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Tom Emmer Called Closing the Education Department “Long Overdue.” Minnesota’s Deaf Children Depend on What Is Left of It.

Heather Grizzle · November 16, 2026

Rep. Tom Emmer's record on closing the Education Department, set beside what has happened to federal special education oversight and Minnesota's own deaf education record.

Waxyaabaha ku jira

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A mother in Big Lake sits at her kitchen table with her daughter's IEP. Her daughter is eight and deaf. The plan names a teacher of the deaf who comes twice a week from the regional cooperative, an educational interpreter, and an FM system the audiologist checks each fall. None of it was easy to get. When the district was slow to staff the interpreter last spring, she read up on her rights and learned that behind her district stands the Minnesota Department of Education, and behind the state stands a small federal office in Washington whose job is to make sure every state keeps the promises the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act makes to children like hers.

She is a composite. The structure she leans on is not. And her congressman, Tom Emmer, who has represented Minnesota's 6th District since 2015 and has just been chosen to stay in House Republican leadership as minority whip, has spent the last two years saying that the federal department at the top of that structure should be closed.

This piece sets his public record beside what has happened to federal special education oversight since January 2025, and beside what Minnesota's own records show about the deaf and hard of hearing students who live under that oversight. It uses his words and his votes, the federal government's own announcements, and the Minnesota file of the National Deaf Education Data Index. Where his side has made an argument, the argument is given in its own terms.

SI KOOBAN

- In March 2025 Rep. Tom Emmer called President Trump's order to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education a "win for America's children" and said closing the department was "long overdue."
- In May 2025 he led every Minnesota Republican in Congress in a letter asking House appropriators to fully defund the department in the fiscal 2026 budget.
- The department houses the Office of Special Education Programs, which monitors every state's compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In October 2025 its parent office lost 121 of 135 employees in a layoff later reversed by the deal that ended the shutdown.
- In June 2026 the department moved day-to-day management of special education to the Department of Health and Human Services through an interagency agreement.
- In January and February 2026 Emmer voted for the spending law that kept the department funded, including special education, and whose explanatory statement objected to moving programs out of it.
- Minnesota counted 2,623 deaf and hard of hearing students in December 2025. It does not publish where they are by district, and 352 of the 541 local education agencies and cooperatives in the state publish nothing about serving them.

What the congressman said

On March 20, 2025, the President signed an executive order directing the Secretary of Education to begin closing the department. Minnesota's reaction split along party lines. Emmer called the order a "win for America's children." Four days later, at a Bloomberg Government event, he went further. As Bloomberg reported it, he said the executive order was as far as the President could go under law, and that it was up to Congress to codify the changes and close the agency permanently. He described the closure as "long overdue."

Two months later he put the position in writing. On May 27, 2025, his office announced that he had led the entire Minnesota Republican congressional delegation,

Reps. Brad Finstad, Michelle Fischbach and Pete Stauber, in a letter to the leaders of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies. The letter asked them to fully defund the Department of Education in the fiscal 2026 appropriations bill. His statement gave the reason in one line: "By defunding the Department of Education, we are putting our students' education first." The release pointed to Minnesota Department of Education data showing a prolonged decline in student proficiency.

That is the argument as his side makes it, and it deserves to be stated plainly. In this view, the federal department adds cost and paperwork without teaching a child (South Dakota Sen. Mike Rounds has said it "has never educated a single student"), Minnesota's own results have slipped, and decisions about schools belong to states and families. The administration has added a second claim: that moving programs to other agencies changes who manages them, not what children are owed. "Students will not lose any rights, including their right to a free, appropriate public education," a senior department official told reporters in June 2026.

What the letter did not do was carve anything out. A request to fully defund the department is a request to defund every office in it, and one of those offices is the one that watches special education.

The office that watches special education

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is federal law, and the federal government spends about $15.5 billion a year on it, by one estimate about a tenth of what special education costs. The money is the smaller part of the federal role. The larger part is oversight. The Office of Special Education Programs, inside the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, distributes the money, monitors whether each state is complying with the law, collects the data, and issues the guidance that schools and parents rely on. Every year it reviews each state and issues a determination of whether the state meets the law's requirements. A state that keeps failing faces consequences. For a family in Big Lake, that office is the reason the state has to care whether her district follows the IEP.

Over the past two years that office has been cut, restored and moved.

1. March 2025: the department loses nearly half its staff to layoffs and buyouts. The special education office is mostly spared, though its staff still shrinks.

2. October 10, 2025: during the government shutdown, the department lays off about 460 people. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services loses 121 of its 135 employees, according to a department court filing reported by NPR.
3. October 2025: a federal judge halts the layoffs.
4. November 2025: the deal that ends the 43-day shutdown requires the administration to reinstate the workers fired in October, including the special education staff, and bars similar firings through January 30, 2026.
5. January and February 2026: Congress passes the fiscal 2026 education budget. Its explanatory statement condemns moving core programs out of the department but does not legally prohibit it.
6. June 16, 2026: the department signs an interagency agreement giving the Department of Health and Human Services day-to-day management of special education programs, including enforcement, compliance, monitoring and the annual state determinations. The Education Department keeps statutory responsibility, and the funding continues to flow through it until at least fiscal 2027.
7. July 30, 2026: the Senate education committee votes 13 to 9, with two Republicans joining Democrats, to advance a bill blocking that transfer.

The objections to the June move did not come only from one party. Former federal special education officials who served under Republican and Democratic administrations wrote to Congress that the law assigns these functions to the Department of Education by statute and that an interagency agreement cannot lawfully move them. They warned that "moving IDEA's implementation into a health agency risks substituting medical management for educational access." Advocates put it in fewer words: their children need to be educated, not medicalized.

None of this took a vote from Emmer to happen. The layoffs and the transfer were executive actions. But his stated goal, a department closed by Congress and defunded in the meantime, is the destination those actions point toward, and in the statements reviewed here he did not draw a line around special education oversight.

The vote that does not fit

The record has a complication, and it belongs in the story. On January 22, 2026, and again on February 3, 2026, Emmer voted yes on H.R. 7148, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026. The final version passed the House 217 to 214. That law funded the Department of Education for fiscal 2026, carried dedicated appropriations for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and came with an explanatory statement in which appropriators raised legal and practical objections to the interagency agreements.

So the congressman who asked appropriators in May 2025 to fully defund the department voted in February 2026 for a bill that funded it. There are ordinary explanations. A whip's job is to deliver his conference's votes on must-pass spending, and a shutdown had just ended. But the effect matters more than the motive: the money that reaches Minnesota's special education programs this year came through a law he voted for. Credit belongs where the vote went.

It is also true that the protection in that law was a statement, not a rule. The explanatory language discouraged the transfers. It did not stop them. Four months later the special education transfer was signed.

Medicaid, the other half of the system

Special education is not the only federal system deaf and disabled Minnesotans depend on. In 2025 Emmer, as majority whip, was responsible for gathering the votes to pass the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, the tax and spending law that included the largest reduction in mandatory spending in history, as his own statement described it. He voted for it in May 2025 and again in its final form on July 3, 2025, when it passed 218 to 214 with every Minnesota Republican voting yes and every Minnesota Democrat voting no.

The Congressional Budget Office estimated that the law could leave 11.8 million Americans without Medicaid coverage, including 150,000 to 250,000 Minnesotans. Emmer cast doubt on that estimate. He told WCCO that critics were saying the bill "could" cause cuts and that no one was saying it "will," and he predicted that within a year the bill would be immensely popular. Minnesota's Republican delegation wrote that the law strengthens Medicaid by protecting the most vulnerable while restoring

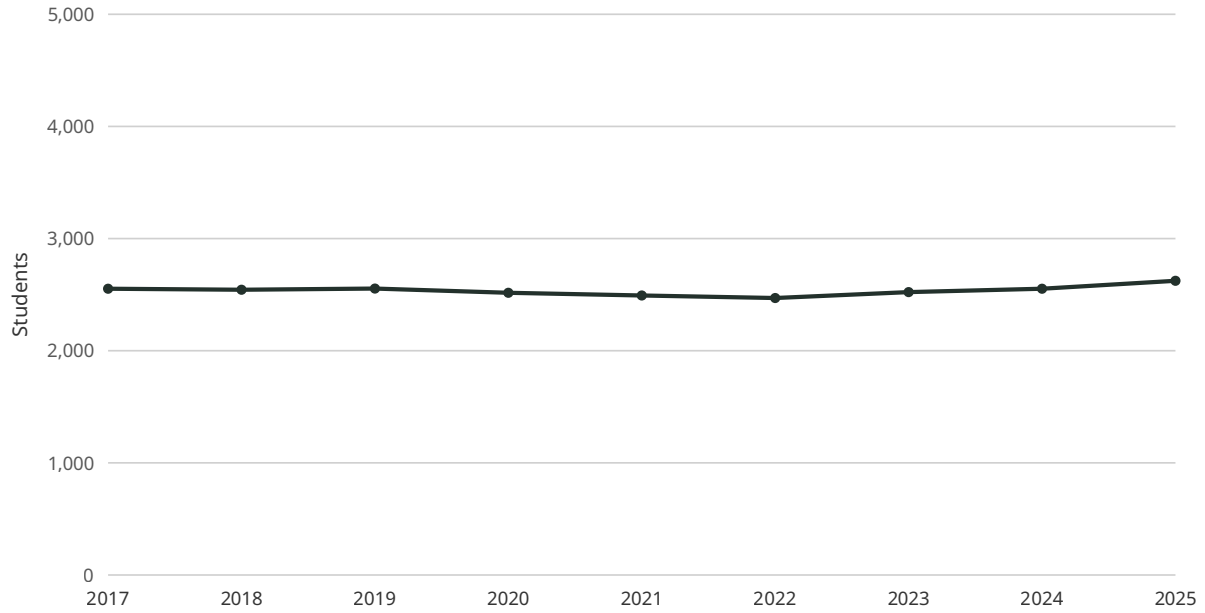
the program's integrity. Minnesota Democrats, among them Rep. Betty McCollum, said it would strip health care from people with disabilities, seniors and children.

That disagreement is about the future, and the future is when it will be settled. What is not in dispute is the vote, and who counted it.

What Minnesota's own record shows

The National Deaf Education Data Index read the public record of every local education agency and cooperative in Minnesota, 541 units in all, between September 24 and 28, 2026, along with the state's statutes, its child count, its aid formula and its licensing rules. The picture it gives is of a state that does a great deal for deaf children and publishes surprisingly little about where and how.

Minnesota counted 2,552 deaf and hard of hearing students on December 1, 2024, and 2,623 a year later. It counted 125 deafblind students in 2024 and 135 in 2025. The count has been steady for nearly a decade.



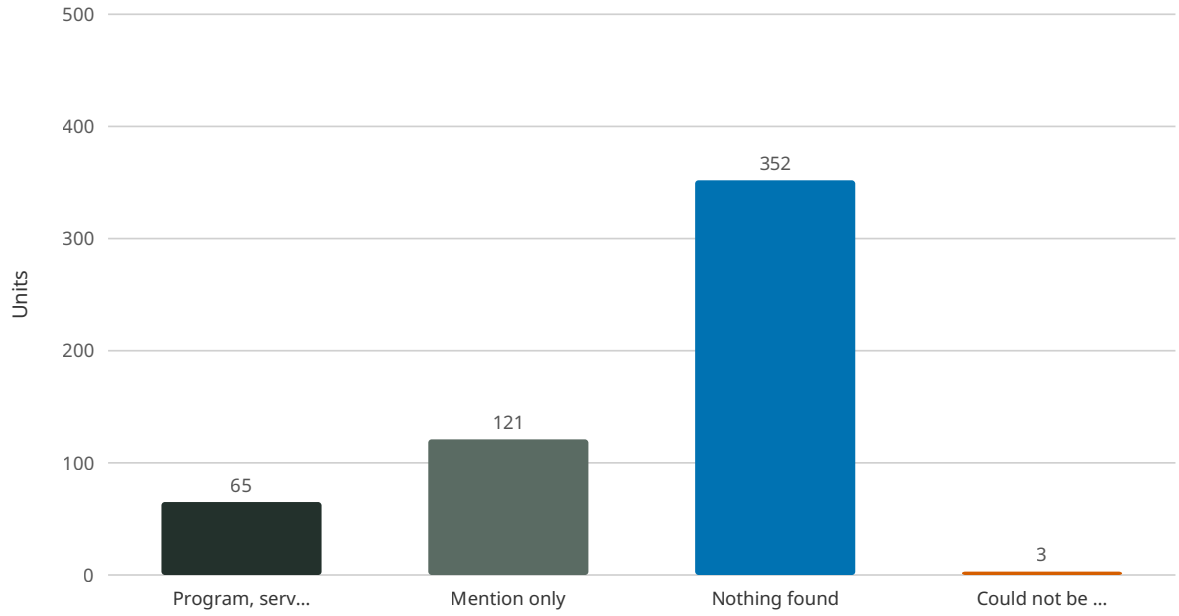
Minnesota deaf and hard of hearing child count, December 1

Fiiri xogta

X	Students
2017	2,553
2018	2,544
2019	2,554
2020	2,517
2021	2,492
2022	2,470
2023	2,523
2024	2,552
2025	2,623

Most of those students are taught in their own districts, with services that reach them through regional cooperatives rather than through the district itself. In central Minnesota that means bodies like the Rum River Special Education Cooperative and the Meeker and Wright cooperative, both of which publish their own deaf and hard of hearing services. The Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf in Faribault, open since 1863, serves a small share of the state's deaf students, and Metro Deaf School, a charter in St. Paul, enrolled 176 in the fall of 2025.

The publication record is thin. Of the 541 units, 65 publish a program, a service or a deaf and hard of hearing staff position, and 43 of those rest on a named position or service rather than a described program. Another 121 mention hearing only in a list. Three hundred fifty-two publish nothing on the subject at all.



What Minnesota's 541 local education agencies and cooperatives publish about deaf and hard of hearing students

Fiiri xogta

Qaybta	Unugyo
Program, service or staff position	65
Mention only	121
Nothing found	352
Could not be read or not operating	3

That finding measures what a family can find, not what a district does. A district that publishes nothing may still serve its deaf students well, and in Minnesota much of the service runs through cooperatives a family would not know to look up. But the state cannot close the gap from its side either. It publishes its deaf and hard of hearing count statewide and by region, never by district, so no one outside the department can say which districts enroll deaf students and whether those districts say anything about

serving them. Minnesota's own Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing has asked for "Child counts for all categorical disabilities" in its 2026 policy agenda.

The workforce is thin at the source. The state's biennial report counts 231 teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing in service. Minnesota's licensing board says the state has "only one or two programs" that prepare them.

Put those pieces together and the role of federal oversight becomes concrete. When a district publishes nothing and the state does not count children by district, the annual federal review of the state is one of the few checks that looks at the whole system from outside it. That review is the work the Office of Special Education Programs did, and it is the work now being managed from a health agency.

The minority whip and the next Congress

The November 3, 2026 election changed the arithmetic. Democrats won control of both the House and the Senate. On November 10, House Republicans chose Jim Jordan of Ohio as their leader and kept Emmer as whip, 103 votes to 76 over Texas Rep. August Pfluger. When the new Congress meets in January, Emmer will no longer be counting votes for a majority. He will be counting them against one.

The committees that will decide what happens to special education oversight change hands as well. Democrats will chair the House education committee, where Reps. Bobby Scott, Jahana Hayes and Suzanne Bonamici are competing for the gavel, and Rep. Rosa DeLauro is expected to chair Appropriations. Advocates have pointed out that the fiscal 2026 objection to the transfers was non-binding. A Democratic majority could write a binding one.

For a minority whip, the most important votes are the ones he decides to whip against. Whether he treats a bill restoring special education oversight to the Education Department as a vote to fight, or one to let his members cast as they choose, is one of the first tests of what his position on the department means in practice.

Questions Rep. Emmer is positioned to answer

1. Does he still believe Congress should close the Department of Education, and if so, where should the Office of Special Education Programs and its monitoring of the states go?
2. Does he support managing special education from the Department of Health and Human Services, and was he consulted before the June 2026 agreement?
3. His May 2025 letter asked appropriators to fully defund the department. Did he intend that to include special education oversight and the federal share of special education funding?
4. He voted for the fiscal 2026 law that funded the department and objected to the transfers. What changed between May 2025 and February 2026?
5. Will he whip against a bill in the new Congress that blocks the special education transfer?
6. How many deaf and hard of hearing students live in the 6th District, and has his office asked the Minnesota Department of Education to publish that count?

Go back to the mother in Big Lake. The things that make her daughter's school day work, the teacher who comes from the cooperative, the interpreter, the audiologist's check each fall, are local. The promise that makes them non-negotiable is federal, and so is the office that checks whether Minnesota keeps it. Her congressman has said what he thinks of the department that holds that office. He has also voted to fund it. She is entitled to know which of those he means, and so is every family in the 6th District with a child on an IEP.

Every statement and vote in this piece is drawn from the public record and linked in the references. If anything here is wrong, send the source and it will be corrected in the open.

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TIPS

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