

JOHNSON'S LEGACY TODAY: DO WE LIVE IN A GREAT SOCIETY?

Seattle Repertory Theatre's productions of Robert Schenkkan's "All the Way" and "The Great Society" shed light on Lyndon B. Johnson's tumultuous U.S. presidency. In this 10-week series, we'll explore the legacy of Johnson's noteworthy legislative acts and how decisions made 50 years ago continue to resonate in modern America. Today's topic: The War on Poverty's higher elementary and secondary education acts.

ELEMENTARY AND EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Education was a top priority for Johnson and an integral part of his dreams for a Great Society. As he stated, "A third place to build the Great Society is in the classrooms of America. There your children's lives will be shaped. Our society will not be great until every young mind is set free to scan the farthest reaches of thought and imagination. We are still far from that goal."

May 22, 1964: Remarks at the University of Michigan "Great Society Speech"

Head Start

Head Start was established to help children from birth to five years old overcome setbacks from, and break the cycle of, poverty. To develop the program, Johnson enlisted the help of experts Dr. Robert Cooke, a pediatrician at Johns Hopkins University, and Dr. Edward Zigler, a professor of psychology and director of the Child Study Center at Yale University. The experts determined that in order for preschool age students to make strides in development and education, their health, psychological, emotional and social needs must be met.

Head Start began in 1965 as an eight-week summer program for preschool children from low income families who would begin public school in the fall. It incorporated preschool learning, medical, dental and mental health services. Then and today, Head Start places a high importance on incorporating families into the program. Parents are encouraged to build relationships with the staff, participate in trainings and volunteer with the program. Some parents comment that the program has been a valuable part of their children's upbringing and development. Programs are offered in schools, centers and, at times, in the families' homes. Today, Head Start operates full-day year-round services for children in rural and urban areas in all 50 states

Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Johnson created the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 to create equal opportunities for educationally deprived children. Federal funds were granted to individual states to make independent choices for curriculum, achievement standards and professional development. Since this initiative to close the skills gap in mathematics, reading and writing was implemented, many studies have been done which show the inverse relationship between academic achievement and poverty. Revolutionary at the time, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act continues to be considered by many as the most impactful, extensive education program in closing the achievement gap. In 2002, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was modified and renamed the No Child Left Behind Act.

Bilingual Education Act

In 1968 the first legislation to address the needs of students with limited English-speaking ability was passed with the Bilingual Education Act. Initially targeted towards Spanish-speaking students, the Bilingual Education Act directed funds to educational programs, teacher

training, development of materials and parent involvement projects. Not only did the Bilingual Education Act equip non-native speakers with necessary skills, it represented an important shift in the country's cultural perspective on diversity. As the Vietnam War unfolded, some Americans were still suspect of foreign cultures. At the same time, the battle for civil rights raged strong in cities across the country. By mandating the education of non-native speakers in English and their native language, Johnson's program sought to make cultural acceptance and understanding a priority in a way that it hadn't been in previous decades.



CURRENT CONNECTION

- What do you know about the No Child Left Behind Act?
- What is your opinion of it now that you have learned about Johnson's original program, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act?
- Why is elementary and early childhood learning important?
- What do you think about the city of Seattle's recent passing of Legislation 1B which funds subsidized city-wide preschools? Why is it important to fund early education?
- Why is bilingual education valuable?
- Should non-native speaking children be taught only in English to help them assimilate better into American society?