The Trump administration is proposing a major overhaul of the Education Department’s organizational structure, seeking to eliminate or consolidate more than a half-dozen offices at the agency, according to an internal presentation obtained by POLITICO.

In one noteworthy shift, the plan calls for merging the two offices that oversee postsecondary education and career and technical education into “a single Office of Postsecondary and Lifelong Learning.”

The overhaul, which has been in the works for months, calls for a sweeping restructuring that affects nearly every major unit of the department. It includes K-12 education, higher education, communications and legislative affairs as well as the agency’s budgeting and financial functions.

The goal of the plan is to shrink the number of political appointees, reduce duplication and inefficiencies and create “clearer lines of reporting, responsibility and decision making,” according to the document. In addition, the reshuffling is meant to improve policy coordination across the department and allow “more focus on the Secretary’s priorities,” the presentation says.

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has previously said she wants to find areas of the department to cut, and earlier this week she said that the Trump administration’s budget request is meant to help “reduce the federal footprint in education.” Department officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

It would also completely eliminate the Office of the Undersecretary of Education, which officials have been considering since the beginning of the Trump administration. The undersecretary role, which has been the top political appointee overseeing higher education in the past couple administrations, is not required by law.

On the K-12 education side, the plan calls for rolling the Office of Innovation and Improvement into the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. It also proposes to “eventually” do the same with the Office of English Language Acquisition.

The Office of the Deputy Secretary would be folded into the Office of the Secretary, though the plan proposes to keep the deputy secretary position. The deputy is the No. 2 in command at the department and a political appointee.

A new “Office of Finance and Operations,” to be led by an assistant secretary of education, would absorb the current Office of the Chief Financial Officer and “certain functions” of the
Office of Management, Office of Deputy Secretary, and Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development.

In addition, the proposal would merge the department’s communications shop and its congressional affairs office into a new “Office of Legislation and Public Affairs.”

The department’s “reform plan” was submitted to the White House’s Office of Management and Budget in September and OMB officials provided feedback in late November, according to the presentation provided to some department employees this week.

The Education Department last spring formed a 15-person committee to study how it should reorganize and cut the agency’s workforce. The effort was a response to President Donald Trump’s executive order in March 2017 directing agencies to develop a reorganization plan, as well as a subsequent White House order that agencies find ways to shrink their ranks and “maximize employee performance.”

The committee, according to a memo announcing its creation, was co-chaired by Robert Eitel, a former for-profit college executive who is now senior counselor to DeVos, and Joe Conaty, a longtime career official who until recently also served as acting deputy secretary.

The internal presentation obtained by POLITICO points out that some changes to the Education Department’s organizational structure “will require action by Congress,” though it suggests that officials are still trying to determine how much discretion they have to make the changes under existing law.

Department officials are working on a “plan for phased implementation” of the proposal, according to the document, which also says that “restructuring takes time.”

The plan also seeks to “streamline and improve internal processes” at the department, according to the presentation. That includes, among other things, improving the department’s technology systems and changing the internal “clearance process” that officials use to make decisions. In addition, the department wants to “reform FOIA procedures,” the document says.

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