

‘A sinking ship’: Employees flee ED’s civil rights office

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MCMAHON IS HIRING — The Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights has been President Donald Trump’s greatest weapon in forcing schools to bend to his will.

But the office is hemorrhaging staff.

Hundreds of civil rights staffers were let go during the government-wide reduction in force last year. Many did not return even after the department started calling workers back, while other employees have chosen to leave in recent months as Trump has repeatedly vowed to shutter the agency and change what work is prioritized.

The number of employees in the civil rights office has declined to 321 from about 575 in fiscal 2024, [according to May data from the Office of Personnel Management](#). In December, when the agency tried to call workers back, the office had 403 workers, but that number has been continuously declining.

“There’s been a steady parade of people leaving,” said Linda Mangel, who was an OCR enforcement director and resigned last year. “Even the people who weren’t RIFed were so shaken by what was happening in the agency that they have steadily left. ... It’s like a sinking ship.”

The Trump administration has deployed the office responsible for enforcing federal civil rights laws in schools to carry out the president’s political agenda. That includes investigating Harvard University — [which the president has frequently sparred with](#) — and other schools over alleged antisemitism on campus. The office has also probed schools over policies allowing transgender women and children to access bathrooms, locker rooms and dormitories and participate in women’s and girls’ sports.

The agency called back [247 workers](#) of the roughly 575 office staffers, with 85 ultimately returning to work, according to a January report by the Government Accountability Office, the federal government’s watchdog.

Staffers have chosen not to come back or are leaving the agency because they retired, got new jobs and are concerned about job stability. But some are uncomfortable with the work.

“After my RIF, I saw some things that were coming out of OCR that I think are not lawful and I would not be comfortable doing,” said Beth Gellman-Beer, former Philadelphia regional OCR office director, who had worked at the agency since the George W. Bush administration. “I figured if I go back, I’ll probably be asked to do something that I’m not going to be able to sign, and I’ll get eliminated anyway.”

Gellman-Beer said she received three or four RIF notices and ongoing lawsuits over the fate of the agency felt like a rollercoaster and “back and forth whiplash.”

She returned to her job for two weeks, but ultimately resigned.

“I don’t begrudge anyone who decided to go back, but I was physically ill those two weeks,” she said. “I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t eat. I was really having health issues. ... I felt like it was going back into an abusive relationship after what I had been through.”

A spokesperson for the Education Department defended its civil rights actions, but did not directly respond to the comments made by the former staffers.

“The Trump Administration is restoring civil rights enforcement in line with the letter of the law,” Ellen Keast, the agency’s press secretary for higher education, said in a statement. “We’d encourage you to ask the individuals you reference why they felt comfortable, for example, enforcing previous Administrations’ illegal weaponization of Title IX, targeting schools for ‘misgendering’ and subverting women’s sex-based protections in sports and intimate spaces.”

Mangel, who resigned in 2025 from OCR, also served in the Justice Department under the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations and worked in civil rights enforcement for the federal government under seven administrations.

While the first Trump administration took a more restrictive approach to protections for LGBTQ+ students under Title IX, the federal law that bars sex-based discrimination, “we weren’t asked to do things that were inconsistent with the law,” Mangel said.

“I always felt as a public servant that my job was to enforce the laws with fidelity and give the best advice I could to the administration,” she said. “I never had a problem working for Republican administrations because I could always do some good. They weren’t weaponizing civil rights ever, and now they are.”

The strain the staffing cuts have left is evident: the office reached zero resolution agreements involving sexual harassment, sexual violence, seclusion or restraint, racial harassment or discriminatory school discipline in 2025, [according to a report from Sen. Bernie Sanders’ staff](#). And it reached 91 percent fewer resolution agreements in 2025 than in 2017, the first year of the first Trump administration.

Education Secretary Linda McMahon on Thursday told House lawmakers that Kimberly Richey, assistant secretary for civil rights, is working on “bringing down” the case backlog, which she blamed on the Biden administration.

She also said Richey is [“bringing back lawyers”](#) to help.

The department has launched a hiring blitz for the office. It uploaded [senior OCR job postings](#) in late April on USAJobs.gov for regional directors in Denver, Washington and Seattle and [enforcement directors](#).

But Mangel said she is concerned the administration won't be able to bring back or recruit people with the experience needed to rebuild OCR.

"It may be that they have figured out that they couldn't gut the agency like that," Mangel said. "Right now, clearly, it demonstrably can't do its job. ... It only helps to hire if they hire back people who have enough experience to help put things back together."