

# Fears Grow That Trump Will Cut Special Education Support Funding

Advocacy organizations warn members to brace for 'hundreds' of grant terminations

Despite the Trump administration's broad promises to preserve special education funding, advocates are spreading the word nationwide that up to hundreds of millions of dollars worth of in-progress federal grants for strengthening services for children with disabilities could be cut in the coming weeks.

The Council for Exceptional Children and the Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities warned members last week that they've heard the U.S. Department of Education is preparing to soon terminate "hundreds" of special education grant awards under Part D of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

These competitive grants are separate from the IDEA formula funding that directly helps pay for special education services. Instead, they fund academic research, parent supports, technology development, data collection, and training for special educators.

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Letters from leaders at both organizations reviewed by Education Week say they've heard from credible sources that the Education Department used an "AI scan" to identify grants with terminology related to "DEI," or diversity, equity, and inclusion—which the second Trump administration has aggressively targeted in K-12 and higher education.

It's not clear which grants are on the chopping block. The Department of Education hasn't yet notified any IDEA Part D recipients that their grants have been cut—and isn't saying if it will. The agency, however, confirmed that a review of the grants is underway.

"Non-competitive continuation award reviews for IDEA-D programs are ongoing," Madi Biedermann, the department's deputy assistant secretary for communications, wrote in a statement to Education Week. "The Department will not prejudge the outcomes of those reviews nor comment prior to communicating their results to grantees."

The department didn't answer questions from Education Week about whether it's using AI for the funding review, when the review will be complete, and whether all funds will flow once it is.

State education agencies, researchers, and nonprofits are among the organizations that could be affected if the cuts materialize. Depending on their scope, dozens of technical assistance centers that help districts and educators work through challenges could be forced to close, hundreds of doctoral students could be forced to cut their academic research short, efforts to train special education teachers could shrink, and some services for parents and children with disabilities could grind to a halt.

"Any cuts to these areas will leave holes in the support you need," wrote Chad Rummel, executive director of the nonprofit Council for Exceptional Children, in a letter Aug. 8 to special education leaders in K-12 and higher education. "But for those members who are direct grant recipients, this is particularly devastating, and at a time when orientation for a new school year for scholars is already beginning, TA centers are operating with uncertainty, and our field is feeling acute instability."

### Advocates are gearing up to challenge cuts

The Education Department this year has terminated hundreds of grants supporting [teacher workforce development](#) and [mental health services](#); [temporarily frozen billions of formula dollars for academic enrichment and vulnerable student supports](#); and [slashed dozens of education research contracts](#) for projects well on their way to completion.

Now, many federal funding recipients connected to special education are lobbying federal lawmakers to intervene before any cuts come down, workshopping contingency plans if they do, and contemplating a grim future if the money they're expecting in the coming weeks doesn't flow.

More than 100 state-level organizations that support parents of children with disabilities have signed a letter to Congress urging lawmakers to maintain funding for their efforts. Organizers plan to send it Friday.

"Eliminating these programs would not only undermine Congressional intent but also jeopardize the essential services that families across the nation rely upon," says the draft letter, which Education Week obtained.

Competitive grants under Part D of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the half-century-old federal law that governs special education, support efforts to

conduct research, develop resources, and provide support for parents and educators serving children with disabilities.

In some cases, the federal government specifically required applicants to focus on concepts like “equity” that the Trump administration is now fighting. A 2024 announcement during the Biden administration [seeking proposals for a special education personnel development grant](#), for instance, said project submissions must support efforts “to promote educational equity for children with disabilities.”

Programs funded by IDEA Part D, experts say, help lay the groundwork for the instructional experiences students with disabilities are required by law to receive daily in school.

“We have had decades of educator shortages, and if they do away with this funding, that is going to take us back to not having people who are trained to provide support to children with disabilities,” said Glenna Gallo, who served as the Department of Education’s assistant secretary of education for special education and rehabilitative services from 2023 to 2025 during the Biden administration.

### Warning signs give grant recipients pause

Even without official confirmation from federal officials, evidence is mounting that cuts could be on the horizon.

Organizations in the middle of five-year cycles for IDEA Part D grants haven’t yet received their expected money yet for the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1. Those awards typically arrive around this point in the year, if not sooner.

Meanwhile, some recipients of multi-year Part D grants, including at least two national technical assistance centers and more than a dozen Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) recently received notice from the Education Department that the end of their current grant year has been extended from Aug. 31 to Sept. 30. But the organizations are receiving no additional money to account for the additional month, and no assurance next year’s funding will eventually flow.

The parent information and resource centers are among a network of organizations that help parents navigate the special education system. The national technical assistance centers help those local grant-funded organizations, many of which are themselves run by parents of children with disabilities.

“The reason for extending your budget period is to allow you to do work with any carryover amount from August 31—when this original budget period was slated to end—until September 30,” a Department of Education staffer wrote to an IDEA

Part D grant recipient, in an email obtained by Education Week. “This allows us additional time to make awards. This action does not guarantee a continuation award.”

That means, regardless of whether a cut is on the horizon, these programs will have to operate without new funding for at least a month.

Still, they don’t plan to stop working, said one national technical assistance center director, who requested anonymity to discuss their organization’s status. The director’s center has over the years developed hundreds of resources for educators and policymakers to support students with disabilities.

“We’re busy. I’m recruiting. We have states coming to our calls wanting technical assistance. We’re working on our Year 4 work plan,” the center director said. “I’m just waiting for the award to come—and anxious.”

If the IDEA funds Congress appropriated for the current fiscal year don’t flow by Sept. 30, they’ll expire and return to the U.S. Treasury Department.

### **The Trump administration has already proposed changes to IDEA Part D**

More than \$15 billion in annual formula funding for special education—known as IDEA Part B—has already begun flowing to states and schools on schedule and appears to be unaffected by the grant changes advocates say the Trump administration is poised to make. The same is true for IDEA Part C, which supports early childhood education and services for young children with disabilities.

The Trump administration already signaled its displeasure with IDEA Part D earlier this year in its [annual budget proposal](#), which asked Congress to funnel all the funding currently allocated for discretionary special education grants into the Part B funding stream that flows to states and schools. Still, Education Secretary Linda McMahon said during her [Senate confirmation hearing in February](#) that she’s “not looking to defund or reduce” IDEA.

The budget proposal frames this change as part of a broader effort to “return education to the states.” But the vast majority of Part B funding flows by formula to school districts, which means states likely would struggle to fund the programs currently covered by IDEA Part D in the absence of a dedicated funding stream.

Lawmakers from both parties have shown little appetite in recent decades to rewrite special education law or reduce year-over-year funding for the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, which Congress last reauthorized in 2004.

Most recently, more than two dozen senators, including 14 Republicans, [voted to advance a 2026 federal budget](#) that maintains level funding for all existing special education funding streams, and rejects all of Trump's proposed K-12 cuts and consolidations.

Congress last specified total funding levels for IDEA Part D—\$274 million across five separate funding streams—in its [fiscal year 2024 budget](#), which took effect Oct. 1, 2023. Then, this past March, Congress broadly extended 2024 funding levels as part of a continuing resolution to keep the federal government open through Sept. 30, the end of fiscal year 2025.

If the Trump administration bypasses Congress and proceeds with cuts to discretionary special education funding for the current fiscal year, it could set up another constitutional clash over federal spending.

Numerous [courts](#) and [independent watchdogs](#) have declared the Trump administration's unilateral funding cuts for education and other priorities illegal.

But administration officials like Russell Vought, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, have repeatedly asserted that the administration can legally withhold congressionally approved spending that conflicts with administration priorities.

Special education advocates spreading the word about coming cuts have also pointed to an executive order President Trump signed on Aug. 7. The order, [entitled "Improving Oversight of Federal Grantmaking,"](#) requires all federal agencies to designate a political appointee who will have the power to approve all grants before they're awarded and rescind any grant at any time, "to ensure they benefit the American public, align with Administration priorities, and are coordinated across agencies to avoid duplication."

Executive orders lack the force of law, and it's not clear whether Trump has the authority to enforce these policies.

Meanwhile, reports of potential IDEA grant cancellations come just weeks after the Education Department wrapped up soliciting applications for [nine separate Part D grant programs](#). All but one was open for a month, slightly less than the one-and-a-half- or two-month windows applicants have had in previous years.

## **Researchers and experts have started scenario-planning**

Across the special education field, anxiety is growing about cuts that could arrive any day with little warning.

One university professor last week decided to shift a planned in-person orientation program for special education doctoral students to a virtual event, to prevent students from having to pay their own way home if a stop-work order arrived during the event, preventing the students from collecting reimbursement for travel.

### Education Funding - One Casualty of Trump's \$6.8 Billion Funding Freeze: Schools' Trust in the Feds

A former special education teacher pursuing a Ph.D. in special education at another university is preparing to cover her last year of her program with other funds if the federal personnel development grant funding goes away suddenly. Otherwise, the doctoral student will need to find another job and put earning her doctorate on hold.

Both the professor and the doctoral student requested anonymity for this article, fearing reprisal from the Trump administration for publicly raising concern about their grants.

Research isn't the only priority at risk. IDEA Part D funds pay for more than 60 small, state-level nonprofit organizations that support parents of children with disabilities. Every state has at least one.

These Parent Training and Information (PTI) centers field hundreds of requests a year from families who need help navigating the complex special education landscape, understanding their rights, or holding schools and agencies accountable for offering required services.

All of the parent training centers last month received their grant awards for the upcoming fiscal year. But the four regional organizations that support the state-level parent training centers haven't yet seen their money. Nor have the roughly two dozen community parent resource centers, which offer similar services to parent training centers, but with a tighter focus on particular groups, like Native American children in New Mexico, or foster and adoptive families in Virginia.

The community resource centers also publish online resources that parent training centers use to supplement their own services, said Carrie Woodcock, executive director of the Maine Parent Federation, which has served as the state's PTI since 1985.

If the community resource centers and the regional assistance centers both disappear, Woodcock said, "that means I am still getting the same amount of funding and having to reinvent the wheel. I may not be able to reach the populations I'm reaching now."

## Cuts would also affect groups that serve deafblind students

Federal funding cuts or delays could also touch the nation's 50 state deafblind organizations, which collectively support more than 10,000 children nationwide who have both impaired hearing and vision. They help connect parents of deafblind children to vital resources like specialized tutoring; and train educators on how to provide instruction to these students, many of whom also have other uncommon disabilities that aren't widely understood.

Some programs are already preparing to tell families of deafblind children that they may not be able to offer services after September, said Maurice Belote, who co-chairs the National DeafBlind Coalition.

The Maryland and DC DeafBlind Project assists school districts and state agencies in providing instructional services for roughly 225 students who have been identified as having both vision and hearing impairments. The four-person organization, based at the University of Maryland, is expecting an annual IDEA Part D grant award of \$242,000.

The staff there is moving "full speed ahead" on plans to support teachers and families for the upcoming school year, said Donna Riccobono, the organization's executive director. But she's also having difficult conversations with her colleagues about pursuing other job opportunities if necessary.

"We know the money could be cut tomorrow," Riccobono said. But that's not an unusual feeling for an organization that's been under the radar and flat-funded for decades despite rising inflation, she said: "We'll just deal with it."