White House merger plan reignites debate on education, training

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A White House proposal to merge the Departments of Education and Labor has reignited a long-running debate about whether the worker training and education functions of the federal bureaucracy should be distinct or part of the same operation -- and whether there might be better ways to create a more coherent system for educating and training Americans. The proposal is part of a broader plan to overhaul much of the federal government released by the Trump administration Thursday.

The White House said the new agency, dubbed the Department of Education and the Workforce, would better align postsecondary education programs with the needs of the work force.

It's likely to face steep odds of advancing in Congress, which must approve any such reorganization. Democratic lawmakers were quick to blast the announcement as unrealistic and a coded plan to cut government investments.

Former federal officials and experts on education and training, however, disagreed over whether folding the departments into a single agency could produce better results.

Anthony Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, said such a reorganization was long overdue. When the Education Department was created in 1980, he said, the relationship between educational attainment and the economy was "very weak." Now the opposite is true, and a college education is seen as key to a good-paying job.

"We've moved away from a world in which 70 percent of jobs didn’t require any postsecondary education or training," he said. "The real world has made these connections, but we've not aligned these systems at all."

Carnevale, a former Labor Department official in the Clinton administration, said combining the two departments would force a culture change at the new Education Department with a stronger emphasis on connecting education to jobs.

"If you want to change missions, you change institutional structures," he said.

But Mary Alice McCarthy, director of the Center on Education and Skills with the Education Policy Program at New America, said the Trump administration was trying to reinvent the wheel with its proposed reorganization.

"This is focusing on the wrong problem," she said.
Much of the existing overlap between the two agencies involves grant programs dealing with short-term training designed to get individuals into the labor force quickly. McCarthy said the White House would do better to make sure officials at the existing Labor and Education Departments are coordinating various programs well, rather than moving desks between agencies.

The Obama administration in 2014 conducted a review by Vice President Joe Biden’s office of all federal job-training programs and acted on recommendations to streamline and improve the effectiveness of those programs.

“We are not duplicating services, but we could be coordinating them better. On that point there’s no doubt about it,” McCarthy said. “But that isn’t a matter of where the offices are located.”

McCarthy also said that, more fundamentally, the work-force training and higher education programs managed by the federal government are focused on different people at different times in their lives.

“Our work-force development programs are designed to get people in the labor market as quickly as possible,” she said. “That is not the purpose of our higher education system. The way this administration talks about it, these are all programs doing the same thing, and they’re not.”

David Longanecker, interim president of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education and a former high-ranking official in the Education Department under President Clinton, said it may make sense to move some functions between either the Education or Labor Department and consolidate similar missions. But he said there are many responsibilities at both agencies that wouldn’t make sense in a single agency, such as civil rights and Title IX enforcement or oversight of workplace safety.

“You can’t ignore the other things that either one of those agencies do that don’t really fit compatibly together,” he said. “There’s a need for both of these departments.”

Some college officials perceived the White House plan as an effort to undermine investments in traditional higher education.

“This is an attempt to reduce higher education to work-force development at the expense of a liberal arts education,” said Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos backed the plan in a statement and said it fulfilled a campaign promise by President Trump to reduce the federal footprint in education and make the government more efficient and effective.

“Today’s bold reform proposal takes a big step toward fulfilling that promise. Artificial barriers between education and workforce programs have existed for far too long,” she said. “We must reform our 20th century federal agencies to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

“This proposal will make the federal government more responsive to the full range of needs faced by American students, workers, and schools. I urge Congress to work with the Administration to make this proposal a reality.”

**Lawmakers Weigh In**

Reactions to the plan on Capitol Hill Thursday broke down fairly predictably along partisan lines.

“I think it’s always wise to look for greater efficiency in how our government operates and will study the proposal carefully,” said Senator Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican and chairman of the Senate education committee.
Senator Patty Murray, the top Democrat on the committee, said the administration had wasted energy on an unrealistic, unhelpful and futile reorganization plan for the sake of a new talking point.

“Democrats and Republicans in Congress have rejected President Trump’s proposals to drastically gut investments in education, health care and workers -- and he should expect the same result for this latest attempt to make government work worse for the people it serves,” she said.

The top Republican and Democrat on the House education committee also took the expected views.

At the American Enterprise Institute, Rick Hess and Amy Cummings argued [3] that there is plenty that can be cut from the two departments and real benefits in streamlining programs.

“But big savings require making major cuts to programs -- and the administration hasn’t had any success on that count,” they wrote. “Just a few months ago, in fact, it agreed to bust the longstanding budget caps and sign off on a dramatic expansion of federal spending. And, even among the shrinking ranks of fiscal hawks, there’s not much appetite for trimming big-dollar education programs like Title I and Pell Grants.”

If the administration combined the department without major cuts, the reorganization would consist of “rearranging the patio furniture,” they said.

But the proposal earned skepticism even among advocates for federal support of career training. Kermit Kaleba, director of federal policy at the National Skills Coalition, said stronger alignment of the mission of federal programs is a laudable goal.

“Mashing agencies together is the intellectual shortcut when you don’t have better ideas,” he said in a tweet. “It’s like proposing massive budget cuts to increase ‘efficiency.’”


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