

NINA MOINI: The Trump administration announced earlier this month the Department of Health and Human Services will take over responsibility of the Special Education Office from the Department of Education.

The office oversees programs to support students with disabilities and accommodations for public education. Supporters of the move say it makes sense since the areas often overlap, but the move has drawn criticism from disability advocates, including Minnesota-based PACER Center, which advocates for educational opportunities for children with disabilities.

PACER's interim executive director, Gretchen Godfrey, is here now to explain what this shift could mean. Thanks for being with us, Gretchen.

GRETCHEN GODFREY: Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: I'd love if you could start by just explaining what this federal office, the Office of Special Education, a little bit more about what it day-to-day does and how it interacts with families and children.

GRETCHEN GODFREY: Sure. So there are a few main functions that the office serves. It provides monitoring and oversight of the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which is the federal special-education law. So it's looking at whether states are complying with the details of the law and also what are the results of students with disabilities.

It also provides funding for different programs, so for example, teacher training or technical assistance centers that support states and districts in delivering quality education. And so those are the main functions of the office.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. So what specifically would change about the office, do you think, from your perspective, if it moves to be a part of Health and Human Services? Because I think initially when people hear it, it does sound like there would be a lot of overlap.

GRETCHEN GODFREY: Right. So the reasons we're concerned is that we believe this move will lead to more confusion, less accountability, and a decreased emphasis on the inclusion and high expectations for students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is a civil rights law that ensures students with disabilities receive the education that they're entitled to.

And it's an education law, not a health law. So moving us to the Department of Health and Human Services sends a message that the administration sees disability and students with disabilities as a problem to be treated, rather than a natural part of the diversity of the student population.

NINA MOINI: And impacts what the Department of Education generally is able to oversee and the scope of that department. And so for families with a child with disabilities here in Minnesota, have you thought about how this shift could play out? I mean, I'm assuming it would take a while for all of those transitions to take place. But could you think of examples already of how families could experience this change?

GRETCHEN GODFREY: Yeah, you're right that the transfer wouldn't result in immediate changes that we'd see on the ground level. But it is disrupting an already challenged system and sending a signal that inclusion and having high expectations for students with disabilities isn't a priority.

And that would naturally have a trickle-down effect in the resources and attention dedicated to special education and accountability. So some examples might be fewer guidance documents being issued at the federal level that impacts how the day-to-day delivery of services might be provided for students.

If there's less of a focus at the federal level on teacher training, for example, we know that that's already a concern for families of having qualified teachers and sufficient number of teachers in the education system. So those are a couple examples.

NINA MOINI: To your point, I wonder what some of the challenges already are that perhaps-- I feel like what I'm hearing you say is it would be nice to work on some of those challenges instead of making this disruption right now in the way that things are done. What do you wish was taking place to help with implementing the type of special education that people deserve?

GRETCHEN GODFREY: Exactly. Well, funding for special education has been a challenge for decades. There's never been the full federal funding for special education programs and services.

And another challenge that this move would cause is that families aren't always sure where to turn if the services and supports aren't being provided. So by having special education move to Health and Human Services-- they're also looking to move the Office for Civil Rights to the Department of Justice. And general education has moved to the Department of Labor.

So you have these three parts that need to work together for special education. And when they're split among different agencies, it causes a lot of confusion. And it's hard to make those systemic changes, like you mentioned, that would support a better education system for students with disabilities.

NINA MOINI: I wonder if you could give folks an idea, too, of what all special education encompasses. I think sometimes it's hard for people to think of just what a broad scope there is.

GRETCHEN GODFREY: Sure. So it's important to remember, first, that students with disabilities are general education students first. So they're not a separate population that doesn't participate in the day-to-day life of a school.

And so it's really-- the focus of special education is to serve the unique needs of the child. And that can vary significantly, child to child. A student with ADHD might receive some accommodations in the classroom around sitting in the front of the class or different assignments, where students with complex medical needs or complex emotional-behavioral needs, sometimes there is a different setting that's more appropriate.

But the premise of the law is that we're looking at what's going to serve that student in the most inclusive environment possible.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, thank you for that. I wonder if you are hearing from parents about this yet who are concerned or confused and what you would want them to know at this point.

GRETCHEN GODFREY: We haven't heard from a lot of parents directly yet. I think with the summer, everyone's having a little sigh of relief with summer vacation. But what we do want parents to know is that even though PACER is very concerned about these changes and is going to advocate to reverse them, that, right now, special education laws and funding remain intact.

So there hasn't actually been any change to special education law. And so families should continue to expect the same level of service for their children. We also want parents to know that PACER is always here for any questions that they have and that even though these changes are happening at the federal level, it's more important than ever for them to partner with their local school and their student's IEP team to really navigate the process and work together to have the best education possible for their child.

NINA MOINI: What's the summer looking like for you at PACER? What are you keeping an eye on?

**GRETCHEN
GODFREY:** So we'll definitely be watching these changes. And we help support a national call-in day to encourage people to call their member of Congress and oppose this change. So continue to look for opportunities with our partners to advocate for this change to be reversed.

We're also looking at issues at the state level. We're concerned about some things happening there around possible future funding cuts. But we're also developing new resources and trainings so that we can continue to be a quality resource for families as they navigate the process.

NINA MOINI: All right, Gretchen, thanks very much for coming by and sharing your perspective with us. Appreciate your time.

GRETCHEN Thank you.

GODFREY:

NINA MOINI: That was Gretchen Godfrey, interim executive director of PACER Center.