

A Brief History of the U.S. Department of Education

The Federal Government has been involved in public education since 1787, when the Northwest Ordinance gave land so that education institutions could be created. As the nation grew, so did the amount of money given to fund education.

The first “Department of Education” was created by Congress in 1867 as a response to the push by the National Teachers Association, which later became the National Education Association. It had four employees and was not a cabinet level agency.

States remained largely responsible for educating the children within their boundaries. However, by 1965 the Office of education had grown to 2,113 employees and had a budget of \$1.5 billion.

Funding for K-12, higher education and vocational education continued to massively expand and then in 1979, in a very narrow vote, Congress created the official Department of Education. It grew to 6,400 employees and was a direct result of a campaign promise former President Jimmy Carter made to the two major teachers unions in order to get their support against the Republican Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Part of Reagan’s platform was to eliminate “President Carter’s new bureaucratic boondoggle,” but he was unable. Republicans instead took a different tact – to push for accountability through goals, testing and standards over the next 40 plus years.

The question remains: should Republicans push for reform, or the abolition of the US Department of Education? There is no evidence in the Constitution that the federal government has any role to play in educating young Americans. To the contrary, the 10th Amendment makes it clear that roles not designated in the Constitution belong to the states.

Meanwhile, the US Department of Education’s 4,400 employees are spending \$68 billion and what does America get for that “investment”? We get a Biden Education Secretary, Miguel Cardona, who solicits a letter from the National School Boards Association comparing protesting parents to domestic terrorists. We also receive an embarrassing ranking internationally on the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA. The US is not even in the top 10. That’s what American taxpayers get for their investment.

Perhaps it’s time to revive the idea of eliminating the US DOE.

TOP 10 SCORES - Mean scores in PISA 2018

READING		MATHEMATICS		SCIENCE	
China*	555	China*	591	China*	590
Singapore	549	Singapore	569	Singapore	551
Macau	525	Macau	558	Macau	544
Hong Kong	524	Hong Kong	551	Estonia	530
Estonia	523	Taiwan	531	Japan	529
Canada	520	Japan	527	Finland	522
Finland	520	South Korea	526	South Korea	519
Ireland	518	Estonia	523	Canada	518
South Korea	514	Netherlands	519	Hong Kong	517
Poland	512	Poland	516	Taiwan	516
OECD average	487	OECD average	489	OECD average	489

NOTE: *China is represented by four provinces: Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang.

For a complete timeline beginning in 1787 of federal involvement in education, visit Downsizing the Federal Government at:

https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/education/timelinegrowth#_edn1

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/what.html>