

History of education in the United States

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(Redirected from History of Education in the United States)

The **history of education in the United States**, often called **foundations of education**, is the study of educational policy, formal institutions and informal learning from the 17th to the 21st century.

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History

The first American schools opened during the colonial era. As the colonies began to develop, many in New England began to institute mandatory education schemes. In 1642 the Massachusetts Bay Colony made "proper" education compulsory.^[1] Similar statutes were adopted in other colonies in the 1640s and 1650s. Virtually all of the schools opened as a result were private. The nation's first institution of higher learning, Harvard University, was founded in 1636 and opened in 1638.

Religious denominations established most early universities in order to train ministers. In New England there was an emphasis on literacy so that people could read the Bible. Most of the universities which opened between 1640 and 1750 form the contemporary Ivy League, including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, Brown, the University of Pennsylvania, and several others.^[2] After the American Revolution, the new national government passed the Land Ordinance of 1785, which set aside a portion of every township in the unincorporated territories of the United States for use in education. The provisions of the law remained unchanged until the Homestead Act of 1862. After the Revolution, an emphasis was put on education, especially in the northern states, which made the US have one of the highest literacy rates at the time.

The school system remained largely private and unorganized until the 1840s. In fact, the first national census conducted in 1840 indicated that near-universal (about 97%) literacy among the white population had been achieved.^[3] The same data tables demonstrate that of the 1.8 millions girls between five and fifteen (and 1.88 million boys of the same age) about 55% attended the primary schools and academies.^[4] The data tables do not note the actual attendance rates, but only reflect the static numbers at the time of the U.S. census.

Data from the indentured servant contracts of German immigrant children in Pennsylvania from 1771-1817 showed that the number of children receiving education increased from 33.3% in 1771-1773 to 69% in 1787-1804. Additionally, the same data showed that the ratio of school education versus home education rose from .25 in 1771-1773 to 1.68 in 1787-1804.^[5] The increase in the number of children being educated, and the fact that more students were being educated in school rather than at home, could help explain how near-universal literacy was achieved by 1840.

Teaching young students was not perceived as an end goal for educated people. Adults became teachers without any particular skill except



Colonial schoolhouse in Hollis, New Hampshire

sometimes in the topic they were teaching. The checking of credentials was left to the local school board who were mainly interested in the efficient use of limited taxes. This started to change in with the introduction of two year normal schools in the early 1800s. By the end of the century, most teachers of elementary schools were trained in this fashion.

Education reformers such as Horace Mann of Massachusetts began calling for public education systems for all. Upon becoming the secretary of education in Massachusetts in 1837, Mann helped to create a statewide system, based on the Prussian model^[6], of "common schools," which referred to the belief that everyone was entitled to the same content in education. These early efforts focused primarily on elementary education. The common-school movement began to catch on in the North. Connecticut adopted a similar system in 1849, and Massachusetts passed a compulsory attendance law in 1852.

It was not until after the Civil War and under Reconstruction governments, that the coalition of black and white Republicans in state legislatures established universal public education in the South. This was one of the major achievements of Reconstruction governments.^[7] By 1870, every state provided free elementary education. Although in some states, education was first established as integrated, after white Democrats regained political power in the 1870s, they imposed segregation on all schools, and later on all public facilities. The South was struggling after the war, but as they had before the war, the wealthiest classes resisted taxes that would provide sufficient funding for education.

Heavily Protestant in the 19th century, most states passed a constitutional amendment, called "Blaine Amendments, forbidding tax money be used to fund parochial schools, a possible outcome with heavy immigration from Catholic Ireland after the 1840s. In 2002, the United States Supreme Court partially vitiated these amendments, in theory, when they ruled that vouchers were constitutional if tax dollars followed a child to a school, even if it were religious. However, no state school system had, by 2009, changed its laws to allow this.^[8]

More significantly, through laws and new constitutions, white legislatures systematically disfranchised most African Americans and tens of thousands of poor whites in each Southern state from 1890-1908. The disfranchisement lasted for decades; in most states, it lasted with little relief until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had gained passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.^[9] As one result, white-dominated legislatures consistently underfunded schools for African Americans. Most rural schools ran shortened schedules because children were needed in farming. It was chiefly due to the African American community's own tremendous efforts with the help of some Northern financial support in establishing schools and colleges, that 30,000 African American teachers were trained and by 1900, a majority of blacks in the South were literate.^[10]

By 1900, 31 states required children to attend school from the ages of 8- to 14-years-old. As a result, by 1910 72 percent of American children attended school. Half the nation's children attended one-room schools. In 1918, every state required students to at least complete elementary school. Lessons consisted of students reading aloud from their texts such as the *McGuffey Readers*, and placed emphasis on rote memorization. Teachers often used physical punishment, such as hitting students on the knuckles with birch switches, for incorrect answers.

Because the public schools focused on assimilation, immigrants who were not Protestant organized to develop their own schools. This was also an effort to create a social environment more supportive than the often hostile natives who resented immigration by Catholics. In addition, Catholic communities raised money to build colleges and seminaries to train teachers and religious to head their churches.^[11] The most numerous early Catholics were Irish immigrants in the early to mid-19th century, followed by Germans, Italians and other Catholics from southern and eastern Europe. By the time the later groups immigrated, Irish immigrants and their descendants had often built an extensive network of churches and schools in many cities. The Irish dominated the American Catholic Church for generations. Though the private schools met some opposition, in 1925 the Supreme Court ruled in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* that students could attend private schools to comply with compulsory education laws.

To put the historical progress of education in the United States into perspective, American towns began providing high schools in 1910. By 1940, 50% of young adults had earned a high school diploma.

The "High School Movement"

At the dawn of the 20th century, for the first time in history, leaders believed that the post-literacy schooling of the masses at the secondary and higher levels, would greatly enhance economic production. This "high school movement" in America radically changed the education of its youth and set the United States apart from other nations for much of the twentieth century.

In 1900 the American high school underwent a series of fundamental changes. It became less classical and more practical, although still primarily academic. Its diploma was a terminal degree for youths whose first jobs would be in a host of white-collar positions and certain blue-collar ones as well. Economist Claudia Goldin believed the incredible growth of secondary schooling occurred in United States was accompanied by a set of "virtues". These virtues included public funding, openness, gender neutrality, local (and also state) control, separation of church and state, and an academic curriculum. Relative to other nations in Europe, the United States took on this movement as a result of these virtues, whereas others lagged. Europe had more exclusivity to their education system and focused on apprentice-type schools. The openness and gender neutrality, according to Goldin, allowed for the United States to have higher rates of enrollment than in nations of Europe.^[12]