CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY CEP

Graduate School of Education & Human Development
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

History and Evolution of Public Education in the US

Throughout the history of public education in the US, public schools have filled multiple roles. These roles are an outgrowth of why public schools came into being and how they have evolved. This publication briefly reviews that history. For a look at how these historical purposes shape education today, see CEP's 2020 publication, *For the Common Good: Recommitting to Public Education in a Time of Crisis*, available at www.cep-dc.org.

Before Public Schools

In the early years of the nation, schooling was haphazard. Many children were excluded on the basis of income, race or ethnicity, gender, geographic location, and other reasons.

The children who did receive instruction, primarily white children, were educated through a hodgepodge of arrangements:

- Church-supported schools
- Local schools organized by towns or groups of parents
- Tuition schools set up by traveling schoolmasters
- Charity schools for poor children run by churches or benevolent societies
- Boarding schools for children of the well-to-do
- "Dame schools" run by women in their homes
- Private tutoring or home schooling
- Work apprenticeships with some rudimentary instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic

Early schools were financed from various sources and often charged tuition.

Without a formal system for funding education, local schools were dependent on parents' tuition payments, charitable contributions, property taxes, fuel contributions, and in some cases state support. At the time of the American Revolution, some cities and towns in the Northeast had free local schools paid for by all town residents, but this was not the norm. (A few Northeastern cities also had free schools for African American children.)

Children in the South were educated mostly in tuition-charging or parent-organized schools. Some rural areas had no schools. The schools that did exist outside of cities were often hard to get to, skimpily equipped, and overcrowded. Teachers were poorly paid, transient, and inexperienced, and some were undereducated themselves. In no state was education compulsory or fully supported by taxes.

Democracy and the Origins of Public Schools

Preparing people for democratic citizenship was a major reason for the creation of public schools.

The Founding Fathers maintained that the success of the fragile American democracy would depend on the competency of its citizens. They believed strongly that preserving democracy would require an educated population that could understand political and social issues and would participate in civic life, vote wisely, protect their rights and freedoms, and resist tyrants and demagogues. Character and virtue were also considered essential to good citizenship, and education was seen as a means to provide moral instruction and build character. While voters were limited to white males, many leaders of the early nation also supported educating girls on the grounds that mothers were responsible for educating their own children, were partners on family farms, and set a tone for the virtues of the nation.

The nations' founders recognized that educating people for citizenship would be difficult to accomplish without a more systematic approach to schooling. Soon after the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and other early leaders proposed the creation of a more formal and unified system of publicly funded schools. While some Northeastern communities had already established publicly funded or free schools by the late 1780s, the concept of free public education did not begin to take hold on a wider scale until the 1830s.

The new federal government provided encouragement and support for establishing public schools.

Although the main responsibility for schooling rested with states and localities, federal ordinances passed in 1785 and 1787 gave substantial acreage of federal lands in trust to new states entering the union, as long as the states agreed to set aside a portion of these lands for the support of public schools.[1] These federal "land grants" not only supported the creation and maintenance of schools in each of the townships carved out of former territories, but also helped to build stable communities across the country, each with a local government and education system. The land grants show the value placed on education as positive element of nation-building by the first federal leaders.

[1] At the time of these Ordinances, most of the territory west of the Mississippi was federally owned.

The Establishment of "Common Schools"

The "common school" movement encouraged the creation of public schools for multiple purposes.

In the 1830s, Horace Mann, a Massachusetts legislator and secretary of that state's board of education, began to advocate for the creation of public schools that would be universally available to all children, free of charge, and funded by the state. Mann and other proponents of "common schools" emphasized that a public investment in education would benefit the whole nation by transforming children into literate, moral, and productive citizens.

Common school advocates emphasized the knowledge, civic, and economic benefits of public schooling. Common schools would teach the "three R's" (reading, writing, arithmetic), along with other subjects such as history, geography, grammar, and rhetoric. A strong dose of moral instruction would also be provided to instill civic virtues. Educating children of the poor and middle classes would prepare them to obtain good jobs, proponents argued, and thereby strengthen the nation's economic position. In addition to preparing students for citizenship and work, education was seen by some reformers as a means for people to achieve happiness and fulfillment.

Common schools were also proposed as a way to promote cohesion across social classes and improve social outcomes.

Reformers argued that common schools would not truly serve as a unifying force if private schools drew off substantial numbers of students, resources, and parental support from the most advantaged groups. In order to succeed, a system of common schooling would have to enroll sufficient numbers of children from all social classes, including the most affluent and well-educated families. This idea met with resistance from many Americans who did not want to pay to educate other people's children. And some passionate advocates of common schools did not interpret a "universal" system of public education as being equally available to children of all races and ethnicities.

Advocates saw universal education as a means to eliminate poverty, crime, and other social problems. Some early leaders argued that the costs of properly educating children in public schools would be far less than the expenses of punishing and jailing criminals and coping with problems stemming from poverty.

The Spread of Public Education

The path toward providing universal access to free education was gradual and uneven.

Throughout the 19th century, public schools took hold at a faster pace in some communities than in others. Public schools were more common in cities than in rural areas, and in the Northeast than in other parts of the country. As explained below, it also took longer for children of color, girls, and children with special needs to gain access to free public education.

Gradually, more states accepted responsibility for providing universal public education and embedded this principle in their state constitutions. Not until the latter part of the 19th century, however, did public elementary schools become available to all children in nearly all parts of the country. In 1830, about 55% of children aged 5 to 14 were enrolled in public schools; by 1870, this figure had risen to about 78%.[2]

High school attendance did not become commonplace until the 20th century. In 1910, just 14% of Americans aged 25 and older had completed high school. As recently as 1970, the high school completion rate was only 55%. In 2017, 90% of Americans aged 25 and older had a high school degree.[3]

The process of establishing local public schools was itself an exercise in community building.

The actions of local people coming together "to run their schools, to build schoolhouses, to hire teachers, and to collect taxes" helped forge a sense of community and made people invested in their schools.[4] Once established, public schools often became community centers where people of all ages came together for meetings, exhibitions, entertainment, and other social activities. In some small and rural communities, schools were the only public building suitable for these purposes.

Diversity and Immigration

Early public school advocates maintained that educating children from different economic, religious, and European ethnic backgrounds in the same schools would help them learn to get along.

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[2] Johann N. Neem, *Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), p. 177.

[3] https://census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2017/educational-attainment-2017.html.

[4] Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 185.

The rationale was that when children from diverse backgrounds interacted in the same classrooms, they would find common ground, learn to respect each other, and learn skills of getting along. Some reformers further envisioned that educating children together would help forge a common American culture. This ideal was compromised, however, by segregated school systems and other exclusionary practices that persisted into the 20th century.

Children of color were discriminated against in access to public education.

In the early years of the nation, non-white groups were often excluded from school. When these groups did gain access to public schooling, they were often underserved or educated in separate schools, by law or by custom. Almost all of the Southern states enacted laws that prohibited teaching African Americans to read. After the Civil War, Southern states restructured their state constitutions as a condition for reentry to the Union. These new constitutions established free education as a basic right for both races and created structures for governing and financing public education. But the political power to implement this vision was fleeting; beginning in the 1870s, white supremacists took control of Southern state governments and passed "Jim Crow" laws that enforced segregation in public schooling and other major aspects of life. In some states and communities, Latinx students or Chinese American students were forced to attend segregated schools. And many American Indian children were sent to federally run day or boarding schools, where the goal was often to assimilate the students into white culture and discourage their Native culture.

Access was unequal for other groups.

Schools were slower to provide full access to girls than for boys. When public schools did open up to girls, they were sometimes taught a different curriculum from boys and had fewer opportunities for secondary or higher education. Children with disabilities were often kept at home or put in institutions where they received little or no education.

Increased immigration placed new demands on public schools.

As waves of immigrants arrived in the US in the 19th and early 20th centuries, public schools were the main institution charged with teaching immigrant children the English language and assimilating them into American culture and values.[5] However, this process involved tradeoffs for immigrant families, who were expected to surrender their heritage and language and even "Americanize" their names. There were also ample instances of bias against new immigrants and discrimination by the majority Protestant population against Catholics and other non-Protestant religions. (This led the Catholic church to create a system of private parochial schools that grew in enrollments through the mid-1960s.)

[5] http://www.civiced.org/pdfs/PrinzingDan.pdf

Equity and Opportunity

Promoting equity for all became a preeminent mission of public schools in the mid-20th century.

It took many decades and the force of civil rights legislation and court decisions before universal access to public education matured into the full pursuit of equal educational opportunity for all racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, as well as for girls and children with disabilities. When *Brown v. Board of Education* declared state-sponsored segregation of public schools to be unconstitutional, public schools were placed in the vanguard of ensuring equity, at times amid enormous backlash.

The federal government played an influential role in promoting educational equity.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the Individuals with Disabilities Act, and subsequent federal legislation were instrumental in ensuring educational opportunity for children from low-income and minority families, children with limited English proficiency, children with disabilities, girls, and other groups.

After World War II, public schools gradually began to address other social needs, particularly for poor children.

Encouraged by federal and state programs, schools began providing school lunch and breakfast to children from low-income families, and many districts employed school nurses. In the later decades of the 20th century, public schools offered other types of social services, such as before- and after-school care, counseling, substance abuse prevention, and safety and violence prevention. Some public schools became community hubs where children and their families could access a range of services.

A Decentralized System

Authority for public education in the US is divided among the local, state, and federal levels.

As a result of this history and our approach to governance, the education system in the US is more decentralized than in many other countries. Because the Constitution does not mention education governance in particular, states have primary authority over education. States make key decisions about the number of school days, academic content standards, testing, graduation, teacher certification, and much more, while passing on some authority to local districts and school boards. As noted above, the federal government plays an influential but limited role.

Consequently, authority for education in the US is spread across many different entities: [6]

- 50 state systems plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and outlying territories
- 13,598 regular public school districts
- 98,158 public schools

About 47% of public school revenues come from the state level, 45% from the local level, and a little more than 8% from the federal level.[7] This multilayered approach to governance complicates efforts to achieve common nationwide missions.

An Incomplete Agenda

The goal for public education in the 21st century has shifted from providing access to ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education.

Many schools are struggling to meet this goal of ensuring a high-quality education for all, and their efforts are complicated by challenges and changes unknown to earlier generations. The reasons why public schools came into being—preparing people for jobs and citizenship, unifying a diverse population, and promoting equity, among others—remain relevant, even urgent. Public schools reflect our values and influence our future. There are problems with public schools, to be sure. Addressing these problems will require different strategies than in the past and a national will to improve public education.

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[6] National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2017,* table 214.10.

[7] National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2019,* table 235.10.

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Credits

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