

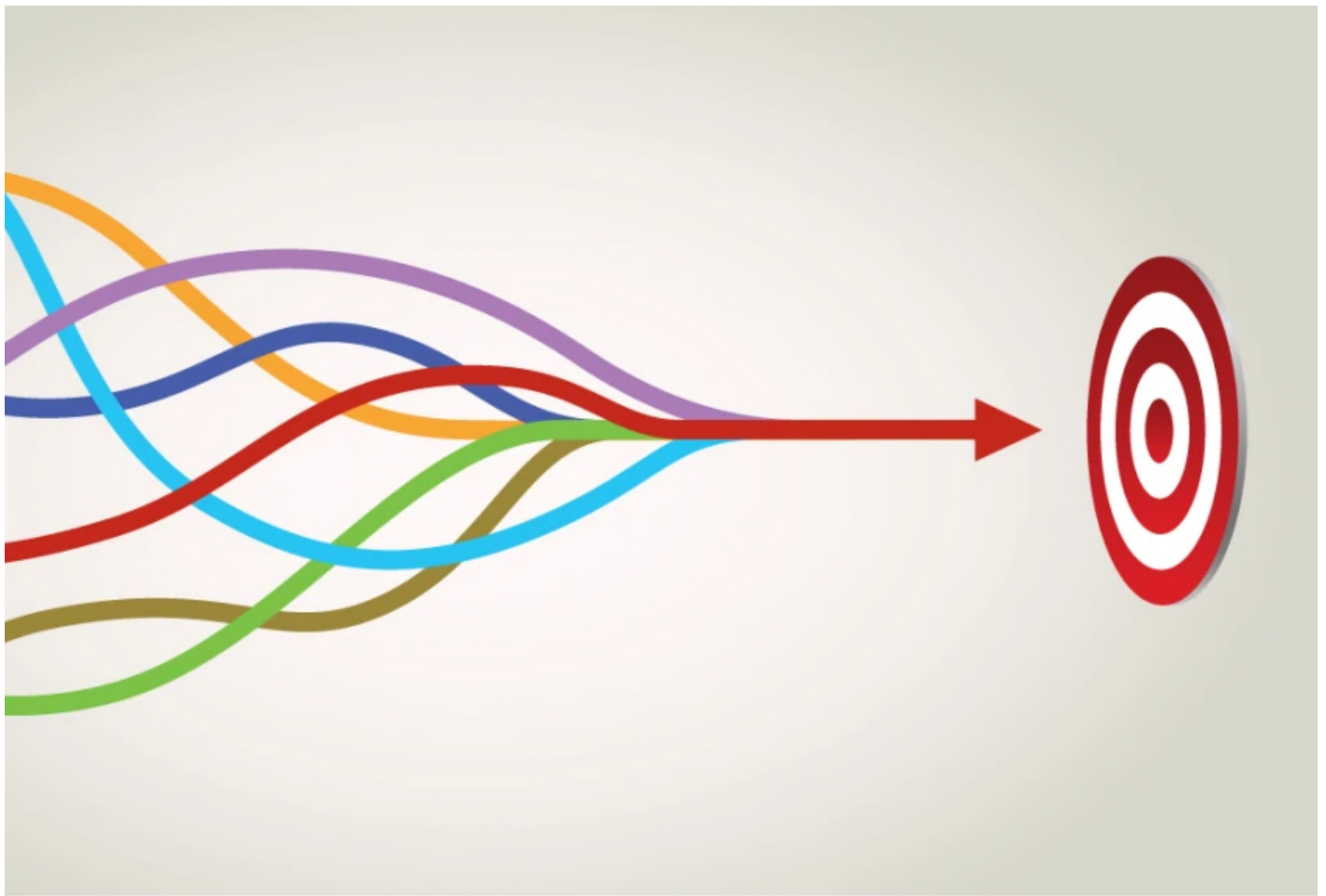
FEDERAL OPINION

Republicans Keep Talking About Abolishing the Education Department. Why?

Their pledges are best viewed as performative rather than practical



By [Rick Hess](#) — October 02, 2023 ⌚ 4 min read



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When you've been around as long as I have, one gets all manner of intriguing questions. While I usually respond to such queries in private, some seem likely to be of broader interest. So, in "Ask Rick," I occasionally take up reader queries. If you'd like to send one along, just send it to me, care of Caitlyn Aversman, at caitlyn.aversman@aei.org.

Dear Rick,

I've heard a number of Republican presidential candidates talking about getting rid of the U.S. Department of Education. I know that this isn't new, that it's something Republicans have talked about over the years. Anyway, I've got a number of questions about it. I saw that you wrote [something](#) about this not too long ago and was hoping you could help make sense of them. Where did this idea even come from? What's behind it? If a Republican wins in 2024, is this really going to happen? And, if it did, what would it mean? If you can address some of this, it'd be really helpful.

Sincerely,

I've Got Some Questions

Dear Questions,

These are terrific questions. I think the whole topic is confusing even to policy wonks and pundits who write about this stuff, so I appreciate the chance to discuss what's going on. I'll try to answer each of your questions in turn, as I think you've got plenty of company on each of them. After all, as you say, a bunch of the Republican presidential aspirants, including former President Donald Trump, have called for eliminating the Department of Ed.

OK. Where did the idea come from? Well, when he was running for president in 1976, Jimmy Carter promised the National Education Association that he'd create a federal Department of Education if elected (at the time, federal education programs already existed, but were housed at the then-Department of Health, Education, and Welfare). Carter got Congress to create the new Department of Education in 1979. Running for president in 1980, Ronald Reagan pledged to dissolve it, and the Republican platform adopted that promise. So, Republican calls to end the department have been around about as long as it's existed. In fact, Trump talked about dissolving it when he was in the White House with a Republican Congress. Yet, you'll note that the department is still here.

What's behind the proposals? Conservatives would explain that it's about distrust of federal bureaucrats, the conviction that the Constitution gives the federal government no authority over education, and the concern that federal funding tends to fuel administrative bloat and spawn red tape. More recently, as the department has become more assertive on questions like gender identity, Title IX, school discipline, and student-loan forgiveness, conservatives have also come to see the agency as a mechanism for trampling democratic and legal processes in pursuit of a progressive agenda. Obviously, as I suspect you know, defenders of the department tend to regard such explanations as incomplete or insincere.

If a Republican claims the White House in 2024, will they really abolish the Department of Education? Probably not. Republicans have been promising and failing to eliminate the department for 40 years. It's not clear what has changed. First off, no Democrats are likely to support this, meaning the Republicans would need to control both the House and Senate. Then, unless the filibuster is abolished, they'd need 60 senators to support the measure. There's no way that Republicans wind up with 60 seats in the Senate next year. And not every Republican in Congress is likely to back this proposal; there are a handful of centrist Republicans from purple states who might balk. Oh, and surveys suggest that a majority of Republicans think the federal government should spend *more* on education, which highlights just how difficult the practical politics of this would be. (Oh, and you may have recently seen that GOP candidate and tech bro Vivek Ramaswamy has promised to abolish the department via executive order. What should you make of this? Well, Ramaswamy isn't going to be president, and no one is abolishing a Cabinet department without congressional action. So, you can safely ignore his posturing.)

But let's say a Republican president did successfully abolish the department: What would it mean? Well, the big question here is whether a push to eliminate the department would mean eliminating all the programs and funding that it oversees or whether it simply means moving some or all of that to other federal entities. Keep in mind that the four biggest programs at the department are student lending, Pell Grants, IDEA, and Title I. The fact is that few policymakers, right or left, are willing to call for slashing (much less ending) federal aid for low-income students or learners with special needs. Given that, it's a safe bet that the big programs aren't going away. The practical effect would be to move this stuff to other Cabinet agencies—many to Labor, some to Health and Human Services, civil rights enforcement to Justice, and so forth.

The bottom line is that, until a candidate gives us reason to think otherwise, pledges to abolish the department are best viewed as performative rather than practical. Indeed, the performance can serve as an excuse to avoid talking about the more difficult, serious work of addressing the cost, operation, and overreach of federal programs. I think dismantling the department is a

perfectly fine idea, but, as with most public policy, what matters is whether and how a candidate might actually do this rather than the bombast with which they promise to.

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