

When a School Rights Office Shrinks, Families Wait

Federal changes may make it harder for families to get help when schools do not meet disability rules.



An empty school hallway shows accessibility equipment and folders outside a closed office door.

A federal office that investigates discrimination in schools has fewer workers and fewer **regional** offices after major cuts, and families of children with disabilities may now face longer waits when they ask for help. According to an article published by PBS NewsHour from The Conversation, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil **Rights** has been reorganized after staff reductions and office closures.

The Office for Civil Rights, often called OCR, is part of the federal Department of Education. It enforces civil rights laws, which are rules meant to stop unfair **treatment** because of race, national origin, sex, **disability**, age, or other protected traits. In schools, that can include checking whether a child with a disability is getting the support the law requires.

One example in the PBS article was Felicita Piñón, an eighth grader in Crowley, Texas. She has cerebral palsy, a condition that can affect movement and muscle control, and she uses a power wheelchair. Her mother said Felicita wanted to join her middle school cheerleading team in 2024, but the school was not willing to make

accommodations, meaning changes that help a person with a disability take part. Her mother filed a **complaint** with OCR. That complaint was rejected in July 2024, before the later federal cuts, but her mother said the office still gave families a place to turn.

Families usually start close to home when a school problem comes up. They may talk with teachers, principals, district leaders, and state officials. Filing with OCR can be a last step because it connects families directly with the Education Department at no cost. The process could be slow even before the cuts, but advocates quoted in the article said families at least often received confirmation that their complaint had been received.

The changes were large. In March 2025, the Education Department cut nearly half of its **workforce** of almost 4,000 people. PBS reported that, according to the Government Accountability Office, an independent agency that checks how the federal government works, an estimated 299 of OCR's 575 staff positions were included. After lawsuits challenged the cuts, some employees

returned. The Education Department later reported in November 2025 that OCR had 446 staff members, including 384 who had first received termination notices.

The office also became less local. Seven of OCR’s 12 regional branches permanently closed: Atlanta, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Dallas, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. A regional branch is an office that serves a part of the country, so closing one can move help farther away from the people who need it.

Education Secretary Linda McMahon has said the changes were needed to improve accountability and **efficiency**. Accountability means be-

ing responsible for results. Efficiency means trying to get work done with less waste. In June, the Education Department announced that the Department of Justice would take a larger role in civil rights investigations.

The question for schools is not only how many complaints get filed. It is what happens when a child needs a ramp, extra help reading, a quieter testing space, or a fair chance to join an activity. Middle school is where many people first notice how rules affect daily life. A federal office may sound far away, but its decisions can shape who gets to participate in ordinary school moments.

Written from reporting by PBS NewsHour.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. When should a school problem be handled locally, and when should a federal office get involved?

2. Do you think efficiency is a good reason to shrink a government office that protects rights? Why or why not?

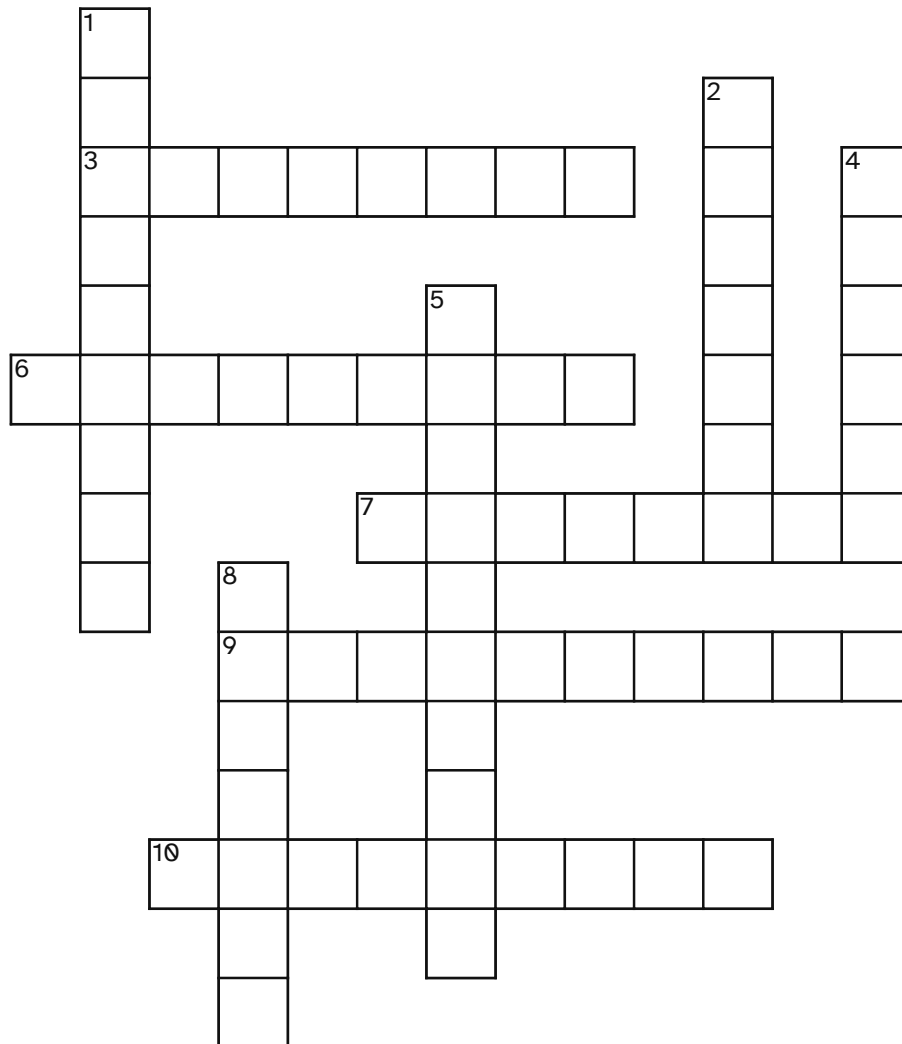
3. What information would you want before judging whether these changes are helping or hurting children with disabilities?

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I C A L S H F R A K D N F U B L E I
Y E R R W A I I E T I V E E I M R T
C R F R N E E T C E E R D D D L E A
C K A N R E C L O S U R E N T H T H
P O A E T E Y N E K M N R C C M A M
P B A N H E E C O M P L A I N T N T
E L Y R L O H O M E E O L U O R O C
D N O R R N F R O A L C E S N R T E
I C E W C A Y I I M Y G I R E A A F
S T I R T L A E R A E I T H K D G F
A E F T E O Y R F H I W R A P I N I
B F A S Q R I E R I I R I R M T H C
I O I T T A S G I R I R F E F L A I
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T R E A T M E N T J A C S E O L D C
Y O S T S E O A S P R C E L C R C Y
L C S N E G I L F O G T N L I O N I

CLOSURE	COMPLAINT	DISABILITY	EFFICIENCY	FAIRNESS
FEDERAL	REGIONAL	RIGHTS	TREATMENT	WORKFORCE

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ACROSS

- 3 Linked to one part of a larger area or country
- 6 Official report about possible unfairness or rule breaking
- 7 Equal and unbiased treatment of people
- 9 Getting work done with little wasted time, money, or effort
- 10 Way a person is handled by others

DOWN

- 1 All employees of a business or organization
- 2 Permanent shutting down of a building, branch, or service
- 4 Legal protections for equal and fair treatment
- 5 Condition that can make some tasks harder and call for extra help
- 8 Connected to the U.S. national government

Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

PBS NewsHour

“Civil rights enforcement cuts mean fewer staff, closed offices, longer waits for students with disabilities”

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<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/civil-rights-enforcement-cuts-mean-fewer-staff-closed-offices-longer-waits-for-students-with-disabilities>

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