

MEETING DISTRICT NEEDS MARKET ANALYSIS

Trump Has Vowed to Disrupt Education. Here's How Companies Can Navigate the Tumult



By [Emma Kate Fittes](#) — February 07, 2025 ⌚ 12 min read



— Liz Yap/Education Week and DigitalVision Vectors

As the Trump administration seeks to bring sweeping change to K-12 education — with a particular focus on overhauling federal funding and policy — companies in the sector are in a difficult position.

They're caught between trying to stay ahead of potentially massive shifts and making quick pivots — and providing stability and guidance to school district customers anxious about what far-reaching changes will mean to them.

In his first few weeks in office, President Donald Trump has issued a rapid-fire succession of executive orders and federal memos — some of which have caused confusion about their practical impact on schools, as well as their legality.

One memo issued last week, for instance, calling for a federal funding freeze, was later clarified as not targeting major K-12 formula grants — such as Title I funds — before it was abruptly rescinded.

More recently, Trump's administration put forward an executive order that threatens to pull federal subsidies from schools that teach about race and gender in ways the administration considers to be “radical indoctrination.” The order cites unsupported claims that students are being “compelled to adopt identities as either victims or oppressors.”

So far, it's largely falling on school district leaders to wade through which of the Trump administration's directives have real-world implications for their schools' day-to-day operations, the work of teachers, and students' lives.

The uncertainty creates further complexities for companies trying to navigate an already complex market, where the needs of their district clients are varied and evolving.

Many of Trump's most sweeping moves so far have focused on restructuring the federal government, and the role of federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Education. Several of his executive decisions are already being challenged in court.

But he's shown no sign of slowing down — an indication that he will continue an aggressive push to make changes over the next four years.

The question for companies is to what degree the overall upheaval will have a cooling effect on school districts' purchasing, even before the legality and practicality of implementing those changes is known.

“When everybody has issues like this, whether it's in schools or personal, you hold on to the money that you've got,” said Jeff Jones, CEO of professional development provider Solution Tree. “You cut back on your budget, you hold on to your security blanket, if you will — and I think that's smart.”

How can education companies navigate the new policy environment under the Trump administration and best support school districts — not just now, but over the next four years?

EdWeek Market Brief sought advice on that question from experienced education industry representatives, advisors to companies, and associations representing districts and ed-tech providers. Their answers offer a look at how education organizations can help school systems mitigate risks, and by extension, how companies can manage their own.

Have a Strong Grasp of District and State Authority

To some degree, school districts in the U.S. are shielded from direct federal involvement in their decision-making by a system that traditionally leaves most K-12 policy setting to individual states, and purchasing to individual districts.

There are statutes, for example, that set clear limits on the federal government's influence over curriculum.

Federal funding makes up about 10 percent of K-12 dollars, as school district budgets are mostly dependent on state and local funding streams. (Although some districts rely more heavily than others on federal grant money, including those with high numbers of students living in poverty.)



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Derek Black, University of South Carolina law professor

However, in contrast to his first term, Trump seems to intend to use federal funding to influence state and local adoption of curriculum — which some legal experts say pushes the boundaries of current statute.

Education companies — as well as school districts — should know their rights when deciding how much weight to give presidential actions, and which to set aside, said Derek Black, a

University of South Carolina law professor focused on educational policy.

“The president has no authority to order school districts to do things,” he said, because that’s not the way the government and educational system are structured. “For that, school districts can still rest comfortably.”

If it’s unclear whether a presidential mandate is legal or not, Black says companies and districts should turn to their attorneys.

They should also look to legal counsel to interpret which ideas within executive orders — even if the order itself doesn’t hold up in court — could become reality with a different approach, should Trump choose to prioritize those things.

“That’s what your attorneys are for,” Black said. “Attorneys can help district leaders see [whether] it’s something that might be coming down the pike.”

Districts that don’t have access to an in-house attorney, especially those that are smaller and working with tighter budgets, will also need guidance, said Sara Kloek, vice president of the Software & Information Industry Association.

In those cases, school systems are likely to turn to relevant associations or unions that typically serve as a resource for them, whether they represent administrators, educators, or districts. Companies should pay attention to the public advice those groups are putting out to school districts, she said.

Some districts — especially those with longstanding, successful, or trusted vendor partnerships — may also look to companies for help interpreting what changes, if any, need to be made.

In those cases, company representatives have a responsibility to ensure they are not inadvertently spreading misinformation during their conversations with educators and administrators, Kloek said.

For instance, a number of Trump’s executive orders have simply directed federal agency leaders to explore an option or make a plan, as opposed to demanding specific changes — a critical detail that is easy to overlook when distracted by the bigger idea that spurred the communication.

SIIA, which represents ed-tech vendors, is similarly working to distill helpful information for education companies through a nonpartisan lens.

“The news is moving fast, but it is always important to make sure that the information you are passing along is correct and of high quality,” Kloek said. “So take a breath. Read the articles, read the news that’s coming out, but make sure that [you] are passing along what is actually happening.”

Know Where Pressure on Schools Is Coming From

Even if school districts are within their legal rights in staying the course with their policies or purchasing, districts may face other pressures to take more immediate action.

Some administrators may be motivated to make changes before there is a legal mandate to do so because school board members or parents in the community agree with Trump’s ideas. Or because they want to get ahead of an issue before it becomes a source of division in their school community or ends up in the courtroom.

“If there’s anything school districts want to avoid more than anything else, it is public controversy and finding themselves in court,” Black said.

Staying in close communication with district leaders and understanding which pressures are top of mind is key context for companies to help administrators address their specific needs.



Lean into the fact that what is true today may not be true in March, may not be true in June. Except that kids will need fundamental teaching and learning.

Jeff Livingston, CEO of EdSolutions

That strategy shouldn’t be limited to responding to policies focused relatively narrowly on academic resources and federal funding, pointed out Rachelle Rogers-Ard, an anti-racism and leadership development consultant for school districts.

Conflicts brought on by new policies that affect large portions of the population also often end up spilling into the classroom.

For instance, school principals have been receiving urgent questions from students, families, and educators about how to handle immigration officers who may show up at schools after Trump rescinded the policy that had designated schools as protected areas against immigration enforcement, [Education Week](#) reported.

Answering those questions is easier said than done, Rogers-Ard explained, especially for a large district. By the time a district or school gets the information they need from the county office — which is waiting for directions from the state level — there's new news breaking, she said.

“Everyone is trying to put as positive a spin on it as they can, so that mass hysteria doesn't happen in schools,” Rogers-Ard said of the California districts she's spoken with in the last couple of weeks. “But ... can I educate kids if the child is not safe? I don't know if education can really happen like that.”

Be Clear With Districts About Your Company's Position

Part of the confusion with the early executive orders stems from the conflicting information in Trump's messaging, said Noelle Ellerson Ng, associate executive director for advocacy and governance at AASA, The School Superintendents Association.

For many district leaders, there's a conflict between federal officials simultaneously striving for smaller government while expanding federal influence over education. And it's contradictory to expect states and schools to spend less money while also requiring them to buy new or different curricula, she said.

“To the extent that the information coming out of the administration actually does seem to be at odds with itself, it's really hard to know which one to take seriously,” Ellerson Ng said. Superintendents need to make it clear to their communities that the mixed messages are a holdup.

The administration has also made it clear it will target efforts focused on certain principles, including DEI — or diversity, equity, and inclusion. But it's less clear what practical practices and procedures meet the administration's definition of DEI work.

Ultimately, that could lead to some companies simply deleting various phrases from titles and materials, while still essentially providing the same underlying services.

That muddies the water for school districts and companies.

Regardless of what messaging companies decide to put out publicly, they need to ensure they are being clear with district leaders about exactly where they stand and what work they are doing, said Ellerson Ng.

“Maybe not in public statements that could be picked up and shared by everyone,” she said. “But account managers and relationship people need to say, ‘Here’s how we’re thinking about this, here’s what this would look like.’”

When it comes to addressing concerns from parents and the community, school districts will look to company partners for [help in some specific areas](#), a 2023 *EdWeek Market Brief* survey found.

About a third of district and school leaders and teachers say companies providing supplemental resources to help educators navigate controversy is helpful. So is guidance and support for responding to parents (27 percent) and live professional development (24 percent).

Rogers-Ard, the K-12 consultant, advises school officials to work with vendors that “understand the subtle nuances of trying to educate” students — which is often not what politicians and advocates find divisive.

To her, that boils down to making sure many perspectives are represented in a classroom and that all students feel safe in school.

“I don’t care what you call it,” she said, “This is the work that needs to happen.”

Prepare to Pivot

Over the next four years, education companies are in a uniquely strong position to help school districts — which are not set up to adapt quickly to new, controversial mandates.

The role of providing support in making sense of policies coming out of Washington is something vendors should embrace, said Kelsea Kierstead, vice president of marketing agency

Finn Partners, which serves education companies.

“They’ve already excelled at solving specific classroom challenges, and now they’ll need to use that muscle to help their customers and prospects navigate an unpredictable and volatile landscape,” she said. “They should guide their customers and partners by using their entrepreneurial qualities—optimism, ingenuity, adaptability, and risk tolerance.”

For Jeff Livingston, CEO of EdSolutions, that looks like finding the places where people from both political parties overlap in their priorities. It’s a practice he calls looking for “Venn diagram overlaps.”

His interest in project-based learning, for example, aligns well with the conservative emphasis on K-12 creating a more skilled workforce, he said. So an organization could help a district prioritize making project-based learning available to more kids, potentially by leveraging AI’s ability to help teachers create and monitor projects.

Those sorts of needs, and the importance of having a robust K-12 system overall, are too important for the industry to disengage because the federal climate feels chaotic or because an education company leader is not politically aligned with the president, Livingston said.

“Lean into the fact that what is true today may not be true in March, may not be true in June,” he said. “Except that kids will need fundamental teaching and learning.”

Livingston also suggests that company leaders stop trying to make sense of every little action that is happening now — such as trying to guess the fate of the national Head Start program based on the fact that its portal shut down before many others.

But they should be attuned to the overall direction, by looking at policy blueprints like Project 2025.

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The document outlining the presidential transition, written by ultraconservative policy leaders and endorsed by Trump on the campaign trail, “seems to be the blueprint” on education policy, Livingston said.

“They are following chapter and verse, so take them seriously and take them literally,” Livingston said. “At the very least, stop being surprised... and start thinking now about what those priorities are.”

Some education company leaders are trying to make practical changes to their organizations, based on potential policy and funding changes coming out of the nation’s capital.

At Solution Tree, Jones is already thinking about how to reduce the cost of the company’s professional development services for districts, without making any cuts to staffing. One avenue is by leveraging AI.

The uncertainty combined with the end of federal stimulus dollars means districts will double down on scrutinizing every purchase and asking for proof that a product is high-quality and priced competitively, Jones predicts.



Take a deep breath. And keep your eyes wide open, because things are going to continue to change fast.

Jeff Jones, Solution Tree CEO

“They need to make sure that, whoever their provider is, that they can prove that what they’re selling you works,” Jones said. “They need evidence of effectiveness has to be tested and proven.”

The work Solution Tree does with some of its school district clients has already been impacted by confusion around federal funding coming from D.C. as some states started cutting funding for teachers to travel for training, he said.

Broadly, his advice for the company, as well as other providers, is to focus on adhering to state standards and wait for things to settle down in the weeks to come, at least marginally.

“Take a deep breath,” he said. “ And keep your eyes wide open, because things are going to continue to change fast.”



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