—with special education services and specialized teachers and therapists. Title I benefits 26 million kids living in poverty, in 63 percent of America's public schools, through extra supports like lowering class size; additional instruction in reading and math; mental health programs; and pre-school, after-school and summer programs. The department has reimagined “shop class,” investing in career and technical education programs for 12 million students across all 50 states to help them master the skills and knowledge needed in today's rapidly changing economy. It enforces civil rights laws that protect students from discrimination based on race, sex, disability, religion and national origin. It puts higher education in reach for 10 million students from working-class families through need-based Pell Grants or subsidized loans. It does this and much more—with funds appropriated and approved by Congress on a bipartisan basis.

Even Trump admits that abolishing the department outright would require an act of Congress, yet his administration has plowed ahead and already stripped it of many important functions. Under the pretense of “efficiency,” it has all but shut down the nonpartisan Institute of Education Sciences, which helps schools use research-based methods to improve teaching practices and raise student outcomes in areas like reading and math.

Trump often says he wants to “return” responsibility for education to the states. But states and local school districts already are in charge—and have been for as long as we have had a republic. Local school boards set property tax rates, and state legislatures and state school officials establish teaching and learning standards, adopt curriculums, distribute dollars and determine what it takes to graduate. The federal role is to level up opportunity and make the promise of public education real for every child. Gutting federal support for education will break that promise and create huge budget headaches for rural, suburban and urban communities. Either students will lose services they rely on, or states and communities will have to raise taxes to maintain them.

Some lawmakers want to convert federal funding into no-strings-attached block grants that would no longer target the services students need or the students who need them most. Funding that provides speech and occupational therapy for students with disabilities, for example, should not be diverted to pools of money that states can use for unrelated purposes like vouchers or tax cuts.

In her Senate confirmation hearing last week, Trump's choice to head the Education Department, Linda McMahon, said her priority is to make programs work more effectively and efficiently, to boost literacy and to expand pathways to opportunity like career and technical education—areas on which we hope to find common ground to help kids succeed. But I deeply disagree with her support for private school vouchers, which have a disastrous track record on student achievement and divert funds from students in public schools to unaccountable private schools.

I would expect that McMahon would commit to protecting Americans' private data from one of the biggest data hacks in U.S. history. The department she seeks to lead is responsible for \$1.6 trillion in student loans requiring the disclosure of sensitive personal data. Musk and his minions have been rifling through this data—a heist that could do irreversible damage to millions of Americans. The AFT and two other unions have filed suit to prevent them from putting Americans' private data at even graver risk.

Another cause for alarm is House Republicans' budget blueprint, which would slash federal spending on education, SNAP food assistance and Medicaid—critical services Americans rely on—to pay for up to \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts. The GOP wants to pay for tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans at the expense of America's children.

This attack on our kids' futures is wrong. That's why on March 4, students, families, educators and other supporters of our public schools will march to protect our kids and fight for the schools and funding they need. We should be investing in our kids and strengthening our public schools, not taking a hatchet to them.

Weingarten at a rally to support students and public schools outside the U.S. Capitol on Feb. 12.



Photo: AFT

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