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Education Leaders Divided Over Impact of Federal Cuts to Department of Education

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As the school year begins, the U.S. Department of Education has undergone a dramatic downsizing, prompting mixed reactions from education leaders and families nationwide. The decision, enabled by a recent Supreme Court ruling, cuts the department by roughly 50%, transferring more authority over education policy and funding to state and local governments. The move has ignited debate over whether reduced federal oversight will empower communities or jeopardize critical services.

Education Secretary Linda McMahon described the ruling as a “significant win” for families, aligning with the Trump administration’s long-standing stance that education should be governed locally. The policy shift is part of a broader effort to limit federal control over school systems and restore decision-making to parents and states. While some educators and parents see this as a long-overdue correction, others worry about the impact on vulnerable student populations and federal civil rights protections.

Federal involvement in education typically accounts for about 10% of public school funding, according to education experts. Proposed changes include shifting certain responsibilities, such as oversight of special education and civil rights complaints, to other federal departments, including the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Additionally, there are concerns that block grants to states could result in inconsistent support for underserved students across the country.

Tonya Strozier, a former principal in Arizona’s Tucson Unified School District, cautioned that the role of the federal government has historically been to safeguard the needs of students with disabilities and those from marginalized communities. She expressed concern that families may not fully understand the implications of removing that layer of oversight.

Conversely, some state officials welcome the change. Wyoming Superintendent of Public Instruction Megan Degenfelder emphasized that education should be under state jurisdiction, noting that the nation’s founders envisioned state-led education governance. She argued that states are better positioned to make localized decisions that reflect community needs. Idaho’s Superintendent Debbie Critchfield echoed that sentiment, stating that cutting federal bureaucracy allows for more responsive and effective local education.

Critchfield reassured families that Idaho will continue to support children regardless of federal involvement, adding, “It comes down to a matter of whose role it is. If it’s the state’s job to direct education, then the dismantling of the Department of Education doesn’t change that.”

However, not all advocacy groups agree. Keri Rodrigues, president of the National Parents Union, expressed alarm over the potential for disruptions. Representing over 1,000 affiliated parent organizations, Rodrigues warned that removing federal support could lead to delays in services such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), risking chaos for families that rely on those resources.

The debate intensified in recent weeks when a pause in the disbursement of approximately \$6 billion in Title funding caused concern among school districts. While those funds were eventually released with the requirement that states comply with federal laws, the incident underscored uncertainties surrounding the transition.

McMahon has stated that the agency will still fulfill all statutory duties and emphasized that programs like the \$14 billion in special education funding were disbursed on schedule. The Office of Special Education Programs confirmed timely allocation to states as of July 1.

Some former department officials argue that the reduction of federal oversight may ultimately benefit families. Sarah Parshall Perry, vice president of the nonprofit Defending Education and a former senior counsel in the department's civil rights office under President Trump, said that while civil rights protections must be enforced, the department itself is often inefficient. "The Department of Education doesn't educate any students," Perry stated. "It simply spends money and has very little to show for it."

Perry also noted the shift could serve as a catalyst for states to raise their academic standards, improving outcomes without excessive federal intervention.

As the structure of American education governance undergoes a significant shift, the nation's families and school leaders remain divided. Whether the move will lead to greater local accountability or a lapse in protections for the most vulnerable students remains to be seen. What is clear is that the conversation around who should hold the reins in education is far from over.