THE CULTURE WAR OVER AMERICAN EDUCATION: TAKING THE BATTLE ONLINE

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Abstract
Since the early 1980s education has been a polarizing political issue in the US context, not least thanks to the efforts of the Republican party. Starting with its party platforms of 1976 and 1980, the Republicans were able to establish a link between education and "family values" as a means to promote a new conservative agenda that put the 'traditional' family at the centre of the party's ideological universe. For the past four decades, favourite conservative talking points on the topic of education have included, among others, more school choice, marketplace competition, the dangers of (leftist) ideological indoctrination, as well as the goal of eliminating the Federal Department of Education (DoE), a Cabinet-level agency created by President Carter in 1979. When, on March 20, 2025, President Trump signed the Executive Order No. 14242 entitled "Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities", it appeared that the long-awaited goal of abolishing DoE was achieved. This two-stage investigation aims to shed light on the use of disinformation strategies in the debate about the past, present, and future of education in the contemporary United States. I analyse two sets of texts that have made a significant contribution to this debate in a bid to identify the main constitutive elements of the popular conservative Narrative about American education. This is done by applying an intertextual lens to isolate and trace the circulation of key conservative ideas across time, genres and the boundaries of the offline and online environments.

Nothing is more important to the future of America than Education
Trump (2000: 91).

1. Introduction: the culture war over American education

This two-stage investigation analyses a set of texts that have made a significant contribution to the debate about the past, present and the future of education in the contemporary United States. With a Washington trifecta in the 2024 Election, which resulted in the election of Donald Trump as the forty-seventh President of the United

States and the Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, the stage was set for a major shift in the area of federal education policy under the leadership of the new Administration. In the conservative agenda, education is an area that sits between the two 'legs' of the "traditional 'three-legged stool'" (Cremer 2023: 397) represented, respectively, by a neo-liberal focus on limited government and a social conservative embrace of traditional family values, in addition to the 'third leg' of a neo-conservative emphasis on strong defence. Indeed, conservative education policy analysts have repeatedly pointed out that "[t]he battle over who should control America's schools is a battle for the future of our nation" (Marshall and Kafer 2005: 46). This battle, as the military metaphor hints at, has evolved into a full-scale culture war whose origins can be traced back to the early 1980s, a period when "questions about the proper role of government in arbitrating cultural values" (Critchlow 2008: 262) started to polarize the American electorate. As sociologists Dill and Hunter (2010: 275) put it:

> Education has been a central field for cultural conflict in the modern era. This is because schools are one of the primary institutions for imparting shared understandings of collective identity and purpose [...] schools do more than prepare students for the economy; they are normative institutions engaged in forming persons and legitimating social orders.

As the moral conflict over shared values and understandings of collective identity intensified, the Republican Party was able to capitalize on the growing cultural cleavage in American society by appropriating and discursively re-inventing terms such as "family" and "family values". These terms, to borrow Prothero's (2007: 222-223) words, were "injected into American cultural politics" in their current sense through the Republican Party platforms of 1976 and 1980, both of which "endorsed 'family values' as an antidote to what conservatives saw as the moral degradation of American society brought on by the sexual revolution, rock'n'roll, and the counterculture". The link between "family values" and education has continued to shape the conservative thinking about American education[1]. In this conservative worldview, a special priority has been assigned to the goal of eliminating the Department of Education (DoE), a Cabinet-level agency created by President Carter in 1979. In the build-up to the 2016 Presidential election, Donald Trump made his views about DoE known in his campaign-trail book, *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (2015: 50-51):

> A lot of people believe the Department of Education should just be eliminated. Get rid of it. If we don't eliminate it completely, we certainly need to cut its power and reach. Education has to be run locally. Common Core, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top are all programs that take decisions away from parents and local school boards. These programs

[1] See, for example, a post by Linda M. Burke (2025), Director at the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation, who wrote that "the best way to provide education accountability is by empowering families to choose the learning options that fit them and their values". This was posted on March 20, 2025, the day that the Executive Order No. 14242, authorizing the Secretary of Education "take all necessary steps to facilitate the closure of the Department of Education" was signed by President Trump. Burke also authored the chapter on the Department of Education (Burke 2023) in Dans and Groves' (2023) *Mandate for Leadership 2025: The Conservative Promise*, better known as Project 2025, which will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

> allow the progressives in the Department of Education to indoctrinate, not educate, our kids. What they are doing does not fit the American model of governance.
> I am totally against these programs and the Department of Education. It's a disaster. We cannot continue to fail our children – the very future of this nation.

Trump's talking points on the topic of education included more school choice, marketplace competition, transfer the management of student loans to private institutions and so on (*ibid.*: 49-60). These points struck the right chords with the hardliners in the conservative grassroots movements, who helped propel candidate Trump to nomination in the 2016 Republican Party primary. On education, these staunch conservatives would likely agree with conservative writers such as Frederick M. Hess (2015), who argued, for example, that many liberals supported the No Child Left Behind Act because they believed test-driven accountability would push schools to focus more on poor and minority children.

With one notable recent exception (Tebaldi 2025), the area of US education policy has attracted little attention within the broader domain of Political Discourse Analysis (PDA, e.g. Fairclough 2000; Cap 2002; Chilton 2004; Charteris-Black 2005; Wodak 2009). To rectify this neglect, I argue here that the culture war over American education offers an interesting test case to investigate the strategic use of language by conservative actors, whereby these actors routinely 1) identify a visible culprit in a polarizing debate, 2) promise quick-fix solutions to complex social issues and 3) claim credit for actions that were never accomplished. With the shift of the discussion online, the affordances of social media platforms have been exploited to spread disinformation, understood as "*false* information that is deliberately passed on with the intention to deceive or otherwise cause harm" (Maci *et al.* 2024: 2, italics in the original). The entry point to the investigation is the 2025 Executive Order (EO) No. 14242, "Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities", signed by President Trump on March 20, 2025, during an Education Event that was live-streamed on the official White House YouTube channel[2]. The news about the signing of the EO was spread through several digital channels, including President Trump's official Truth account, the official White House YouTube channel, as well as several conservative media outlets (e.g. Fox News and Newsmax)[3]. Data from these digital environments, consisting of social media posts, video contents shared through digital channels, blog posts and online media discourse, represents the primary domain that supplied data for the present investigation of digitally-mediated conservative discourse around American education. The other domain subsumes institutional discourse, represented by the 2025 Exec. Order No. 1424, and expert discourse in the form of policy analysis reports compiled by the Heritage Foundation (HF), an influential Washington-based think tank that has been directly involved in the shaping of conservative policy in the area of education since the 1980s. The two sets of texts will be investigated mainly through an intertextual lens as

[2] See "President Trump Participates in an Education Event and Signs an Executive Order", https://www.youtube.com/live/ZjnoGgEJvLs.

[3] See, for example, "Final Bell Rings for Dept. of Education", The NEWSMAX Daily (03/21/25), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arad809DTXs, or "Secretary of Education Linda McMahon joins 'Sunday Morning Futures' to break down President Donald Trump's plan to dismantle the Department of Education", https://www.foxnews.com/video/6370791943112.

a means to explore the discursive strategies involved in the construction of the distinctly conservative vision of what American education should be about.

2. Intertextuality and intradiscursivity in the analysis of political discourse

Intertextuality in linguistics has proven to be a popular, yet elusive concept, whose philosophical foundations and related terminology have been heavily influenced by Bakhtin's work on the role of reported speech in narrative (1981) and multivocality (1986). As is well known, Kristeva (1980: 66, quoted in Hodges 2015: 44) is credited with the coinage of the term intertextuality to "describe the Bakhtinian idea that 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another'"[4]. As Hodges (*ibid.*) explains, the different types of dialogical connections theorized by Bakhtin (1986: 92-100) were subsumed under Kristeva's (1980) notions of the two axes of intertextuality, whereby the horizonal axis involves a subject-addressee relationship, while the vertical axis "deals with the orientation of a written text to the broader literary and cultural context in which it is embedded" (Hodges 2015: 44).

Fairclough's (1995) re-elaboration of the Bakhtinian notion of intertextuality, as applied specifically to the study of media discourse, has established itself as a dominant approach that has informed several CDA-based strands of linguistic research. This approach conceptualizes intertextuality as (Fairclough 1992: 84):

> the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth. In terms of production, an intertextual perspective stresses the historicity of texts: how they always constitute additions to existing "chains of speech communication" (Bakhtin 1986: 94) consisting of prior texts to which they respond.

Fairclough's 1995 seminal book, dealing with the changing discursive practices in the media, remains an invaluable point of reference for linguists interested in uncovering connections between language use and the exercise of power through an intertextual lens. Fairclough's (1995: 55) approach drew on the SFL-based notions that any text "is always simultaneously constitutive of (1) social identities, (2) social relations and (3) systems of knowledge and belief" as the main underlying premises about language use. According to Fairclough (*ibid.*), the multifaceted nature of the majority of texts, which can "involve complicated mixtures of different discourse types [which, in their turn are constitutive of] the order of discourse of a social institution or social domain", complicates the task of a media analyst who must necessarily move between the perspective of the particular (that is, the facets of text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice for a given communicative event) and the perspective of the structure of the order of discourse (*ibid.*: 57-68).

Fairclough (*ibid.*: 61) distinguished between a linguistic analysis proper (i.e. the descriptive analysis of lexico-grammatical textual features) and an intertextual, interpretative analysis, employed to "unravel[ing] the various genres and discourses [...] which

[4] The passage in which the term appears reads as follows: a text is "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality" (Kristeva 1980: 36, quoted in Hodges 2015: 44).

are articulated together in a text". Ultimately, for Fairclough (*ibid*.: 75), intertextual analysis is

> a bridge between the 'text' and 'discourse practice' dimensions in the critical discourse analysis framework. It is an analysis of texts [...] from the perspective of 'discourse processes' - in terms of the ways in which genres and discourses available within the repertoires of orders of discourse are drawn upon and combined in producing and consuming texts, and the ways in which texts transform and embed other texts which are in chain relationships with them.

Hodges (2011) can be cited as an example of a PDA analyst who has fruitfully applied the notion of intertextuality to the study of political discourse. By combining the Bakhtinian perspective on intertextuality with Bauman and Briggs' (1990) work on the processes of decontextualization and recontextualization, Hodges (2011: 8, italics in the original) argued that intertextuality

> is useful for the analysis of political discourse because it emphasizes the connections across multiple discursive encounters where issues are formulated and contested. Intertextual connections involve a process whereby a given piece of discourse is lifted from one setting – that is, it is *decontextualized* – and is inserted into another setting where it is *recontextualized* (Bauman and Briggs 1990). When a piece of discourse is moved from one context to another, it carries along aspects of the earlier context; but it is also transformed in the new context.

This "politics of recontextualization" (Hodges 2015: 49) involves controlling the interpretation not just of prior, but also of future texts. Moreover, recontextualization as a discursive phenomenon also draws attention to the constraining effects of discourse understood, in the Foucauldian tradition, as a notion that "merges concerns about ideology with language [by exercising constraint over] what can be said about a topic and how the topic is reasoned about" (*ibid*.: 53-54). In Hodges' (2011) book, the intertextual lens was applied to analyse the manifold connections in American public discourse about George W. Bush's "War on Terror" Narrative. The materials analysed by Hodges included samples from three different public discourse domains, such as presidential speeches, media discourse and focus group interviews. Campolong's (2022) recent analysis of the discursive strategies involved in the construction of the "crowd size" conspiracy theories has repurposed the notion of intertextuality to study President Trump's campaign-style rally speeches. In Campolong's (2022: 424-426) investigation, intertextuality was identified as one of the key discursive strategies related to the repetition of specific assumptions and language patterns, together with the use of stock phrases, numbers, insults, and recursivity. Campolong's study further distinguished between *intertextual* links between texts of the same speech genre (e.g. Trump rallies) and *intradiscursive* links, i.e. "the interaction of texts, utterances or concepts within a particular discourse [that] includes texts across all speech genres (e.g. Trump rallies, interviews, press conferences, Twitter posts, etc.) (*ibid*: 424)[5]. The above-mentioned examples of

[5] *Intradiscursivity* is not to be confused with *interdiscursivity* as employed by Fairclough (1992: 104)

PDA work using an intertextual lens (Hodges 2011; Campolong 2022) will inform the analysis of my dataset, which will be presented in the Sections that follow.

3. Constructing the Narrative: focus on conservative actors and policy documents, 1983-2025.

My exploration of the recurrent discursive strategies involved in the construction of a particular conservative Narrative about American education starts with the analysis of the main constitutive elements of this Narrative. These will be identified in the first set of materials under investigation (see Table 1) that includes the text of Executive Order (EO) No. 14242, as well as the individual chapters dedicated to the topic of education in transition agenda reports produced by the Heritage Foundation (HF), an influential conservative advocacy think tank (Donadio and Napolitano 2011: 308), in the period between 1983 and 2025. The decision to include HF reports is not coincidental. The foundation's mission, as its website states, is "to champion policy solutions that benefit all Americans"[6]. HF established its connection to the Republican party already in the 1980s, when the newly-founded think tank led a set of parallel task forces to generate its first 1,093-page *Mandate for Leadership* report. This report contained (Hayward 2009: 47-48):

> a detailed agenda for each major federal agency and policy area. A typical chapter about a cabinet department or federal regulatory agency itemized specific programs to be cut or eliminated, grants to be canceled, regulations to be changed, executive orders to be repealed or amended, and statues to be reformed [..] Reagan passed out prepublication copies of *Mandate* to his incoming cabinet secretaries and senior staff in December [1980].

The 1980 report started a productive partnership between HF and the Reagan administration that has continued with the subsequent Republican administrations[7]. Today HF represents one of the most high-profile Washington powerhouses in conservative circles. As previous studies have pointed out (e.g. Donadio and Napolitano 2011), HF's lobbying powers and influence on the Republican party makes it "politically [most] representative of the neo-conservative mindset" (*ibid*.: 305)[8]. More recently, the amount of publicity that HF's 2023 report (better known as "Project 2025", see fn. 2) generated, calls for further investigation into the foundation's vital contribution to the construction of a broader conservative Narrative around education in the United States. For the present investigation, a set of HF reports were analysed with the view to trace the origin and development of conservative ideas that laid the groundwork for President

to refer to "the confluence of discourse conventions that contribute to text production" (quoted in Hodges 2015: 44).

[6] See www.heritage.org/about-heritage/mission.

[7] This is how Blasko (2004) describes this relationship: "Heritage was President Reagan's favorite think tank, and Reagan was the embodiment of the ideas and principles Heritage holds dear. Together, we blazed a new path for America". See Donadio and Napolitano (2011) on the relationship between HF and the Bush administration.

[8] The authors highlight the fact that "Heritage papers are conceived as an operative tool in the hands of Republican congressmen: reports on relevant legislative issues are delivered to political representatives and their staff in the Congress daily and directly" (Donadio and Napolitano 2011: 308).

Trump's EO No. 14242. As a way to bridge over to the next Section in this paper, a recent commentary article written for *The Washington Examiner* by Rep. Miller and Rep. Harris (2025) was added to the set[9]. This was done to include an example of a representative opinion piece on the topic of education of the kind that President Trump typically reposts on Truth Social[10]. Finally, a blog post by Burke (2025)[11] was added to the same set. As the goal of the analysis was to identify both intertextual and intradiscursive recurrent strategies (cf. Campolong 2022) employed by different conservative actors to promote a specific vision for American education, it was decided to include texts representing different genres.

Year, author	Title	Text type
Phelps-Patterson, Lucy, 1983	Education	HF report
Gardner, Eileen M., 1984	The Department of Education	HF report
Butler, Stuart M., 1989	Domestic Policy Overview	HF report
Kimberling, C. Ronald, 1989	The Department of Education	HF report
Marshall, Jennifer A. and Krista Kafer, 2005	Strengthening the civil society	HF report
Burke, Lindsey M., 2023	Department of Education	HF report
Miller, Mary and Mark Harris, 2025	Trump is right: The Department of Education must go	online commentary article
Burke, Lindsey M., 2025	No, we don't need the Department of Education after all	blog post
Exec. Order No. 14242, 2025	Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities	EO

Table 1. Texts analysed in this section, arranged chronologically

The first analytical step was informed by Hodge's (2011) examination of the "War on Terror" Narrative (cf. Section 2). Drawing on Bruner's (1991) and Gee's (1986) analyses of the interrelationship between the whole text and its constituent parts (Hodges 2011: 41), Hodges (*ibid.*: 42) identified several key episodes in the "War on Terror" Narrative, that is to say, constitutive elements that supported the interpretation of "the text as a whole". In Hodge's analysis, the events of 9/11 represent the starting point of the "War on Terror" Narrative. In Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Labov's (1972) terminology,

[9] Republican Congresswoman Mary E. Miller has been serving as the U.S. representative for Illinois's 15th district since 2021; Republican Congressman Mark E. Harris has been serving as the U.S. representative for North Carolina's 8th district since 2025.

[10] See https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114180392545290249. For more examples of reposts of news articles, see https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114140349109974410 and https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114140388991275650.

[11] See fn. 2 in Section 1.

this starting point is defined (Hodges 2011: 43) as "a precipitating event" which acts "as the pivot around which the rest of the Narrative is organized". In the conservative Narrative about American education, the creation, in 1979, of DoE, at the initiative of President Jimmy Carter and endorsed by the country's largest teachers' union, play the role of the precipitating event. As such, the reference to the creation of DoE is the first element that, intertextually and intradiscursively, links the different texts in the first set, as the following examples show (the relevant passages are highlighted in bold):

(1) **The establishment of a Cabinet-level DoE** was an historic blunder, a combination of overweening federal ambition and pandering to interest groups (Gardner 1984);

(2) It is past time to admit that the Education Department has produced a terrible return on America's investment. **Since its creation in 1980**, test scores have dropped, with math and reading scores falling to their lowest levels in decades under former President Joe Biden. Civics knowledge is abysmal, as evidenced by middle school U.S. history scores recently hitting all-time lows (Miller and Harris 2025);

(3) [O]ne of the newest Cabinet agencies, **the Department of Education [...] has existed for less than one fifth of our Nation's history. The Congress created the Department of Education in 1979 at the urging of President Jimmy Carter, who received a first ever Presidential endorsement from the country's largest teachers' union** [...]. Since then, **the Department of Education has entrenched the education bureaucracy** and sought to convince America that Federal control over education is beneficial (EO 14242).

This series of strategic repetitions contribute to the discursive construction of the myth of the creation of DoE as the watershedding event that marked the beginning of an era during which student academic achievement steadily declined across all age groups, teaching and learning standards deteriorated and the school system became ideologically biased. In this Narrative, DoE becomes the main, if not the only, reason why the American education system is failing children, young adults, their families and teachers alike.

The second constitutive element in the Narrative, illustrated in the next set of examples, focuses our attention on the concrete, tangible consequences brought about by the precipitating event. Most importantly, these include the fiscal burden and the federal control burden that DoE imposed on, respectively, individual taxpayers/states and schools/teachers. The two talking points are imported from the broader conservative ideology that champions a small federal government with limited powers (see Introduction), reduces bureaucratic oversight and lowers taxes:

(4) hundreds of education programs […] have had little discernible effect on achievement. Instead, all have contributed to **the growth of bureaucracy in Washington, an increase in administrative burdens on the states, and the creation of a massive education lobby** (Marshall and Kafer 2005);

(5) Federal money is inevitably accompanied by **rules and regulations that keep the influx of funds from having much, if any, impact on student outcomes**. It raises the cost of education without raising student achievement (Burke 2023);

(6) the Department of Education's legacy is one of **bureaucratic waste and federal overreach** (Burke 2025);

(7) **Taxpayers spent around $200 billion at the Federal level** on schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, **on top of the more than $60 billion they spend annually on Federal school funding**… [DoE] maintains a public relations office that includes **over 80 staffers at a cost of more than $10 million per year** (EO 14242).

Of particular importance in these examples is the use of numbers (see examples 4 and 7). As Campolong points out (2022: 430), the use of numbers is "a well-worn trope in political discourse, insinuating a particular kind of knowledge and expertise"[12]. The use of numbers, often combined with hyperbolic, negatively-laden evaluative vocabulary (*waste, overreach, abysmal, terrible*, etc.), serves as a means to reinforce the cause-and-effect link between the creation of DoE and the present dire state of American education.

Furthermore, the burden of an ideological kind is developed as a separate constitutive element in the following examples that are dedicated to "the demands of special interests":

(8) For decades, the quality of our schools has declined as **the demands of special interests have trumped the needs of children and the dreams of parents** (Marshall and Kafer 2005).

(9) The next Administration should take particular note of how **radical gender ideology is having a devastating effect on school-aged children today – especially young girls** (Burke 2023).

(10) Washington bureaucrats have failed our families and have put **their radical ideology over the actual educational needs of our children** (Miller and Harris 2025).

(11) [the Secretary of Education is authorized] to ensure that the allocation of any Federal Department of Education funds is subject to rigorous compliance with Federal law and Administration policy, including the requirement that any program or activity receiving Federal assistance terminate illegal discrimination obscured **under the label "diversity, equity, and inclusion" or similar terms and programs promoting gender ideology** (EO 14242).

Taken together, the creation of DoE as the precipitating event that triggered a three-pronged attack on American education – through excessive federal control, unrestrained taxation, and harmful leftist ideological indoctrination – represent the main constitutive elements in this conservative Narrative. As this analysis has shown, these elements have been part and parcel of the conservative agenda since the early 1980s. In the closing stage of this Narrative we find a series of "solutions" to "fix" American education, proposed by different conservative actors. Three such solutions are set in stone in the EO. These are 1) eliminating DoE completely by "returning" education to the States; 2) empowering families through choice and competition, i.e. by enabling

[12] Cf. also van Dijk's (1988: 87) observation on numbers in news discourse as a way to "forcefully [suggest] truthfulness by the implied exactness of precise numbers."

them to choose alternative forms of education over "the public school monopoly" and 3) eradicating any federal programs associated with "the demands of special interests" (see example 11 above):

(12) Federal strings need to be detached to restore parental authority and involvement to the nation's public schools. [**Parents] should be given a choice as to where their education tax dollars should be spent**. By stimulating competition, schools will be immediately forced to improve or suffer the consequences. [This] is the proven, common-sense notion that giving consumers the ability to decide how to spend their money makes providers of goods and services more responsive than they are under today's centrally administered education system (Kimberling 1989).

(13) Federal education policy should be limited and, ultimately, **the federal Department of Education should be eliminated**. When power is exercised, it should **empower students and families**, not government. In our pluralistic society, families and students should be **free to choose from a diverse set of school options** and learning environments that best fit their needs (Burke 2023).

(14) We must return to a time when the government recognizes that parents, on the whole, know their children better than even the most skilled and well-meaning teachers ever could. That's not a criticism — it's just a natural reality. And that reality informs the duty that parents have in raising their children and **the rights they have in determining how those children will be educated**. This used to be common sense […] (Miller and Harris 2025).

(15) Our Nation's bright future relies on **empowered families, engaged communities, and excellent educational opportunities for every child**. […] **Closing the Department of Education** would provide children and their families the opportunity to escape a system that is failing them. […] **Closure of the Department of Education** would drastically improve program implementation in higher education. […] Ultimately, **the Department of Education's main functions can, and should, be returned to the States** (EO 14241).

In this last set of examples, in addition to the persistent recycling of the same "solutions", we also find some additional elements that establish new intertextual and intradiscursive links between the texts under investigation. These elements include the idea of "common-sense" decision-making, the urgency of "returning" education to the States, together with the need to expand school choice and make the education system more competitive. All of the key talking points that have emerged from the analysis presented in this section can be identified in President Trump's contribution to the conservative Narrative about education, as the analysis of his communication strategy on Truth, conducted in Section 4, will show.

4. Showcasing the future of education on Truth

The second set of texts that will be analysed in this section consists of a small corpus of posts collected from President Trump's Truth account in the period between March 10 and March 25, 2025, i.e., respectively, ten days before and five days after the signing of the EO No. 14242 on March 20, 2025. Only posts that directly addressed the topic

of education by, for example, informing his followers about the signing of the EO, were selected for the analysis (see Table 2 later in this section for the list of the posts). Before discussing the ways in which President Trump was able to exploit the affordances of Truth to publicize his role in the re-shaping of American education, three background facts need to be explicated. DoE, as a Cabinet-level agency[13], can only be eliminated through major congressional legislation that would require Democratic support in the Senate in order to obtain the necessary 60 votes. That Congress needs to pass appropriate legislation to abolish DoE was a topic discussed during Linda McMahon's confirmation hearings for the position of the Secretary of Education[14]. Indeed, in April 2025, Rep. Moore (AL-1) introduced H.R.2691 entitled "To abolish the Department of Education and to provide funding directly to States for elementary and secondary education, and for other purposes" in the House of Representatives. The bill was immediately referred to the Committee on Education and Workforce, but no further action has been recorded since then[15]. At the time of writing (November 2025), DoE still exists, although a major reduction in the workforce has been implemented, and some offices and programs have now been moved to other parts of the federal government (Meckler 2025). So, the first, and probably the most important, background fact is that President Trump's EO did not actually eliminate DoE.

Secondly, the slogan of "returning education to the States", which has gained even more traction[16] since the 1980s, when, as we saw in Section 3, it was first introduced as a reaction to the creation of DoE[17], is factually incorrect. As is clearly stated on the DoE website:

> Education is primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States. It is States and communities, as well as public and private organizations of all kinds, that establish schools and colleges, develop curricula, and determine requirements for enrollment and graduation. […] Despite the growth of the Federal role in education, the Department never strayed far from what would become its official mission: to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.
>
> The Department carries out its mission in two major ways. First, the Secretary and the Department play a leadership role in the ongoing national dialogue over how to improve the results of our education system for all students. […]

[13] In 1979, DoE was established by Congress through "An act to establish a Department of Education, and for other purposes", S.210 - 96th Congress (1979-1980), https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/senate-bill/210/all-actions, and then signed into law by President Carter.

[14] See "Education Secretary Nominee Linda McMahon Testifies at Confirmation Hearing", February 13, 2025, at https://www.c-span.org/program/senate-committee/education-secretary-nominee-linda-mcmahon-testifies-atconfirmation-hearing/655487.

[15] See "H.R.2691 - 119th Congress (2025-2026): To abolish the Department of Education and to provide funding directly to States for elementary and secondary education, and for other purposes." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 7 April 2025, at https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/2691. It is a short bill (roughly 350 words), consisting of two main sections: SECTION 1. ABOLISHMENT OF DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, and SECTION 2. BLOCK GRANTS TO STATES.

[16] In fact, the "Returning Education to the States Tour", at https://www.ed.gov/about/initiatives/returning-education-states-tour, is one of the most recent initiatives launched by DoE in September 2025.

[17] Cf. Gardner (1984: 51) on "return[ing] responsibility for education to its rightful place: the states and localities".

> Second, the Department pursues its twin goals of access and excellence through the administration of programs that cover every area of education and range from preschool education through postdoctoral research[18].

Indeed, this second basic fact was confirmed by the current Secretary of Education, Linda McMahon, in an interview given on Fox News shortly after EO No. 14242 had been signed by President Trump:

> (3:17) The Department of Education doesn't educate one child.
> (3:20) We don't decide on curriculum.
> (3:22) We don't hire teachers.
> (3:23) That's best done at the local level[19].

It would appear that the slogan of "returning education to the states" has been gaining currency thanks to its potential "to index [a] narrative and reinforce its message in the minds of voters" (Hodges 2014: 347). By discursively repackaging the decision to (start to) dismantle a Cabinet-level agency as a move to "return education to the states", i.e. as a means to eliminate federal oversight and facilitate decision-making at the local level[20], the conservative Narrative has transformed the decision into a long-awaited solution that will (presumably) fix the education system. From an intradiscursive perspective, this slogan, for conservative voters, capitalizes on such recent momentous SCOTUS rulings as, for example, *Dobbs v. Jackson*, that returned the issue of abortion to the States.

Thirdly, the general public has very limited knowledge of how executive orders work as an instrument of presidential power. Executive orders can be defined as "legal instruments that create or modify laws, procedures, and policy by fiat" (Mayer 2002: 4). However, for some of these actions the actual impact is limited, as Lowande (2024: 4, italics in the original) explains:

> After some of these actions, *almost nothing happens*. No policies change. No status quo is challenged. Commissions are formed, nonbinding and inconsequential reports issues. Bureaucrats make minor changes to what they had planned to do, but even those might be superficial or symbolic.

This less-known fact is at odds with the wide media coverage that executive actions typically receive (*ibid.*: 3):

[18] https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/federal-role-in-education. Recent information about the allocation of federal funds can be found in "Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Summary" report available at https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/overview/budget/budget25/summary/25summary.pdf.

[19] See https://www.foxnews.com/video/6370791943112, "Trump's education secretary warns America is 'doing something wrong,' says 'we need to change'. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon joins 'Sunday Morning Futures' to break down President Donald Trump's plan to dismantle the Department of Education, March 23, 2025.

[20] All of which the EO does not do, as I explained in the first paragraphs of this section.

> When presidents sign orders, they put on a show. They invite cameras to ceremonies and issue press releases. They pose for photos with activists, politicians, and special interests. Today, these "executive actions" are normal in the United States […].

This is not to say that such actions are always inconsequential, even when they do not produce real policy changes. Executive orders are imbued with high symbolic potential as actions that can help the President to take a clear stance on a given issue, at the same time as they can help claim credit for acting (*ibid.*). In other words, executive orders are routinely used to produce "the *appearance* of governing" in a policy area where the executive branch does not have the capacity to implement drastic reform (*ibid.*: 65, italics in the original). But how exactly can "the *appearance* of governing" be produced by exploiting the affordances of modern-day digital platforms?

In order to answer this question, in what follows I will use three examples extracted from my small corpus of President Trump's Truth posts addressing the topic of education (see Table 2).

March 10, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114140349109974410
March 10, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114140388991275650
March 18, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114180392545290249
March 20, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196632592140620
March 20, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196809553032233
March 20, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196857285570492
March 21, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114201240645206997
March 24, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114215732492267429
March 24, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114219231809224627
March 25, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114220293842425737

Table 2. President Trump's posts about education, March 10 to March 25, 2025

The three examples that I will deal with in more detail were posted on Truth on March 20, the day the EO No. 14242 was signed, at 9.25 pm (Post #1), 10.10 pm (Post #2), and 10.22 pm respectively (Post #3).

Post #1 contains a link to the full video of the Education Event during which the EO was signed. The full video (16 minutes 11 seconds) was live-streamed on the official White House channel. Interestingly, the caption under the visual – "President Trump Participates in an Education Event and Signs an Executive Order" – does not specify what kind of EO had been signed. Analysing the audio track that is monopolized by a lengthy monologue given by President Trump, we can identify the familiar constitutive elements that different actors have consistently employed to construct a distinctly conservative vision of the state of American education (see Section 3). For example, here President Trump reiterates the importance of the precipitating event:



Figure 1. Post #1, https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196632592140620

> 05:34 **When President Carter created the Federal Education Department in 1979**, it was opposed by members of his own cabinet as well as the American Federation of Teachers, the New York Times Editorial Board, and the famed Democrat Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. History has proven them right, absolutely right.

Earlier in the video, the idea of eliminating DoE as "the right thing to do" was introduced through strategic repetitions:

> 02:50 **Department of Education, we're going to eliminate it**; and **everybody knows it's right**. And the Democrats know **it's right**, and I hope they're going to be voting for it because ultimately it may come before them, but **everybody knows it's right**.

The solution of "returning education to the States" is made symbolically prominent thanks to the presence of nine Republican State Governors, from Texas, Florida, Indiana, Ohio, Louisiana, Tennessee, Idaho, Nebraska, and Iowa, at the Education event. The presence of the Governors, even if they only make offscreen appearances, is made



Figure 2. Post #2, https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196809553032233

known to the public through President Trump's introductions, and, in some cases, direct interactions with the Governors. Once again, through a series of repetitions that are a typical feature of Trumpian discourse (cf. Campolong 2022), the slogan is verbalized explicitly by President Trump:

> 09:08 We want to **return our students to the states** where just some of the governors here are so happy about this. They want education **to come back to them**, **to come back to the states**, and they're going to do a phenomenal job. […] 11:01 **we're going to be returning education**, very simply, **back to the states where it belongs**. And this is a very popular thing to do, but much more importantly, it's a common-sense thing to do. And it's going to work. Absolutely, it's going to work. And I can tell you from dealing with the governors and others in the state, they want it so badly.

It is not at all clear what President Trump means here by "returning education to the states", given that, as has explained above, education has always been "primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States" (see the statement on the DoE website quoted above). But he is quick to claim that "this is a very popular thing to do,



Figure 3. Post #3, https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196857285570492

but much more importantly, it's a common-sense thing to do", establishing an intradiscursive link to the texts that used the same talking point of "common sense" in Section 3. Forty-five minutes after the first post, Post #2 appeared on the same platform.

This second post contains a link to a short version of the video linked in Post #1. The duration of the video has been reduced drastically (from 16 minutes 11 second to only 29 seconds). This was done by extracting specific segments and remixing them to produce the short version. A different visual was chosen as the cover image for Post #2, featuring President Trump who is holding up the signed document. At the top, the visual contains a caption that reads "President Trump Signs Executive Order to Eliminate the Department of Education."

Finally, Post #3 that followed the first two – 12 minutes after the second and almost one hour after the first – contains a link to the text of the EO. The visual used here features President Trump looking happy and smiling, glancing over from the stage at two children whose blurred faces appear in the foreground.

Post #2 (total length, 00:29)	Post #1 (total length, 16:11)
00:00 [*smiling President Trump holding up and showing to the audience the signed Executive Order*]	14:37 [*smiling President Trump holding up and showing to the audience the signed Executive Order*]
00:02 today we take a very historic action that was 45 years in the making	02:24 today we take a very historic action that was 45 years in the making
00:06 in a few moments I will sign an executive order	02:28 in a few moments I will sign an executive order
00:10 to begin eliminating the federal	02:30 to begin eliminating the federal
00:13 department of education once and for all	02:33 department of education once and for all
00:15 [*Applause*]	02:35 [*Applause*]
00:17 should I do this? [*the question is addressed to the audience of young children who were present at the Event*]	13:47 should I do this? [*the question is addressed to the audience of young children who were present at the Event*]
00:21 should I do this?	13:51 should I do this?
00:23 [*President Trump at the desk signing the Executive Order*]	14:19 [*President Trump at the desk signing the Executive Order*]
00:25 okay [*and he holds up the signed order*]	14:30 okay [*and he holds up the signed order*]
00:28 [*Applause*]	14:33 [*Applause*]

Table 3. Comparison between the two versions of the audio tracks in Post #1 and Post #2

Apart from the captions, no additional text is found in the three posts. While a detailed, CMDA-informed video analysis is beyond the scope of this paper[21], some preliminary observations can be made by comparing the audio tracks of the full version with the heavily abridged version of the same video, with the full version linked in Post #1 and the short version linked in Post #2. Comparing the two audio tracks, we can see that President Trump's lengthy monologue (roughly 2000 words) in Post #1 has been reduced to roughly 40 words (see Table 3).

The timestamps in the two videos clearly show that the segments of the original long video have been remixed to focus our attention on what Lowande (see above) has called "the *appearance* of governing": for example, the final sequence of the original version has been used as the opening sequence in the short version, as a means to reinforce the "getting it done" message of the second video (see Figure 4).

Moreover, as we can see in Figure 4, the distance/camera angle and the presence/absence of onscreen participants have been tweaked in the same sequence as well: by zooming in onto President Trump in Post #2 and leaving the children out, our attention is focused on the sole protagonist of the event. The addition of the caption in Post #2 is also highly significant. In an interesting twist, the caption distorts President Trump's own words by omitting the important verb "to begin" (as in "*to begin* eliminating the

[21] CMDA stands for Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis, i.e, a critical analysis of multimodal discourse. See Vasta's paper in this volume for a detailed discussion of this methodological approach.

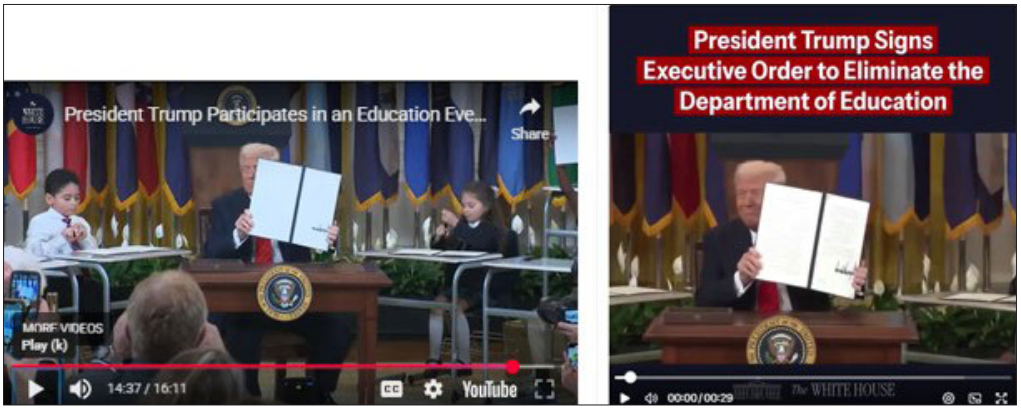

Figure 4. Comparison between the two sequences in Post #1 (left) and Post #2 (right)

Federal Department of Education", see Table 3). The result is a caption that can be interpreted as either ambiguous or outright false: DoE was not actually eliminated after President Trump had signed the EO.

5. Concluding remarks

When, on February 12, 2025, President Trump was asked a question about how soon he wanted to have DoE closed, his answer – that the DoE is a "big con job" – sent a clear message about a forthcoming "historic" decision. Once the EO was signed on March 20, President Trump took to Truth to share the news with the public. While the EO did not actually eliminate the DoE, President Trump was able to successfully exploit the affordance of Truth to leverage the symbolic potential of signing an executive order. In fact, he put on a media show and took credit for maintaining a campaign promise to eliminate DoE, probably hoping that the public will not "pay attention to most policy changes or retain information about who was responsible for a change" (Lowande 2024: 17). In other words, by using carefully curated video materials, President Trump was able to produce "the appearance of governing" (cf. Section 4).

This two-stage exploratory analysis has confirmed that, in the new technological era, social media platforms offer novel ways of abusing the means of political communication by spreading falsehoods, using manipulations, omitting important details or even refusing to speak (Chilton 2023: 12). In the conservative Narrative about American education examples of such falsehoods, manipulations, simplifications and omissions abound. Most importantly, the scapegoating of DoE for the failings of the education system that has not stopped since the 1980s is a convenient excuse for not investigating the complex, large-scale economic, technological, cultural and social changes that are responsible for the dismal state of American education today. The culture war rages on.

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