

Understanding the Federal Role in Education

While the majority of public education decisions are determined at state and local levels, the federal government has a long history of involvement to improve public schools. Read on to learn about the federal role in public education and the key programs the U.S. Department of Education oversees.

Why was the U.S. Department of Education created?

4 Main Goals:

In 1979, President Carter pushed for the creation of the Department of Education to improve education quality.

-  **Centralize federal education efforts** that were formerly scattered across agencies
-  **Distribute federal funds** to schools and administer financial aid
-  **Enforce equal access** to a quality education for all students regardless of background
-  **Collect and share data** and conduct research about schools

What are some of the key programs administered by the federal government?

Initiative	Every Student Succeeds Act	Federal Student Aid	IDEA Individuals with Disabilities Act	Child Nutrition	Research and Assessment
Key Programs	Title I allocates federal funds to support low-income students Title II distributes funds to support educator recruitment, training, and retention	PELL Grants awards financial aid to low-income students to attend college Work-Study funds part-time employment for lower income college students	Students with Disabilities funds supports for special education students and ensures that special education students are educated alongside their peers to the maximum extent possible	School Meals subsidizes cost of school lunch and breakfast for low-income students Summer Meals subsidizes cost of meals and snacks over summer breaks	NCES evaluates education programs and provides research NAEP administers national achievement tests that allow for comparisons across states and over time
Tennessee Allocation (2023)	\$382 million	\$627 million	\$268 million	\$284 million	N/A

What do key federal education laws require states to do?...

ESEA
Elementary and Secondary Education Act
1965

NCLB
No Child Left Behind Act
2002

ESSA
Every Student Succeeds Act
2015

Annual Assessments

- Reading and math in grades 3-8 and once in high school
- Science in elementary, middle, high

Interventions and Supports

- States must identify and intervene in schools that need the most support

IDEA
Individuals with Disabilities Act
1975

SPED Students

- Requires free and appropriate education for students with disabilities
- Mandates Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities

...and what do states and districts have authority over?

- Curriculum and Instruction
- Teacher Pay
- Textbooks
- Teacher Licensure
- Safety and Discipline
- Graduation Requirements

Accountability/ Transparency

- Annual public reports on school performance
- Disaggregated data for student subgroups

What are some of the key Supreme Court decisions that have shaped the federal role in education?

Case	Year	Decision
Brown v. Board	1954	Racial segregation in schools is unconstitutional
Tinker v. Des Moines	1969	Students have free speech protection
Plyler v. Doe	1982	Undocumented students have access to free public education
Zelman v. Simmons-Harris	2002	Voucher programs are constitutional
Espinoza v. Montana	2020	Religious schools are eligible for federal funding
Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard	2023	Race-based affirmative action programs are unconstitutional

SOURCES: Sycamore Institute, Federal Funding in K-12 Education (2023), Supreme Court of the United States (supremecourt.gov), U.S. Department of Education (ed.gov), Tennessee Department of Education Annual Statistical Report (2023)