Understood Quick Insights Series

One year later: Parents are still confused about changes at the U.S. Department of Education

In March 2025, days after President Trump signed an executive order calling for the U.S. Department of Education to close, Understood.org surveyed parents to capture their first reactions.

In June 2026, more than a year after the executive order was signed, the U.S. Department of Education began the process of dismantling itself and shifting oversight of special education between the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice. We wanted to know how parents are reacting to these changes now.

Between July 27 and August 5, 2026, we surveyed 495 U.S. parents of children ages 18 or younger using an online, nationally representative panel through Qualtrics. The sample included 256 parents of kids with IEPs or 504 plans and 239 parents of kids without, so we could compare how the two groups understand and experience the changes so far.

Key insights

Awareness of changes at the U.S. Department of Education is low.

- More than half of parents surveyed (52%) didn't know that special education oversight had moved out of the Department of Education.

Parents' expectations about the impact on education quality have remained steady.

- In 2026, 73% of parents believe the changes will affect the quality of their child's education, and **44% expect that impact to be significant**. That's about the same share who said so in March 2025 (76%).

 © 2026 Understood for All, Inc.

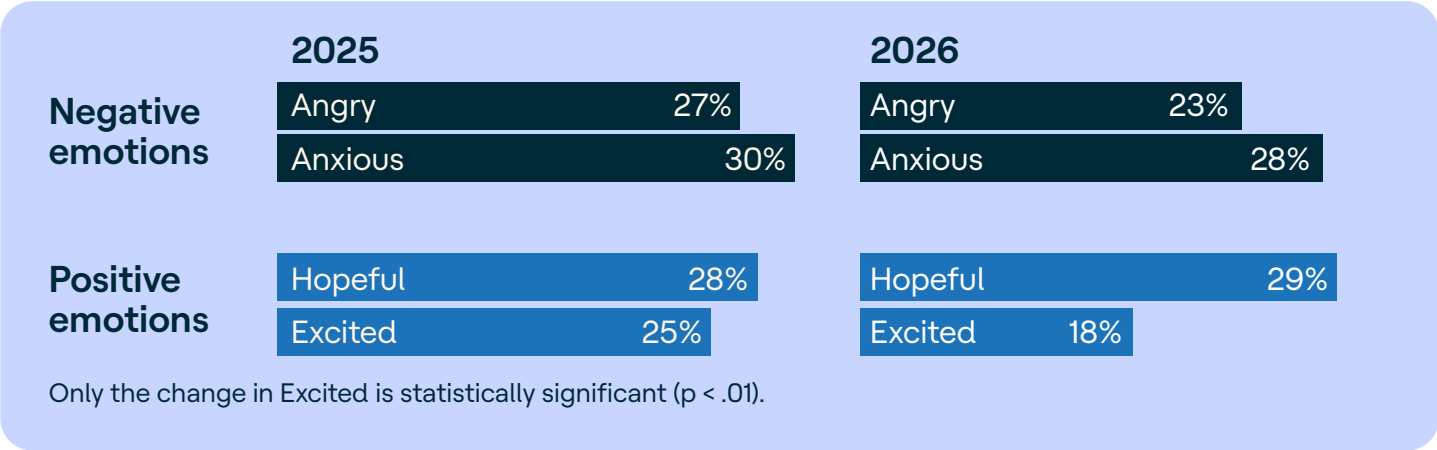
Understood®

Parents of kids who have an IEP or a 504 plan are more informed — and also more likely to think these changes will affect education quality.

- Among parents whose kids have an IEP or a 504 plan, 31% weren't aware of the changes at the Department of Education, compared to 74% of parents of children without IEPs or 504 plans.
- 58% of parents of children without IEPs or 504 plans believe the changes will affect education quality. But among parents of kids with IEPs or 504 plans, 87% believe this, and 54% of those parents expect the impact to be significant.

Feelings remain mixed, though fewer parents feel enthusiastic about the changes.

- Hopeful (29%) and anxious (28%) are still virtually tied as parents' top emotions, similar to a year ago. But fewer parents now say they feel excited about the changes (18%) than in March 2025 (25%).



Only the change in Excited is statistically significant ($p < .01$).

More than half of parents whose kids don't have an IEP or a 504 plan have no trusted source of information about the changes.

- 51% of these parents say they have no trusted source of information, compared with 31% of parents whose kids do have an IEP or a 504 plan. Parents who do have a trusted source most often turn to their child's school or school district.

Understood®

Implications

The findings point to a need for clearer, more accessible guidance as families navigate ongoing changes to special education. When parents expect changes to matter but lack a trusted source for understanding these changes, they may not know what actions to take or where to get support.

Schools and districts may be especially important messengers, but there is also an opportunity for organizations like Understood to translate complex policy changes into practical, trustworthy information families can use. Future research should examine whether better access to trusted information is associated with greater confidence and ability to advocate for children.

Connect with us

We're always looking to collaborate and partner with others on our research. Reach out to our team at knowledge@understood.org to learn more.

Methodology: Between July 27 and August 5, 2026, the Understood.org research team conducted an online survey using Qualtrics with a nationally representative panel of 495 U.S. parents of children ages 18 or younger. Among these respondents, 256 were parents of children who have an IEP or a 504 plan, and 239 were parents of children who do not. The sample overrepresents parents of children with IEPs or 504 plans relative to their share of the general U.S. parent population, so findings for the full sample should be considered within that context. For the full sample, the data are accurate to within ±4.4 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Comparisons to a year earlier reference a survey of 500 U.S. parents conducted between March 21 and March 28, 2025.