# Concerns rise as special education shifts from Education to Health and Human Services department



Special education in the United States is poised for a significant shift as President Donald Trump moves the program from the Department of Education (ED) to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This change, announced in April 2025, has sparked concern among parents, educators and disability rights advocates in California, who fear that the transition will disrupt services and reverse decades of progress for students with disabilities.

For nearly 50 years, the federal Department of Education has overseen special education, enforcing laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education. Despite President Trump’s assurances to maintain the integrity of special education, the relocation of the programme to HHS—led by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—introduces uncertainty. Moreover, enforcement responsibilities could shift to the Justice Department, and HHS itself is facing a 20% workforce reduction.

Gina Gandolfi, a former special education teacher from San Bernardino County and mother to a 10-year-old boy with Down syndrome, expressed her concerns to CalMatters: “Students in special education are equally as important as students who aren’t, but that hasn’t always been the case. The disability community has fought hard for where we are now. What if those services are taken away? Kids with disabilities will go back to being second-class students.”

In response to the administration’s plans, more than 40 disability rights organisations sent a strongly worded letter to Congress in early April, urging them to preserve funding for special education, keep the programme within the Department of Education and maintain the department’s current structure. The letter described the proposed move as “short-sighted, insulting and unacceptable.”

Currently, the federal government covers about 10% of California’s approximately $13 billion special education expenditure. While no definitive cuts to special education funding have been announced, Trump has threatened to withhold funding from states that resist his orders to eliminate diversity programmes and transgender student protections. Additionally, proposed Republican-led cuts to Medicaid could further jeopardise services critical to special education students and their families. Medicaid helps pay for therapies such as speech and occupational services within schools and supports regional centres that provide diagnoses, in-home visits and essential equipment.

Kristin Wright, former director of special education in California and now executive director at the Sacramento County Office of Education, highlighted the interconnected nature of these services. “It’s a fragile ecosystem. These programs have evolved together. When you pull any one strand away, it affects everything else,” she said. Wright warned that scaling back these programs would threaten the significant advances made since the 1970s, when many children with disabilities were excluded from schools or segregated. Today, most California students with disabilities spend the majority of their time in general education classrooms with support, leading to improved academic and social outcomes.

Ginese Quann, special education director for the El Dorado County Office of Education, remains cautiously optimistic. She noted that special education funding and oversight have always been somewhat fluid and pointed to the state’s capacity to monitor compliance and address complaints independently of the federal government. However, she admits the shift to HHS could cause service delays or disruptions in payments and worries about reduced expertise in education within a health-focused department.

For some institutions serving students with acute needs, such as the Hanna Academy in Sonoma County—a small nonprofit boarding school for approximately 50 students with behavioural challenges—the stakes are higher. Principal Courtney Jackson warned that budget cuts resulting from federal changes could reduce staffing levels, compromising student and staff safety and diminishing the individualised support that is critical for student progress. “When you start removing services in a careless manner, without a backup plan, it just causes chaos,” Jackson said. “The damage will be so deep, it could take years to fix and be far more expensive.”

Rorie Fitzpatrick, vice president for K-12 systems at research firm WestEd, emphasised the importance of continued funding and well-trained staff to uphold IDEA’s mandate for free, appropriate public education. “If you cut that funding, you’re gutting IDEA by default,” he said.

Gandolfi shared a personal perspective, describing how special education has transformed her son Nathan’s life. A fourth grader in Redlands Unified School District, Nathan benefits from speech and occupational therapies, one-on-one classroom support and participation in activities through his regional centre, including swimming, drumming and social skills classes. “He’s living his best life. He’s full of joy. He looks forward to school every day,” she said. “We want him to have a long, purposeful, meaningful life, and having the support of special ed makes that possible.”

As this transition unfolds, families, educators and advocates remain alert to the potential impacts on services and the educational experiences of the 14% of K-12 students in California enrolled in special education, whose disabilities range in severity from mild learning difficulties to complex conditions such as severe autism and traumatic brain injury. The coming months will be critical in determining how the move to a new federal agency affects the support structures vital to these students’ success.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/why-trumps-move-to-shift-special-ed-to-hhs-is-rattling-educators/2025/03> - This article discusses the concerns among educators about the vague plans to move special education from the Education Department to HHS, which aligns with the uncertainty and potential disruption mentioned in the passage.
* <https://www.k12dive.com/news/trump-mcmahon-special-education-move-to-hhs/743260/> - This article reports on President Trump's announcement to shift special education oversight to the Department of Health and Human Services, which matches the initial part of the passage describing the program move.
* <https://www.disabilityscoop.com/2025/03/25/trump-says-ed-department-will-no-longer-handle-special-needs/31374/> - The article covers President Trump's plan to move special education to HHS, highlighting the lack of specifics and the potential issues with such a transition, echoing concerns raised in the passage.
* <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2025/03/22/trump-says-education-department-will-not-oversee-students-with-disabilities/> - This piece mentions Trump's plans to relocate special education oversight to HHS and cites critics' concerns about HHS lacking education expertise, reflecting similar worries in the passage.
* <https://hechingerreport.org/special-education-and-trump-what-parents-and-schools-need-to-know/> - The article explores Trump's intention to move federal special education programs to HHS, noting potential classroom impacts and expert concerns about HHS's ability to oversee educational needs, which aligns with fears of reversing progress for students with disabilities.