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House Democrats Plot Reining In Education Department Dismantling

By Tiana Headley

(Bloomberg Government) -- Democrats have been powerless to stop the Trump administration's dismantling of the Education Department as many of their Republican colleagues looked on or aided the effort.

They've failed to block Education Secretary Linda McMahon from transferring key department functions to other agencies, while blasting the administration for flouting their oversight inquiries.

But Democrats, hoping to retake the House in the midterms, are gearing up to check an executive branch that's carried out the federal agency's unprecedented disassembling with little congressional accountability.

They're planning a two-pronged approach: investigating the upheaval at the department, while gaming out an appropriations strategy to halt further dismantling and reverse what's been done.

Blocking the interagency agreements McMahon has used to "pick apart the Department of Education piece by piece" will be a "top priority moving forward," Rep. Rosa DeLauro (Conn.), the House Appropriations Committee's top Democrat, told Bloomberg Government.

The administration defends its mission to eliminate an agency they say hasn't improved the nation's educational outcomes, and condemns lawmakers who stand in their way.

"The rush to shield a broken bureaucracy over the future of our nation's children perfectly illustrates a deeply failed set of priorities in Washington," said Savannah Newhouse, the Education Department's press secretary.

Rep. Tim Walberg (R-Mich.), chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee, said the administration is realigning the department to what it should be.

"Do we believe in the status quo that is failing our children, our educators, and our nation? Or do we believe in a new vision of education that puts students, families, and educators in the driver's seat?" Walberg said in a statement. "Republicans believe in the latter vision, and we are working on fulfilling that vision for the American people."



Oversight Surge

The administration has worked aggressively to downsize the department, trimming the workforce, arranging contracts to offload operations to other agencies, and eliminating certain offices and programs.

Almost 2,300 department workers remain from 3,902 on Jan. 20, 2025, following mass firings and voluntary departures.

Democrats allege many of the administration's maneuvers are illegal. The department's complete dissolution requires congressional action, and lawmakers say they're concerned whether the department is executing its statutory obligations. Department officials maintain they're fulfilling their duties and deny any unlawful activity.

Reports from the department's inspector general and the Government Accountability Office have provided a window into the agency's turmoil but much is still unknown, said Rachel Gittleman, president of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 252, which represents department workers.

"It's really difficult to holistically plan to rebuild when you don't necessarily know how the destruction is playing out," she said.

Newly empowered House Democrats would have subpoena power to compel officials to testify, hand over documents and records, and answer questions about how the department has carried out its work. The same is true for other agencies such as Labor and Treasury that are taking on Education's operations, including management of defaulted student loan collections and K-12 programs.

House Democrats signaled their priorities in unsuccessful amendments to bills the GOP-controlled Education and Workforce panel advanced last month to reassign the department's statutory duties.

One would have required the department to report the costs associated with relocating its operations. Under 14 interagency contracts, the department is sharing its responsibilities with other agencies.

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“They have refused to tell us how high those costs will be,” DeLauro said. “As we continue to perform our oversight functions on the Appropriations Committee, fighting for this transparency on behalf of the American people will remain a key priority.”

Strategic Exposure

Exposing the department’s behind-the-scenes decisions is another leading priority.

Democrats have criticized the department’s handling of civil rights enforcement in schools, and frequently cite a Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) report that its civil rights unit didn’t resolve most of its pending 2025 caseload.

Education and Workforce ranking member Bobby Scott (D-Va.) said in an interview that testimony solely from political appointees may prove unfruitful. That’s why, he said, he wouldn’t rule out issuing subpoenas to employees closest to the department’s everyday operations.

“If you aim your subpoenas down to the people actually doing the work, you can get more substantive answers,” he said. Those employees would have civil service protections, he noted, though the administration is targeting those rights.

Former Democratic congressional aides suggested that House Democrats focus hearings and testimony requests on documenting the impacts of the administration’s decisions — specifically on issues that can elicit “bipartisan outrage.”

That can include having current and recently fired Office for Civil Rights workers testify about what’s happening inside the agency and inviting families to share their experiences, said Manuel Contreras, former senior education policy adviser to top Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Democrats.

“It’s really important that we get really clear data on what’s happened to those cases, but also hear directly from people with lived experience,” Contreras said.

Appropriations Language

Congress’s funding powers are the best avenue against the administration’s moves, said lawmakers, former department workers, and ex-congressional aides.

Democrats failed to advance fiscal 2026 appropriations language to block the interagency agreements. Instead, they secured non-binding language in the budget’s accompanying statement condemning the deals.

Bipartisan momentum has grown since. A bill to block some of these agreements advanced out of the Republican-led Senate HELP committee with backing from cosponsors Sens. Susan Collins (R-Maine) and Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska).

Democrats could leverage the bill’s bipartisan support to have that measure included in a fiscal 2027 budget resolution, said Emily Merolli, a founding partner at Sligo Law Group and former attorney in the department’s Office of General Counsel.

Bipartisan support for statutory guardrails, Merolli said, makes it “far more plausible that funding negotiations could incorporate language preserving the department.”

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