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Impact of a Reduced U.S. Education Department on Wisconsin Students and Schools

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The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Trump administration’s plan to cut over 1,300 jobs at the U.S. Department of Education, part of a broader push to scale back the agency’s operations. For Wisconsin’s students, schools, and universities, the effects of this leaner department, now roughly half its size compared to when President Trump first took office,

are already being felt. With a workforce reduced by early retirements, probationary dismissals, and significant layoffs in March, the department's capacity to deliver critical services is under strain.

The Education Department's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) is tasked with investigating discrimination complaints, such as those from students with disabilities denied adequate support, victims of sexual assault ignored by their schools, or students facing racial bullying. However, since the workforce reductions began, many student-initiated complaints have been stalled. James Nussbaum, an attorney specialising in higher education law at Church Church Hittle + Antrim in Indianapolis, noted in a recent interview: "The focus has shifted to investigations launched by the administration, often targeting elite institutions, leaving student complaints unresolved."

As of January 2025, at least 79 investigations were ongoing at Wisconsin schools and universities, though outdated public records make it unclear how many remain active or have been filed since. With fewer staff to handle these cases, students may turn to costly and time-consuming lawsuits. "We're advising clients to brace for a rise in litigation," Nussbaum added. This backlog risks leaving vulnerable students without timely recourse, undermining trust in the system.

Wisconsin's 725,000 federal student loan borrowers, holding nearly £18 billion in debt, are also feeling the pinch. The reduced workforce has led to slower response times and less support for navigating complex loan queries. The "Big Beautiful Bill", recently signed into law, introduces two new loan repayment programmes and a college accountability system, further stretching the department's diminished resources. Remaining staff face mounting workloads, raising concerns about their ability to assist borrowers effectively.

The Education Department administers federal financial aid, including Pell Grants that support over 60,000 Wisconsin students and approximately £540 million in aid to University of Wisconsin System students last academic year. However, a survey by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) revealed that over half of its members, financial aid officers at colleges nationwide, have noticed slower processing times and reduced communication from the Office of Federal Student Aid since the March layoffs. Melissa Storey, NASFAA's leader, stated: "Our students and members need clarity and reliable support for these critical programmes." The lack of transparency from the Trump administration about redistributing the department's workload only heightens fears of disruption.

Education Secretary Linda McMahon has pledged to maintain legally mandated functions while cutting bureaucracy to empower families and teachers. Yet, experts doubt the agency can be fully dismantled without Congressional approval, given Republicans' slim majorities and strong opposition from Democrats and educational institutions. "They're effectively starving the department," Nussbaum observed, suggesting a strategy of gradual erosion rather than outright abolition.

For Wisconsin, the consequences are clear: delayed investigations, strained loan services, and slower financial aid threaten to undermine students and schools. As the department shrinks, the ripple effects will challenge the state's education system, leaving many to question whether reduced oversight will truly benefit local communities or simply create new hurdles.