

This Day in History... October 17, 1979

Carter Establishes Department of Education

On October 17, 1979, US President Jimmy Carter signed legislation establishing the US Department of Education.

The history of the department dates back to over 100 years earlier, when Congressman Justin Morrill introduced a bill for the creation of public land grants for state colleges. His bill went largely ignored for several years, until President Lincoln's administration took it under consideration. Though first they wanted to collect information on the schools already in existence and already being built.

Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, then created the Department of Education on March 2, 1867, largely at the urging of Zalmon Richard. However, the department only retained its independent status for two years before it was changed to the United States Office of Education within the Department of the Interior. Over the next century it would be transferred to the Federal Security Agency and later the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.



Stamp issued for the 100th anniversary of the first land grant colleges in the US, proposed by Justin Morrill.

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter proposed reinstating a cabinet-level Department of Education in order to "establish policy for, administer, and coordinate most federal assistance to education, collect data on US schools, and to enforce federal educational laws regarding privacy and civil rights." Carter signed the Department of Education Organization Act into law on October 17, 1979, with operations officially beginning on May 4, 1980.

The department started out with 3,000 workers and a budget of \$12 billion before Congress increased that to 17,000 employees and \$14.2 billion. The Department of Education was made responsible for creating policies, monitoring federal funding of education, studying schools, and ensuring equal education for students – it does not decide what students are taught, that is left to individual states and local offices.

In the 1980 presidential election, Ronald Reagan promised to eliminate the department, as he and his party saw it as unconstitutional and too expensive. After winning the election, Reagan cut funding, but was never able to fully dismantle the department.

In the 1990s, efforts were made to improve conditions in schools and focus students more on learning. Parents, teachers, school officials, and community members all worked together to produce well-rounded students. For example, many students were required to complete volunteer service to be eligible for graduation. Also, efforts were made to expose children to a wide variety of subjects by balancing their course loads. Outside sources, such as private businesses, helped schools obtain equipment like televisions and video cassette recorders.



This stamp was issued to honor the creation of the Department of Education in 1980.



Celebrate the Century stamp honoring educational improvements in the 90s

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