



## 'Those Who Don't Learn From Their History ...'

*By guestblogger Alexandra Usher*

There has been a lot of debate lately about the federal government's proper role in education, with some pundits and politicians casually throwing around the suggestion that "the feds get out of education", and others calling for the total elimination of the Department of Education. These are popular taglines because they appeal to our idealized notion that each community, knowing what's best for its kids and families, should support and control its own local school.

But this completely ignores an important detail: the federal government has, since its inception, played a vital role in education.

Before the federal government in its current incarnation even existed, back in the time of the Continental Congress, two laws were passed which set in motion the creation of a national system of public schools. The Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 together established that new states (30 in total) had to, as a condition of becoming a state, set aside a certain amount of land for the support of public schools. After the Constitution was signed, the new federal government continued with this policy by writing it into the laws that allowed each territory to form a new state (called Enabling Acts). Each Enabling Act laid out, with increasing specificity, how a state could manage its lands and to which public institutions the proceeds (from sale or rental of the land or its resources) could go.

So, have local schools always been supported by their surrounding communities? No. The federal government provided the initial support and inspiration for a public school system - without which our system as we know it today might not exist at all. Have schools always been entirely controlled by their local communities? Again, no. By signing their Enabling Acts, each state agreed to a set of federal regulations and in return was granted funds, in the form of land, to support its public schools. To those of us who are familiar with current government programs, this carrot-and-stick approach sounds strikingly similar to Title I, Race to the Top, and other modern government programs.

Whether or not the federal government should play a role in education is a separate issue. (Although I would argue that it should. For examples of the myriad of benefits that have resulted from federal involvement, see [CEP's](#) recently released paper.) But to argue that the Department of Education should be completely eliminated or that the government needs to "step back" so that we can return to some mythical time when the feds didn't bother worrying about public schools is a falsification of our nation's history.