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Trump education cuts quietly declare that opportunity should be rationed on race | Opinion

What's under attack isn't just a set of programs. It is a vision of America itself — one where diversity is an asset, education opens doors, and opportunity expands rather than contracts.

Anthony Hernandez Special to Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Federal funding cuts are threatening the survival of Minority-Serving Institutions, including tribal and Hispanic-serving schools.

Educators report that budget reductions and increased immigration enforcement are creating fear and instability in school communities.

These cuts impact not only schools but also local economies, workforce programs, and community services.

Supporters argue these institutions are vital for creating opportunities and correcting historical inequities for excluded communities.

On a hot afternoon this summer in northern New Mexico, I sat across from the director of a small community school tucked within a Tewa pueblo. Native artwork covered the walls, stacks of education workbooks filled the shelves—signs of a place where learning and heritage live side by side. Outside, dust swirled across the schoolyard, and children's laughter drifted through the cottonwoods outside.

“Our focus is to preserve our culture and the Tewa language,” the director told me. But the school's resources are painfully thin. Federal funding is its lifeline, and recent announcements of program eliminations have cast doubt on whether the school can survive. “We have no choice but to wait and see,” he said.

His words came back to me when the Education Department announced plans to [end funding for all Minority-Serving Institutions](#) — following an earlier decision to [cut \\$350 million from Hispanic-Serving Institutions](#). These are not isolated moves. After months of conversations with educators, parents, and leaders in New Mexico, California, Texas, and Wisconsin, I saw a coordinated retreat from the public institutions that once promised upward mobility.

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Educators train staff to prepare for ICE raids, assist families

In Anaheim, California, a high school principal described her school as “a frontline,” where staff train students to prepare for ICE raids and families learn their rights. “We’re expected to do more with less,” she said.

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In Houston, Texas, an assistant superintendent struggles to serve a rapidly growing Latino population as budgets shrink. Special education programs are “on life support.” Leaders still provide meals and wraparound services, but the strain shows.

In Green Bay, ICE raids have hollowed out neighborhoods, leaving children too afraid to attend school. “You can’t teach kids who are scared to leave their homes,” a bilingual education leader told me.

And in California’s North Orange Continuing Education, an institutional research director worries that community college pathways for adult learners and single parents could vanish in a political climate that values only bachelor’s degrees.

Cuts ripple outward, weakening not only schools but also local economies. “When these cuts happen, it’s not just fewer scholarships,” one Albuquerque official said. “It’s an entire ecosystem losing momentum — feeder high schools, workforce programs, even local businesses.” In Houston, a principal recalled the heartbreak of handing teachers layoff notices just before the school year began — a stark reminder of the human cost behind budget lines.

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Each move reinforces the others: DEI programs banned in the name of unity, immigration enforcement driving families from schools, curriculum restrictions stripping away histories that justify these supports. Together, they narrow possibility while cloaked in the neutral language of efficiency.

These are not special interest programs; they drive success

This is not only about money. It is about whether we still believe in the infrastructure of belonging — that historically excluded communities deserve investment to correct inequities. Without HSIs, fewer Latino nurses, engineers, and teachers will graduate to serve their communities. Without HBCUs, the pipeline of Black professionals in medicine, law, and STEM will shrink. Without tribal schools, languages and histories may vanish within a generation.

These are not special interest programs. They are engines of inclusion and innovation, ladders into the middle class for millions of students. To undermine them is to quietly declare that opportunity should again be rationed along lines of race, language, and class.

At Compton College, an HSI in California, I watched a student share with the president that he had secured a spot in a competitive nursing program. They embraced, and the president reminded him to return and teach after earning his credential. “When he came here, he was homeless and living in his car,” the president said softly. “We’re out here showing up for students.”

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Across the country, countless educators are still showing up — preserving culture, keeping students safe, and protecting fragile pipelines into mobility. But they are holding on against the tide.

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than contracts.

Before I left the pueblo, the director shared a story about [fossilized footprints](#) from thousands of years ago discovered in New Mexico: an adult and a child walking side by side, until the child's steps vanish and the adult carries them forward. Scientists believe the adult carried the child across shifting ground. "That's what we are doing here," he said. Outside, the wind carried the sound of children laughing. "We carry them until they can walk on their own."

Those footsteps remain in the earth, a record of care and endurance across centuries. The question now is whether we will leave behind the same — whether, when the ground shifts beneath us, we will choose to carry one another forward.

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