

Studying the First Year of Trump's Second Term: The Renewed Importance of Participatory Governance



Derek Gottlieb
Independent Scholar

April 2026

National Education Policy Center

School of Education
University of Colorado Boulder
nepc.colorado.edu

Acknowledgements

NEPC Staff

Faith Boninger
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Margaret Balch-Gonzalez
Academic Editor

Elaine Duggan
Production Design

Alex Molnar
NEPC Director

Kevin Welner
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Suggested Citation: Gottlieb, D. (2026). *Studying the first year of Trump's second term: The renewed importance of participatory governance*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/policy-review>

Funding: This policy brief was made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Educational Research and Practice.



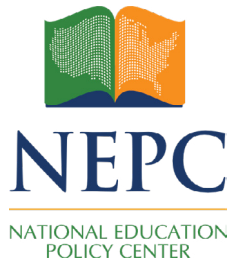
Peer Review: *Studying the First Year of Trump's Second Term: The Renewed Importance of Participatory Governance* was double-blind peer-reviewed.



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I. Executive Summary

The first year of the second Trump administration marked a radical break with 60 years of federal interventions in education. It inaugurated a new theory of American educational governance, and it scrapped, wholesale, the orienting ideological vision that had guided education policy since the Johnson administration—a vision focused on equal access for all children to human capital development in the interest of social equality and national competitiveness.

Citing the importance of institutional alignment with “Presidential priorities,” the Trump administration has supercharged the use of executive orders and other prerogatives within the executive branch to govern educational institutions. With the compliance of a quiescent Congress and Supreme Court, the administration has demanded radical changes to policies regarding, among other areas, antidiscrimination violations, the disbursement of Congressionally approved support for school districts, and research contracts with universities.

Yet, notably absent from the flurry of executive actions over the course of 2025 is any unifying vision of what American education is supposed to do, and for what purposes. The Johnsonian vision that animated education policy for decades has been replaced by a patchwork of contradictory impulses. One part of that patchwork significantly invests in “parental choice” through additional federal money for charter school programs and the creation of the first federal tax-credit scholarship program. Another part involves efforts to combat grade inflation and restrict leftist activism on college campuses. Yet another part wants to dismantle federal capacity to support

educational research and collect educational data. But most sweepingly, there is a reinterpretation of Equal Protection jurisprudence and of Title VI and Title IX guidance and enforcement—via an expansive reading of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2023 affirmative action decision. The administration is using these anti-discrimination laws to prevent school districts and universities from continuing initiatives designed to assist minoritized racial and ethnic groups and other vulnerable populations. It is also targeting what administration officials describe as efforts to “indoctrinate” children in “radical ideologies” regarding American values, American history, or theories of gender. And the administration is requiring the decision-making of educational institutions to be grounded only in what it considers to be “merit,” thereby excluding consideration of structural inequalities and discrimination.

The upshot is that the daily work of educational institutions has gotten much harder. Continuing to use inclusionary practices and curricula is inviting a federal investigation. Duly appropriated federal funds can be frozen or withheld for any reason or for no reason, seemingly according to whim. Resources to support K–12 education are now more diluted across the private and public sectors than ever. And looming over it all is this most fundamental and radical proposition: that the executive branch has a de facto veto power over the decisions of any educational institution unlucky enough to wind up on its radar.

Educational institutions find themselves in a period of arbitrary rule. Protecting schools’ mission-driven work under these conditions will require new institutional efforts at engaging local constituencies, from civil-society and business organizations to ordinary citizens and voters. Federal power over schools comes from two basic sources: funding provision and investigation authority. Federal power over schools has always broken, to the extent that it has, on the reefs of state and local opposition. It is therefore crucial in this political moment for state education agency (SEA) and local education agency (LEA) officials to cultivate the faith of their constituents. Successful pushback and alternative visions require that faith and support. That means engaging those constituents more deeply and holistically in order to maintain popular support through responsiveness and alignment. For state and local officials, that can mean adopting participatory budgeting processes. For LEA officials, it can mean conducting and responding to regular stakeholder engagement surveys. Whether the federal government threatens funding or legal action, the goodwill of the citizenry is necessary to weather the storm.

Recommendations

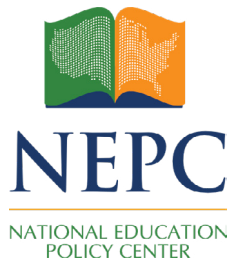
My analysis leads to the recommendations for cultivating this support:

Local Educational and State Educational Officials:

- Emphasize—through ongoing community collaboration and official communications—the holistic educational mission, including academic and career planning, dual-enrollment strategies, youth apprenticeship programs, etc., which can help remind people of schooling’s place in maintaining economic and community life.

Local Educational Officials:

- Conduct and respond to engagement surveys of stakeholders—students, staff, parents, and community members—in order to maintain alignment between schools and community values.
- Invite the public into the practices of school governance through participatory budgeting, and standing superintendents’ advisory councils that will build and maintain institutional trust.



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II. Introduction

This brief covers the first year of educational policymaking under the second Trump administration. But the actions and initiatives undertaken in 2025 depart so radically from what “educational policy” has meant for the past 60 years that it is difficult to grasp in “educational policy” terms. Only a small subset of the Trump administration’s actions and initiatives are intended to have recognizably *educational* outcomes at all. And taken as a whole, the Trump administration’s educational actions and initiatives are strikingly similar in form and content to efforts in other policy domains—including the snap closure of USAID, the arbitrary levying of tariffs on allies and trade partners, the new nature of immigration enforcement, and so on.

Rather than taking a conservative approach to achieving long-standing educational goals, the Trump administration has spent its first year in office wielding every tool at its disposal to realize the holistic political vision that the president ran on in 2024. This holistic vision, we can now see, has two parts: First, the executive will simply act, unconstrained by legislation or due process; and second, the executive will act for the exclusive benefit of cultural and ideological kin and against any inclusive notion of the public. Within this vision, there simply is no conception of what an education system ought to do or ought to produce, nor what its proper functioning would contribute to any national project. There is only the empirical recognition that education functions as a sorting machine; and the administration’s concern is restricted to whether it is properly rewarding allies and excluding others.¹

While the various Executive Orders, funding impoundments, and proposed “com-

pacts” with higher-education institutions do not articulate any particular *educational* vision, they do coherently articulate an *institutional* vision, in which decisional power devolves to the level of parents and state governments, provided those desires align with “the will of the American people as expressed through Presidential priorities.”² The first part of that vision seems to make a traditionally conservative argument against federal oversight in educational decision-making, but the second part of that vision asserts an unprecedented degree of federal authority over institutional life.

The Trump administration’s vision represents a rupture with the previous 60 years of federal educational policymaking. Since the end of World War II, there has been strong bipartisan agreement that education serves a particular set of national purposes and that the federal government has a role to play in supporting those. In 1947, President Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights tied the field of education to “the Right to Equality of Opportunity.”³ President Eisenhower had Cold War readiness in mind when he signed the National Defense Education Act into law in 1958.⁴ President Johnson brought these impulses together under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which placed education at the center of a civil-equality project, a large-scale workforce preparation initiative, and a national-defense imperative. Ronald Reagan empaneled the committee that produced the *Nation at Risk* report in 1983, which echoed Johnson- and Eisenhower-administration concerns.⁵

The Trump administration's vision represents a rupture with the previous 60 years of federal educational policymaking.

Values of national defense and competitiveness, equal individual opportunity, and academic rigor oriented postwar education politics.⁶ The Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, and Obama administrations inherited these values and

carried them forward.⁷ This general consensus is what Mark Lilla calls a political “dispensation”⁸ or what Gary Gerstle calls a political “order.”⁹ Education policy debates tended to take place within or downstream of this general consensus, at least ostensibly.¹⁰ Those policy debates concerned the best means of achieving the tacitly agreed-upon mission of “excellence for all”¹¹: Should the federal government use regulatory mandates or various incentives to compel educational institutions to achieve their mission?¹² Should institutions serve families as customers or as civic partners?¹³ Should equal access be understood in terms of resources or choice?¹⁴ Should federal activity be coordinated by a Department of Education at all?

But those days of educational policymaking are behind us now. The most analogous historical frame to our current era would be the period between the lead-up to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the handing-down of *Green v. New Kent* (1968),¹⁵ when the national vision of education was caught between institutional resistance to civil-rights activism of the 1930s and 1940s and an institutional consolidation under a civil-rights paradigm.¹⁶ During that period, the educational law-making and

law-breaking¹⁷ did not so much question whether equal access to education really does produce equal opportunity as it questioned whether equal opportunity was worthy of proactive state support, and indeed, whether political equality was even desirable.

During that period, as in 2025, it would be fair to say that education policy was less *about* education than it was about where power lay—power to determine whom schools must serve, where funding must go, and whose rights must be recognized.

It is the reason that George Wallace’s famous promise—“segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”—appears in a more general diatribe against the “tyranny that clanks its chains upon the South” and voices a refusal to “sacrifice our children to any such type [of desegregated] school system.”¹⁸ Education policy was, and is again, at the forefront of an argument about power and pluralism.

Understanding the second Trump administration’s educational initiatives as blunt responses to those fundamental questions, rather than as idiosyncratic or politically incorrect approaches to improving educational outcomes, might help us renew our grasp of the stakes involved—and of the possibilities created by turning up the dial on participatory governance that involves the community and turning down the dial on more technocratic and (suddenly) more capricious forms of administration.

To accomplish these goals, I will examine the educational purposes that administration officials have publicly articulated across a variety of platforms—including criticisms of previous policy efforts. With these goals made clear, I will explore the various Executive Orders, Dear Colleague guidance, funding impoundments, and assorted “deals” or “compacts” with educational institutions undertaken or attempted by the federal government during the past year. I will close with a set of alternative aims and policy suggestions for state and local education officials to consider.

II. Review of the Literature: U.S. Education and the National Interest

A publicly supported education system has always depended on some articulation of the national interest. Whether to inculcate the skills necessary to democratic self-government, or whether to guarantee that “civilization” would travel westward with territorial expansion, the public purpose of education has never been limited to education for education’s sake.¹⁹ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, public schools were given the cultural task of assimilating immigrants and their families.²⁰ In the wake of the Great Migration of Black Americans from the South before and after the Second World War, public schools were part of the institutional machinery that spatially contained these domestic migrants and trained children to prosper in the industrial economy of the 1940s and 1950s.²¹ Each of these educational purposes

is self-evidently connected to a particular vision of what makes America great, and what it would take to carry it forward into the future.

In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* wove a number of nation-building impulses together—and these impulses have remained with us, at least until now. Formally, *Brown* recognized a federal responsibility to ensure nondiscrimination in access to public schools, superseding any state or local legislation to the contrary.²² Ideologically, *Brown* articulated a national commitment to rights-based equality at the level of the individual, irrespective of arbitrary characteristics—race, most immediately, but later expanded to sex and gender, disability status, immigration status, and so on.²³ This national commitment entailed a governmental duty to protect a maximally inclusive public sphere, with schools as the paradigmatic public institution.

These impulses consolidated into an educational consensus the wake of *Brown*. That consensus consisted of three pillars that the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) laid out.

The Postwar Educational Consensus

First, education has a special role to play in the fulfillment of “American justice.” We know this, President Johnson implied in a graduation address at Howard University, because of the effort that Southern states had made to deny even basic literacy instruction to enslaved persons.²⁴ After the Civil War, segregated and inequitably resourced school systems were central to maintaining the Jim Crow racial order.²⁵ President Johnson challenged the education system to provide equal access to the “training and skills” through which Black Americans will equalize themselves with White Americans, thereby eliminating the putatively “factual” foundation of White racism.

Second, schooling can play this special role in the realization of American justice more or less on its own. While ESEA was part of a slew of Great Society legislation, these other bills were designed to limit the hardships and discrimination faced by impoverished individuals and disfavored groups in the present.²⁶ Other institutions can provide band-aids, but education is unique in promising a cure.

Third, we can know whether our school system is producing these outcomes by looking at the numbers. The reliance on statistical analysis, a tendency that spread across the federal government under Johnson, has been favored by quantitative social scientists as a way of making injustice publicly visible ever since.²⁷ Mean differences between various groups reveal and reify prejudice as a systemic problem, not attributable to individual circumstances or malevolent bad actors. Such policy research has set the terms by which we will know that justice has arrived.²⁸ A state of justice is manifest in the absence of racial disparities, and the absence of racial disparities signifies the presence of justice.

This basic understanding of how schooling, economic opportunity, and justice are related to one another has structured the successive iterations of U.S. education reform initiatives in the decades since. Whether it has appeared in the framing of “the soft bigotry of low expectations” or whether it has provided the equity rationale for revamping teacher evaluations, it has supplied the moral energy and national purpose behind bipartisan reauthorization of state and federal legislation, and it has determined the targets on which reasonable initiatives—and research agendas—ought to focus.²⁹

This is what I refer to as a political dispensation or a political order. It is within that rough political consensus that educational *policy* arguments have taken place. For instance, school choice advocates spent decades arguing that market forces would improve systemic performance,³⁰ that it is unjust to deny students access to better schools on the basis of zip codes,³¹ and that institutional responsiveness to educational consumers would lead to better individual outcomes.³² Opponents of school choice argued that exit options would drain resources from already impoverished schools,³³ would create a two-tiered system through “cream-skimming” dynamics,³⁴ and would fail in their systematically transformative aspirations.³⁵

The correctness of either camp is beside the point. The point is that both sides of the debate broadly accepted the view that education policy should aim to improve the system for all and facilitate equality of access to educational opportunity. That is what has made it a policy debate first and foremost. Whether we’re talking about race or class or disability status; whether the reform in question pertains to institutional structure, funding, curriculum, or pedagogy; whether decision-making is centralized or decentralized; the basic understanding of what schools are for and why they matter remains the same.

The Trump Pivot

Since Inauguration Day 2025, the second Trump administration has spiked all of that. Socioeconomic equality and institutional inclusion are out as policy lodestones. The Institute of Education Sciences (IES), created under the George W. Bush administration specifically to study and disseminate “what works” to equalize opportunity and improve outcomes, was the first part of the U.S. Department of Education to be gutted. And new Executive Orders and guidance strengthen privatization initiatives that funnel money away from public-education institutions without even the fig leaf of an argument about increasing student achievement.

If there is a national purpose embodied in federal initiatives, it is entirely different from what has come before.

III. Recent Developments

In this section, I will detail the federal initiatives and governing tools that the administration has used to promulgate changes in educational institutions in both K–12 settings and in higher education. In each setting, the administration has most fundamentally worked to reverse or dismantle rules, procedures, and offices dedicated to providing access and protection for traditionally marginalized groups of students and workers. The administration has argued that such attention amounts to unacceptable discrimination against traditionally non-marginal groups. I stress that rationale not only because it is the one the administration most regularly articulates, but because it is utterly disconnected from any argument *about* educational goals and their role in some national project.

PK–12 Education

In the world of PK–12 education, the Trump administration has pursued three goals: expand and bolster parental choice programs, dismantle and disempower the federal Department of Education, and prevent state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) from contravening the administration’s position on sex- and race-based discrimination. As I will discuss later on, these three aims are incompatible with one another in principle, but not necessarily in substance.

The first two of these goals represent long-standing conservative aspirations, and the administration has tended to stress its commitment in the familiar language of “return[ing] education to the states and empower[ing] parents in their child’s education.”³⁶ Because only roughly 10% of the average school district’s funding is federal, and because so little decision-making power is vested in the federal executive, the administration’s ability to positively direct local policy is somewhat constrained. For instance, the president cannot simply dissolve the Department of Education by Executive Order.³⁷ That requires an act of Congress. Nevertheless, of course, the administration has been able to make deep cuts within the Department—including to the Office of Special Education Programs³⁸ and the National Center for Education Statistics³⁹—and also to transfer many of its responsibilities elsewhere in the federal bureaucracy.⁴⁰ This Executive Order is illustrative of the administration’s overall approach to PK–12 matters: although both the letter and the spirit of the law bestow little power on the federal government, and even less on the executive branch in particular, the second Trump administration nonetheless uses every plausible avenue within the letter of the law in order to realize its vision.

In terms of returning education to the states, the administration has issued Dear Colleague guidance encouraging SEAs and LEAs to use existing waiver processes to deviate from federally stipulated default decisions⁴¹ and, for SEAs in particular, to apply for Ed-Flex status, which would allow states to unilaterally waive federal

requirements for certain programs.⁴² These are obviously not new powers that the federal government is granting to state and local agencies, but the administration is loudly signaling that it will not police any states who wish to go their own way, even highlighting available pathways for states to do so.

The administration has taken more decisive action to bolster school-choice initiatives in order to “empower parents in their child’s education.” President Trump emphasized the value of “universal K–12 scholarship programs,” which some education scholars have termed “neo-vouchers,” in an early Executive Order.⁴³ And the U.S. Congress followed up by incorporating just such a program within the Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025—the first federal-level school voucher.⁴⁴ Additionally, the Trump administration boosted federal funding for a variety of existing school-choice options, including a \$500 million dollar investment in the seven Charter School Program grant categories.⁴⁵

But in this area, again, the bulk of the administration’s efforts have taken the form of guidance to SEAs on the use of “Federal formula funds to support K–12 educational choice initiatives.”⁴⁶ The Department of Education now officially encourages states to (a) take a choice-first approach to addressing school improvement,⁴⁷ (b) use some of its Title I allocation for parental outreach and choice,⁴⁸ and (c) make parental-choice options part of their required “safe schools” initiatives.⁴⁹ These are, once more, mostly explicit permission slips to states: The guidance is highlighting policy avenues and funding sources for parental choice that already exist.

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It is with respect to the administration’s third goal—preventing deviation from the administration’s position on sex- and race-based discrimination—that interventions have been much more muscular and much more disruptive. Two Executive Orders, on “Ending Radical Indoctrination

in K–12 Schooling”⁵⁰ and on “Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy,”⁵¹ articulate the administration’s substantive positions and lay the groundwork to punish educational agencies and institutions that defy them—whether by cutting funds or by launching investigations.⁵²

The former order directs federal agencies to explore “eliminating Federal funding or support for illegal and discriminatory treatment and indoctrination in K–12 schools, including based on gender ideology and discriminatory equity ideology.”⁵³ This statement flatly declares certain pedagogical, curricular, and administrative practices “illegal” in spite of decades of jurisprudence to the contrary, and it promises to withhold federal funding from institutions that fail to comply with the administration’s novel construction of discrimination and “gender ideology.” Importantly, the Executive Order cites harm to parental authority as its motivation: These practices “sow division, confusion, and distrust, which undermine the very foundations of per-

sonal identity and family unity.”

The latter order, on meritocracy, seeks “to eliminate the use of disparate-impact liability in all contexts to the maximum degree possible” so as to nominally ensure equal treatment under the law.⁵⁴ Disparate-impact analysis has traditionally helped agencies see whether a given policy is having unequal *effects* across various groups—whether a policy is discriminatory *in fact* and not merely in *intent*. Eliminating the use of disparate-impact liability makes it straightforwardly impossible to officially recognize whether ostensibly neutral policies are having functionally discriminatory effects.⁵⁵

Both of these Executive Orders have dramatically changed the interpretation of the rules under which educational officials (and courts) have judged matters of equality and fairness, and they have done so with real consequences for federal aid to public schools. The very specter that some long-standing federal programs might include support for initiatives that contravened the administration’s line on equal treatment led to the sudden freezing and unfreezing of nearly \$7 billion in federal aid for K–12 schools over the summer of 2025.⁵⁶ The blanket suspicion of programs intended for students with special needs or to support student mental health—the presumption that acknowledging *special* needs amounts by definition to *unequal treatment*—has led to the sudden cancellation of federal grants nationwide.⁵⁷ Seemingly convinced that the federal government has long subsidized precisely the kind of educational programming that the Trump administration has now declared illegal, these Executive Orders have sent officials on a hunt to cut these programs off at the funding root. As I’ll detail in the Discussion, state and local officials have been scrambling for ways to affirmatively prove their compliance with the administration’s priorities, at both the higher education and K–12 levels.

Higher Education

In the world of higher education, the Trump administration wielded the same construction of discrimination, and the same threats to federal aid, to compel elite institutions, especially, to reform themselves in the administration’s ideal image. The federal government has significantly more leverage over higher education than it does over K–12 school districts because so much college and university revenue depends on federal policies—student loan money, visas for international students, research grantmaking, and so on. This leverage is compounded by the fact that state-level funding for higher education has fallen by more than \$6.6 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars since the Great Recession.⁵⁸

The second Trump administration has leaned on its funding power to bring colleges and universities into line. On January 27, 2025, the Office of Management and Budget ordered a “temporary pause” on all “agency grant, loan, or other financial assistance programs” until these programs could be vetted for alignment “with the

will of the American people as expressed through Presidential priorities,” imperiling various streams of revenue to colleges and universities.⁵⁹ Naming the same “unlawfully discriminatory practices” it cited with reference to “equity ideology,” the administration issued an April 2025 Executive Order to ensure that accreditation agencies use the administration’s own interpretation of the Civil Rights Act in evaluating higher-education institutions.⁶⁰ Unaccredited colleges and universities would not be eligible to receive federal loan money, which, as the Executive Order itself menacingly notes, amounts to “more than \$100 billion . . . each year.” President Trump also singled out university endowments for additional governmental scrutiny in terms of their investment decisions in his “America First Investment Policy” memorandum.⁶¹

At the same time, the administration spent 2025 offering colleges and universities a deal: a set of policies and stances to adopt that would ostensibly keep federal money unproblematically flowing. At the end of the year, the Department of Education was able to tout “striking historic deals” with several institutions.”⁶² And the administration has aggressively followed through on its threats to withhold federal funding from institutions that do not leap to comply. Targeting elite institutions first, the government withheld \$2.7 billion in federal grants and contracts from Harvard University, prompting Harvard to sue. On September 3, a district court found in Harvard’s favor, ruling that the withholding of funds was retaliatory and that the government “had not followed the procedures required by Title VI.” As of this writing, the administration has appealed that ruling.⁶³ The federal money has remained frozen all the while.⁶⁴

The administration has aggressively followed through on its threats to withhold federal funding from institutions that do not leap to comply.

When the Department of Education speaks of “striking historic deals” with colleges and universities, it is referring to the “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education,” which summarizes the administration’s view of what higher education has been doing wrong and what it should be doing instead.⁶⁵ The list of demands to which institutions must agree is a wide-ranging anti-“wokeness” platform. It includes the “antidiscrimination” requirements covered elsewhere in Executive Orders, but it also requires colleges and universities to crack down on student protest activities, refrain from taking political stances of their own, adopt new measures of fiscal responsibility, promote “Western values,” limit international students, and combat grade inflation. The introduction to the “Compact” explicitly notes that research funding, student loans, student visas, and “preferential treatment under the tax code” may all depend on remaining in the good graces of the federal government.

The administration’s discretion with respect to higher-education funding has also enabled a wholesale recalibration in the way individual students approach career preparation—and these changes will trickle down to middle and high school systems,

too. By changing eligibility requirements associated with professional training and public-service student loan repayment plans, the administration has made “care” professions where women predominate—nursing, teaching, social work, etc.—even less attractive than they were before.⁶⁶

The Big Picture

These educational policy initiatives of President Trump’s first year back in office imply a particular vision of an ideal American—who they are, how they act, how they are to be treated by institutions, and how their deservingness is to be demonstrated. Educational institutions are to develop and to serve this ideal American. They are to produce and certify, in accordance with the level of individual “merit,” the ratings and credentials that truthfully attest to their deservingness. This ideal American cannot be—by definition—transgender. This ideal American cannot have their qualifications tainted by the specter of having received preferential treatment on unlawful bases of sex or race or national origin. This ideal American must believe in the goodness of American and Western values, obey their parents faithfully, and strive to make the most of their individual talents.

Nothing in this vision is particularly new, even if this is the first time it’s been so explicitly enshrined in policy. It is a fundamentally conservative vision. What is genuinely new here, especially for a nominally conservative administration, is the willingness to use the full array of executive levers to compel federal agencies, state agencies, local school boards, and public *and* private institutions of higher education to adopt an administration’s substantive political vision. Of course, the federal government has always used leverage to win compliance from lower levels of government: the Trump administration’s reinterpretation of Title VI’s nondiscrimination provisions would be toothless if Title VI did not *already* condition federal funding on lower-level compliance.

But the impounding of duly approved Congressional funding to states, districts, and higher-education institutions, as well as the general disregard for statutorily encoded procedures for *establishing* violations of antidiscrimination laws—that is new. Federal protections against individual discrimination and federal supports for programs serving underrepresented groups have suddenly, in 2025, found themselves routed through an ideological bottleneck somewhere in the executive branch, a rubric consisting of one question: Does this align with “the will of the American people as expressed through Presidential priorities?”⁶⁷

IV. Discussion and Analysis

The same factors that make it difficult to grasp the Trump administration’s multifarious executive actions under a rubric of *education policy* make it difficult to dis-

cuss them in policy terms. The goals that have oriented educational decision-making for more than half a century now seem utterly inert. At any point in the previous half-century, a policy scholar would evaluate the expansion of parental choice in PK–12 education on (a) whether it seemed to bolster achievement at all, and (b) whether impacts were similar for rich and poor students, White and Black students, and so on.⁶⁸

But it is no longer clear that student outcomes *matter* in the same way at all. A policy scholar’s warning that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activities seem to be driving down attendance among students of color—with obviously detrimental educational effects—would have been a flashing red light to any of the previous 10 presidents. But it does not even seem like an *unintended* consequence in this presidency.⁶⁹ Educational directives coming from this administration are about winnowing schools’ decision-making power (and revenue sources), and about coercing them to wield what remaining power they do have toward treating traditionally marginalized students and families with malign neglect.

The second Trump administration is not trying to “improve” schools according to any traditional concept of “school improvement”: It is not trying to lift all boats; it is not trying to raise test scores; it is not trying to address chronic absenteeism. This administration has a vision of an ideal America, and it has arrogated to itself the coercive power to make that vision real, and educational institutions are a medium—one medium among several—through which that power can work toward the realization of that vision.

It is a discombobulating time for every state education agency (SEA) and local education agency (LEA) official. The education policy infrastructure under which every such official has come up has abruptly vanished. The most basic senses of “this is how it is done” and “this is why we do the work” are up for grabs in a way they have not been in generations. It is (literally) a crisis.⁷⁰

Federal Coercion Harms Allies as Well as Opponents

Earlier, I said that the administration’s three goals—to expand and bolster parental choice programs, to dismantle and disempower the federal Department of Education, and to prevent state and local education agencies from contravening the administration’s position on sex- and race-based discrimination—are incompatible in principle, but not in substance. The parental right to school choice is offered in the name of those parents whose authority is threatened by “radical indoctrination,” but obviously many parents support accurately critical instruction in American history, as they support inclusive approaches to schooling practices more generally. For those parents, however, the administration recognizes no right to inclusive schooling or critical history. Inclusiveness and critical history, we are to believe, are prohibited by the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments. That

is how these three goals are incompatible in principle. Parental rights only apply to the subset of parents whose particular values align with the Presidential administration's. That is also, obviously, how these goals are deeply compatible in substance.

But the administration's willingness to move fast and break things—to suddenly and without explanation cut off funding, to very loudly file litigation against elite higher-education institutions, to circumvent due process entirely—destabilizes the ground for everyone, not merely the administration's ideological opponents. It is not *enough* to conform to, or even to champion, the administration's values. In making good on its coercive threats, the administration harms its own allies, too.

Take the State of Idaho, for instance. Idaho is quite conservative; it went heavily for Trump in the 2024 election; its SEA has been dutifully adjusting policy guidance in accordance with the federal administration's priorities. Yet on New Year's Eve 2025, Idaho had its Full-Service Community Schools Scaling Grant finally terminated three years early due to "DEI language in the original application."⁷¹ Idaho had appealed the decision earlier in the month, protesting that the offending language had been removed and that no DEI work had ever been conducted. Idaho's two Republican Senators even intervened with the Department of Education.⁷² It made no difference. "The Department of Education's response did not address the amendment or documentation submitted with the Dec. 17 appeal."⁷³ The Department of Education has reduced its own capacity and focused so heavily on punishing deviation from its ideological priorities that it cannot be counted on to reward or protect its own ideological friends. Some scholars may have suggested that the Trump administration governs by the logic of the protection racket,⁷⁴ but the most important lesson for SEA and LEA officials is that *complicity does not buy protection*.⁷⁵

An Opportunity for Increased Reliance on Local Constituents

While a federal administration with its hands on the funding spigots and an itchy litigation finger might take a blitzkrieg approach to policy change, public expectations around the purposes and functioning of educational institutions change much more slowly. It is one thing to watch Fox News and bristle at the specter of federally mandated "DEI" preferences in general; it is quite another to see vision screenings at your child's school suddenly evaporate. And in a situation where the federal administration itself will decide whether an educational institution is adequately aligned with "Presidential priorities," the only *certain* way to get vision screenings or special-ed services into your child's school is to do it yourself, with your community's support.

If the federal government is radically breaking with 60 years of education policy-making, and if the federal government is a fundamentally unreliable partner, it counterintuitively also presents an opportunity. SEA and LEA officials will have to

turn much more directly to their state and local constituencies for guidance and for resources. Since the federal government’s blunt-force weapon is funding, SEAs and LEAs who wish to continue serving their communities and improving schools along traditional lines will have to insulate themselves financially. And that means, ultimately, that SEA and LEA officials will have to engage their constituents in new and/or deeper ways in order to make those constituents willing—even happy—to raise their own taxes to offset the loss of federal revenue. Displeasure at funding “government schools” evaporates to some degree when a community understands itself to be funding “our schools.”

In my home state of Wisconsin, for example, legislation originally intended to rein in local property taxes and discipline teachers unions has led public schools to more conscientiously articulate their value to local businesses and general community life in order to build grassroots support for maintaining resources.⁷⁶ This articulation looks different from community to community. The School District of Rhinelander touts its “Partners in Education” (PIE) career-academies programming to remind its constituents that the school district is committed to local workforce preparation.⁷⁷ The Wauwatosa School District stresses its small class sizes, its arts programs, and its boosting of teacher compensation as reasons for taxpayers to approve additional revenue.⁷⁸ A bare-bones, mostly volunteer statewide nonprofit—the Wisconsin Public Education Network—helps to connect local organizers across communities to share communication strategies, information resources, and so on.⁷⁹ The financial need, and the policy regime starving school districts of reliable funding, is the same all across the state. But each local district draws upon its constituents’ values in order to convince voters to pass necessary funding referendums. In November of 2024, almost half of Wisconsin’s school districts had referendum questions on the ballot, and 70% of those referendums passed—because districts continue to provide the educational goods that their particular constituencies want.⁸⁰

In addition to ad-hoc, community organizing around an upcoming levy or bond vote, some LEAs and SEAs have created or required local advisory and planning councils in order to ensure a direct pathway between constituents’ voice and public-school leadership.⁸¹ Such councils provide institutional vehicles for ongoing calibration between constituencies and school leaders, helping to ensure that when federal policy pressure suddenly appears, or when federal funding abruptly vanishes, education officials know where they have the capital (political and financial) to continue to pursue their own missions irrespective of directives from above. Even under conditions of “perceived compliance,” state and local actors can actually engage in “bottom-up capacity-building,” a strategy well-established in the Jim Crow South.⁸²

Grassroots support for local schools is also the fulcrum on which state-level policy can move—a broad-based understanding of schools’ financial straits can underwrite efforts to change state law.⁸³ LEA and SEA officials—*regardless* of their degree of

support for federal priorities—will need to cultivate that support for schools as a hedge against the arbitrary disappearance of federal resources *and* as protection against any local temptation to call the feds.⁸⁴

For that reason, LEAs and SEAs ought to pivot to governance strategies that prioritize direct stakeholder involvement. Stakeholders engaged in practices of school governance through participatory budgeting, standing superintendents' advisory councils, and so on, can build and maintain the levels of institutional trust necessary to educational stability amid unpredictable federal circumstances. Stakeholders are willing to provide greater levels of revenue through taxes as a result of this kind of engagement, as the Wisconsin experience shows.⁸⁵ Creating ongoing structures that bridge the gap between schools and civil-society organizations, as well as entrenching routine citizen participation, can protect schools' educational work in an era of arbitrary rule.

V. Recommendations

My analysis leads to the recommendations for cultivating this support:

Local Educational and State Educational Officials:

- Emphasize—through ongoing community collaboration and official communications—the holistic educational mission, including academic and career planning, dual-enrollment strategies, youth apprenticeship programs, etc., which can help remind people of schooling's place in maintaining economic and community life.

Local Educational Officials:

- Conduct and respond to engagement surveys of stakeholders—students, staff, parents, and community members—in order to maintain alignment between schools and community values.
- Invite the public into the practices of school governance through participatory budgeting, and standing superintendents' advisory councils that will build and maintain institutional trust.

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