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Closing Department of Education is Trump's 'shock and awe'

Even if the department lives to fight another day, putting it under threat will have helped Republicans to 'flood the zone' and disorientate opponents, academics say

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Source: iStock/johnaudrey

Donald Trump's widely anticipated order to close the Department of Education is part of his "shock and awe" doctrine in his second term in the White House, according to experts.

Prior to his inauguration, observers had struggled to predict what President Trump's plans for the sector would be, but feared he would be guided by [the *Project 2025* policy playbook crafted by his allies](#), which advocated shuttering the government department.

Among [a flurry of executive orders](#), recent reports

indicate that Trump is indeed preparing to wind down the department and to urge his colleagues in the House and Senate to abolish it altogether, although his chances of success remained unclear.

The Republican party has attempted to eliminate the department since it was created in 1979 but there is more of an appetite to do so now than in recent decades, Rebecca Natow, an associate professor of specialised programmes in education at [Hofstra University](#), told *Times Higher Education*.

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Along with [unprecedented orders on research funding](#), the Trump administration was sending a clear message that education should be handled by

the states, she warned.

"I think higher education is very aware of what's going on, [they know that what was said during the campaign trail was serious](#) and now they have to prepare for what's coming," she said.

Other high-profile interventions into higher education include [allowing immigration agents on to campuses](#), launching [antisemitism investigations](#) at five universities, [trying to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion \(DEI\) positions](#), and [banning transgender women from college sports](#).

Comparing this to George W. Bush's military campaign in Iraq, Jennifer Steele, a professor in the School of Education at [American University](#), said this represented the Trump administration's "shock and awe" tactics – of which closing the department is a key tenet.

"These sweeping executive orders are really to signal that this is not business as usual, and that people should be on alert," she said.

Commentators have [linked this over-activity across many aspects of the federal government](#) to right-wing mogul Steve Bannon's tactics of "flooding the zone" and disorientating opponents.

"I think that they're trying to make people scramble so fast and seeing what they can get away with and

so fast and seeing what they can get away with and what they can't, so the strategy is really gamesmanship," said Steele.

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Marybeth Gasman, distinguished professor of education at [Rutgers University – New Brunswick](#), said attempts to close the Department of Education sent the message that students should not have access to equitable and high-quality education.

And she agreed that the avalanche of noise was intentional. "He likes to come in and distract people, have them looking in all directions. You feel like you have whiplash...more than likely, from my vantage point, I think he's doing something else while everyone is looking at all of these things."

[Closing the department would affect all levels of](#)

education, but with vice-president J.D. Vance's stated view that professors are the "enemies", Gasman said it appeared that colleges were the real target.

While Trump has nominated Penny Schwinn, the former commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Education, as deputy secretary, a hearing for Linda McMahon as education secretary is yet to be scheduled.

Because of the difficulty faced in passing an act of Congress, Steele said that shuttering the Department of Education was "political theatre" – but indicated the 78-year-old's commitment to his more serious threats.

"What I think is most scary for higher ed is it will be increasingly difficult for people from many countries to get visas to study in the US, so I think that is going to hurt the bottom line of higher ed," she said.

The early attacks on higher education have left many feeling "powerless" as this four-year term begins, according to Gasman, but she urged colleagues to not give up.

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“You’ve got to stand up and you’ve got to lean into the things that you are really good at. And you’ve got to use your voice...I think that’s what faculty have to do. I think that’s what students have to do.”

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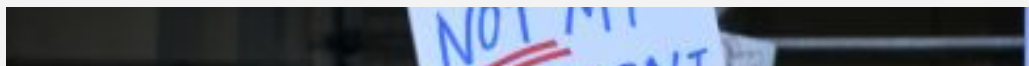
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#1 Submitted by [graff.40](#) on February 7, 2025 - 12:05am

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this since 2013. And his first Sec. of Educ, DeVos began the task. Hardly "shock and awe"!

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