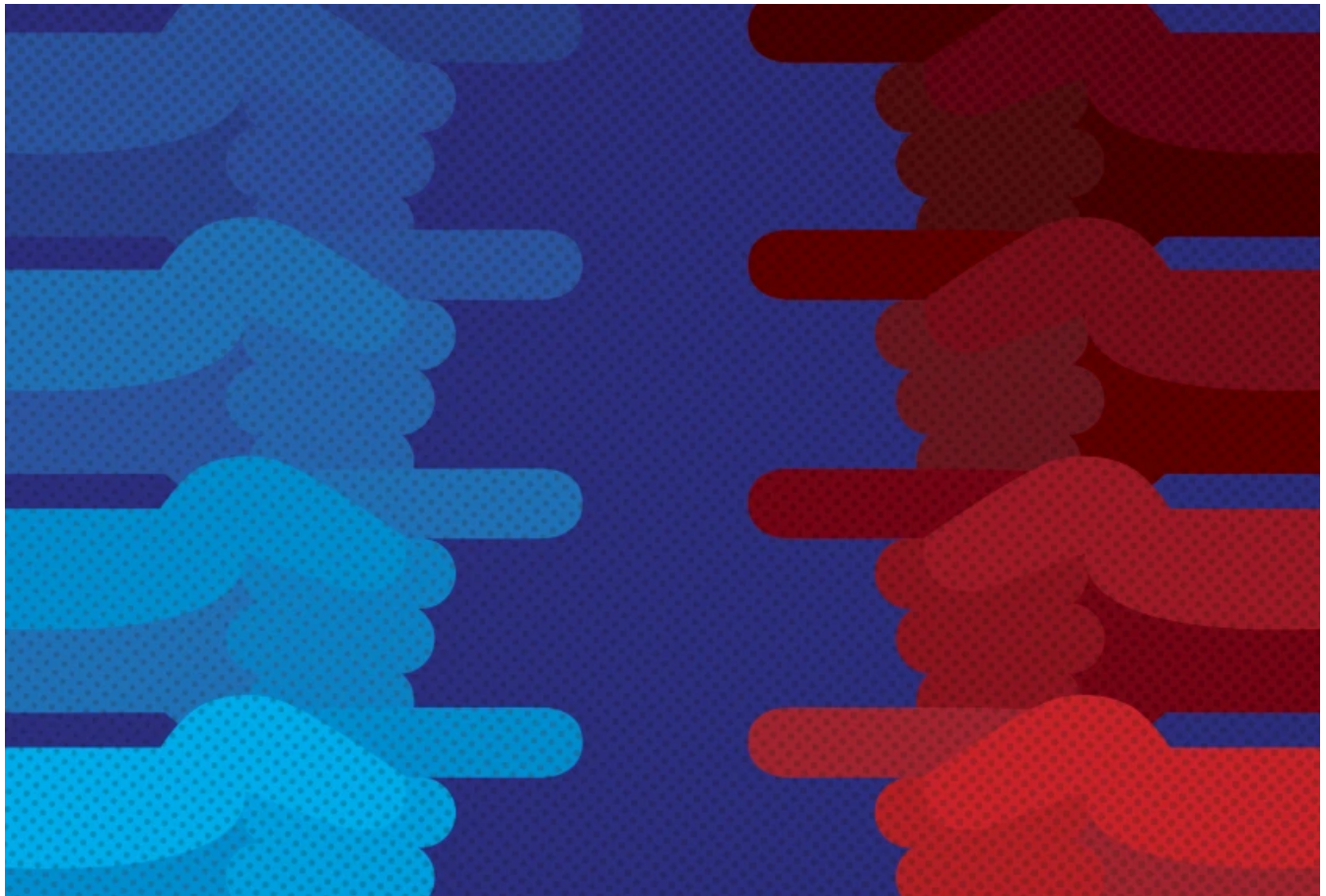


We're All to Blame for What Has Become of the U.S. Dept. of Education

The trouble started decades ago with a flawed plan to improve America's schools

By Michael V. McGill — May 01, 2025 ⌚ 5 min read



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Linda McMahon, the nation's 13th (and possibly last) U.S. secretary of education, wants to “reorient” the federal Department of Education. She aims to “fund education freedom” (read charter and private schools), “not government-run systems” (read public education), and “empower states” (implicitly, disempowering the Education Department). She has been tasked with shutting it down and putting herself out of a job.

It's the latest chapter in a national story of education reform gone awry, one I was (too often unhappily) involved in from its beginning in 1983 until I retired in 2014 after 16 years as the superintendent of the Scarsdale, N.Y., public schools. The tale started with a flawed plan to improve America's schools, one the political right then seized on and used to discredit them. The ill-advised idea of eliminating the Department of Education is a logical result.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its influential report “A Nation at Risk.” The report declared that “a rising tide of mediocrity” was engulfing America's schools, threatening the future of the country and its people. It prompted reforms that led eventually to the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, requiring each state to adopt a regimen of tests and other requirements to produce better results. The plan was to make every child in the country “proficient” in reading and math by the 2013-14 school year.

The plan didn't work. Nor did efforts to reauthorize NCLB, which was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015. The new law gave states more control over education policy. But the machinery of testing and accountability ground on.

Undoubtedly, the reformers who led the accountability movement wanted to improve education opportunities and outcomes for all children, especially the poor and students of color. Their idea was to drive school improvement by holding teachers and administrators wholly responsible for student achievement through a system of high-stakes testing, performance evaluation, and publicized test results. School choice and charter school opportunities would spur competition and lead to improvement.

In practice, however, some scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress did rise, but there'd been similar or greater gains before NCLB pursued its high-stakes accountability strategy. “Teaching” too often turned into test preparation, taking energy and time—days or even weeks—away from more valuable learning. In too many schools, more reading, writing, and math—what the tests assessed—meant less social studies, science, and arts. Plus, the strategy purposely ignored socioeconomic disparities’ powerful impact on test results—and on children’s outcomes. The plan motivated some teachers. Others were skeptical, even deeply resentful.

Throughout, though, the public kept hearing that the schools were failing. America’s top education officials—secretaries of education and state commissioners—often seemed, at best, ambivalent about the quality and value of the nation’s public schools. At times, they sounded more like unflinching taskmasters, pointing out shortcomings and brooking no excuses.

That message resonates today. In a Gallup poll early this year, only 24 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with the quality of public education in America. (However, parents tend to be more satisfied with the quality of their own kid’s education.)

Still, it probably shouldn’t have been a surprise when critics on the right took what they were given—an (often unfairly) maligned traditional system and a “better”

alternative of school choice that promised to give families what they want—and ran with it.

It's true that not all public K-12 education is great. But attempts to characterize this whole sprawling, decentralized enterprise as “good” or “bad” ignore the fact that it's not one thing. There are 50 states. New York state alone has more than 700 school districts. School quality and academic achievement vary widely.

Yes, children could be more deeply and broadly educated. Nowhere do schools engage or nurture every child as they ideally could.

But public school is also where a teacher helps a struggling 13-year-old with learning difficulties. Or where a social studies class wrestles with issues of race and class in America. Or where a 2nd grader finally makes sense of words on a page. It's where teachers work long hours for modest pay and eke out small but meaningful victories day by day.

In other words, public education is often much better than easy stereotypes suggest.

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Nonetheless, 40 years of criticism, embraced and amplified by the right, have led us to the Trump administration's decision to undermine public education yet further by dismantling the federal Education Department—even though it's entirely unclear that the change will yield better results.

Full disclosure: I had my beefs with some of the department's policies when I was a superintendent, but I always believed it does something unique and important. The department's direct involvement in schools is very limited. But it is the one government entity responsible for promoting education equity nationwide, targeting resources in support of that goal, evaluating national progress, and providing an informed overview of a dynamic enterprise that doesn't stop at state lines.

Without well-coordinated policy, research, and practice at a national level, states will be less able to do their jobs. Without a national strategy, it will be harder to give all America's children a world-class education.

Considering these realities, we'd be in a much better place if national leadership were helping Americans see the situation this way: Our public schools are trying to do something unprecedented—enable every child, regardless of race, social class, or income, to succeed in a century transformed by technology and new global challenges. We all share responsibility for what the schools are today; we are all responsible for making them better. We can cheer their achievements, reward initiative and improvement, provide the resources to help them flourish, and, yes, expect them to recognize their shortcomings and improve.

Public education is especially worth supporting now, when we are so divided and dialogue across political lines is so fraught. It's where people with different values and beliefs rub shoulders and learn to live together as productive, contributing, citizens. It's a bedrock of democracy that's worth securing.

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