



The History of U.S. Education

An Infinite Campus White Paper



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We Hold These Truths to be Self Evident...

During the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, new currents of thought began circulating among the intelligentsia of Europe and the American colonies known as enlightenment. This thought movement brought about momentous change in nearly every aspect of Western society, especially in American education. The concept of enlightenment implied freedom from the past. It offered hope, welcomed change and questioned entrenched authority and it proved to be more profound and a more enduring ideological influence in America than in Europe. (Urban, Wagoner, 2000)

In 1776, 56 men pledged their lives, fortunes and honor in support of a set of ideals and expressed their belief in the power of enlightenment through the memorable words of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. (Jefferson, 1776)

Even though the American Revolution was initially a “minority movement,” leaders of the rebellion began immediately to plan for the new nation - or rather the confederation of thirteen independent nations. In 1781, the Articles of Confederation which were ratified by each state, reserved for each state “its sovereignty, freedom and independence,” and established a government in which American citizens were of their own states first and of the United States second.

Thomas Jefferson in a letter to a friend wrote, “It is an axiom in my mind that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves and that too of the people with a certain degree of instruction. That is the business of the state, in effect, and on a general plan.” Jefferson, and some of his cofounders, knew that a great nation could not be built on ignorance, apathy and distrust. With his lead, education would become an essential consideration in the minds of the founding fathers of the new nation.

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With Thomas Jefferson’s lead, education would become an essential consideration in the minds of the founding fathers of the new nation.

As early as 1779, Jefferson proposed that the new country be divided into wards where local citizens would provide an elementary school to which all the free children, male or female, would be admitted without charge. Schooling at this level would equip students with basic literacy and computational skills needed to manage their affairs. Jefferson claimed that by educating people, they would be improving the citizens' moral and civic virtues enabling them to know and exercise their rights and duties.

For the majority of students, public schooling ended after three years. Children whose families could afford to pay for additional years could remain in school for as long as the parents thought it was proper.

Jefferson's plan also called for 20 secondary schools to be located in convenient locations throughout the nation. These secondary schools would receive public subsidies with one caveat: the school had to accept, without charge, the most promising boy from each of the lower schools scattered throughout every county. Then the best of these students would be provided the opportunity to study on scholarship at the College of William and Mary. Jefferson died on July 4, 1826 and did not see his plan of educational opportunity come to fruition.

U.S. Education Timeline

1600-1700s	European Enlightenment Declaration of Independence Articles of Confederation
1779	Jefferson U.S. Education Proposal
1824	Common Schools Established
Late 1800s	Age Grading Established
Early 1900s	Comprehensive High Schools
1920s	Detroit's Modern Classroom Schedule Brown v. Board of Education Elementary & Secondary Education Act Passed
1980	U.S. Department of Education Established
1983	A Nation at Risk Released
1990	Federal-State Education Summit - America 2000
1992	Goals 2000 program
2001	No Child Left Behind Act
2005	Connecticut NCLB law suit

Common Schools to High Schools

Common Schools

Grand theories of educational systems were proposed, but the actual work of establishing schools of various sorts was undertaken largely at the local level by small groups of individuals. Rather than substantial government subsidies, schools received erratic support from occasional government offerings of land or money. And then Andrew Jackson, the supporter of the common man, was elected president in 1824.

Under Jackson, “common schools” were established as free, not based on fees. Jackson and his supporters believed schools should be open to all, not just the elite few, a concept which did not become a reality until later in the century following the Civil War. Jackson also believed schools should foster morality and ethics, avoid sectarian entanglements, and prepare teachers to deal with different walks of life. (Schlesinger, 1945)

The One Best System

Many historians refer to the late 19th and early 20th century as the period of modernization in our nation’s development. Key ingredients in the modernization process included the nationalizing trend taking place in American society following the Civil War, the development of majority politics, increasing urbanization, greater economic wealth to the builders of a new infrastructure and a huge wave of immigration.

Urban schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were characterized as the creation of “one best system” to serve every situation. (Tyack, 1974) The earliest schools attempted to create a system of urban education that would distinguish them from their common school predecessors.

First, urban schools were organized on a new principle - age grading. Previously, all schooling was conducted either in a one-room setting where students of all ages studied at their own level or in multi-room setting with each room having a large, heterogeneous group of students. In the new urban schools, students were grouped into classes according to age, so city schools began to resemble egg crates. They contained several classrooms similar in size but differentiated according to age and presumed ability of the students.

Along with the division by age came a uniform course of study, specifying what subjects were to be taught in each grade, the order in which the material in each grade would be covered, and the activities to be used by teachers to cover the material. Basic mathematics, spelling and grammar were staples in the new course of study. They represented areas that could be sequenced, handled through a closely planned set of student activities, and tested frequently and consistently.

Examinations were essential to the new urban school courses since they provided immediate evidence of student achievement or failure. The value of written examinations was providing a clear and consistent record of what was taking place in the classroom. Uniformity was imposed at each grade level through this process. Punctuality, regularity, obedience, and silence were expected and awarded.

Given the number of students in their classrooms, teachers became committed to managing classrooms with a set of factory-like rules. The attention to every aspect of student conduct, the sequencing of classroom materials and activities, and the frequent measurement of student learning all contributed to the development of hierarchical, efficiency-oriented urban schools. (Urban, Wagoner 2000)

A result of urban schools was the socialization of students to the authoritarian order they would encounter in the workplace. Devotion to organization, regularity, punctuality and discipline meant the schools prepared their students to work in the new factories developing in the nation's cities. The same routinization the young would face on the job was present in the schools they attended.

A goal of this culture was to homogenize the school population. The school with its order and conformity offered an antidote to divisive social currents. The "one best system" reinforced social barriers rather than breaking them down. Its success in this regard was proudly noted by its leaders, most who came from the more conservative ranks of America's school structure. They were confident the primary mission of schools should be the maintenance of order in a rapidly changing society. They were equally confident this order was necessary to the maintenance of social order.

The creation of the comprehensive high school in the early part of the 20th century completed the development of an educational ladder that served pupils from their early childhood years through graduate and professional school.

Detroit, Michigan

Jeffrey Mirel writes in his history of Detroit public schools that in the 1920s it was "one of the finest school systems in the world." (Mirel, 1993) Mirel argues there was a fundamental consensus among various political and economic interest groups in the city that allowed the schools to develop and prosper. Success of the Detroit schools came from strong leadership, support from organized labor and involved businesses.

The Detroit schools successfully implemented a school day that included one-half day of traditional classroom instruction and one-half day in various activity programs including recess, crafts, performance and skill building programs.

This school day format became a model for the rest of the nation in urban communities but few rural schools were able to implement these programs due to a lack of funding. Urban and Wagoner conclude that the 1920s was the time of greatest accomplishment in American public education, in part due to the changes made in the Detroit school system.

Post World War II

The 15 years following World War II was a crucial time for America's schools. Teachers struggled to find their place in the postwar economy and to guarantee their place in the future.

Teacher organizations took on an important role. In 1965, the U.S. Congress passed the most influential piece of education legislation in American history until that time, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). It was by far the most costly and comprehensive federal educational law ever passed. A wide-ranging consensus of the gravity of the educational problems of the poor motivated its passage. From three-fourths to five-sixths of the funds appropriated through ESEA went to various Title I programs, all of which were geared specifically to the needs of educationally deprived children. (Ravitch, 1989)

ESEA funded activities included cultural and social enrichment programs, library innovations, parental involvement activities, nutrition programs, and social and medical services as well as innovations in teaching practices.

Curriculum lurched along with an increase in federal education activity, the *Brown v. Board of Education* case loomed over the entire era. The issue of racial justice raised by the case is a major educational concern to this day.

Brown v. Board of Education

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court announced its decision that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

The decision effectively denied the legal basis for segregation in Kansas and 20 other states with segregated classrooms and would forever change race relations in the United States.

Post-Vietnam Era

During the Carter administration, the Department of Education (DOE) was established, continuing the trend of increasing federal involvement in education.

Sidebar: Its interesting to note that one of Carter's largest supporters during his candidacy was the National Education Association (NEA).

The first secretary appointment caused concern to the NEA. Carter appointed an outsider to the head of the DOE which sent a message to the NEA that this new department and the federal government were not committed to education. In addition, it would later prove that this new department had not produced a substantial improvement in the educational accomplishments of poor children to support the federal tenets of educational support. (Warren, 1974)

In the 1980s, the educational climate, like the political climate, was one of disarray. Reagan preferred to campaign on the more emotional and vote-rich issues of tuition tax credits for private school parents, a return to prayer in schools and the establishment of school choice programs including public funding for private schools. Reagan's victory foreshadowed a substantial shift away from the focus on equalizing educational opportunity for the poor and minorities that had characterized the federal agenda for the previous 20 years.

During the Reagan-Bush 1 era, both presidents tried to abolish the DOE, establish school prayer and legalize tuition tax credits. They did succeed in reducing federal educational spending, raising public concern over school violence and moral education, and sustaining a nationwide momentum for school choice plans. However, the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, did have more success than the programs both presidents advocated.

A Nation at Risk was prepared by the Secretary of Education Terrell Bell to persuade the American public that the nation was in the midst of a real educational crisis. It referred to the United States as a competitor in the new world economy and named Japan, Korea and Germany as rivals. These nations were described as outstripping the United States economically and educationally with their students scoring higher on international measures of educational achievement. In addition, the pamphlet went on to state that test scores, dropout rates, poor teacher pay and morale, reduced academic requirements for high school graduation, and textbooks that had been “dumbed down” were all contributing to the crisis.

Educators were divided. One side felt that education should return to the basics of academic subjects and discipline, while other educators felt that the report was the bashing of public schools by an administration that seemed to exhibit contempt for nearly all public enterprises. Still others felt that there was something disingenuous in the motives of the economic and political leaders who placed blame for the national economic crisis on the educational system.

As a result there was a move from federal control of education to the state level, which ironically imposed even more regulations on local schools. In addition, the discretion of how federal money was spent increased but the amount of federal money available for education was reduced drastically. (Verstegen, 1990)

National Conference of State Governors
Another important source of school reform was the national conference of state governors, which met regularly throughout the 1980s. Governors vied with one another to earn reputations as education reformers. This move brought about more measurable outcomes that could be compared both within and among states, increasing the national trend toward uniformity in educational policies and practices.

Sidebar: Interestingly, both of the secretary of education's, the last of the Reagan-Bush 1 era and during the Clinton administration, were drawn from the ranks of “education governors.”

Bush 1 held a federal-state education summit in 1990 and published, America 2000. In it they listed their goals for education which reiterated earlier educational themes: schools were in need of a revolution. They would have to be held accountable for their results, need to become learning communities and the students within should prepare for lifelong learning. It also discussed similar themes to A Nation at Risk regarding the international economic competition that was looming.

One new and controversial idea in the pamphlet was its statement for the need of national standards in basic subjects as an integral part of any education revolution. (America, 2000) This provision stood in tension with traditional dogma that the schools needed to be locally controlled. Bush 1's solution to this dilemma was to make the new national standards voluntary, not mandatory. The one area the Bush administration did not address, which was critical, was how these goals would be enforced, and reached by the year 2000.

Clinton, who had won a reputation as one of the nation's most accomplished education governors, helped convene the America 2000 conference and was a leader in the movement to adopt it at the state level. After he defeated Bush 1 in 1992, he criticized his opponent for not making good on his promise to become the education president.

Clinton proceeded to build on America 2000 in developing his own program called Goals 2000, which differed in the areas of school prayer and private tuition tax credits. Clinton advocated a school choice program limited to public schools. The result of these administrations was little educational reform throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

No Child Left Behind

In January 2001, George W. Bush announced the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, his framework for bipartisan education reform he described as “the cornerstone of my administration.” Bush emphasized his deep belief in public schools but an even greater concern that “too many of our neediest children are being left behind.” Bush called for bipartisan solution based on accountability, choice, and flexibility in Federal education programs. (NCLB Web site: www.ed.gov)

The act, according to the ed.gov site, provides a framework to improve the performance of America’s elementary and secondary schools while at the same time ensuring that no child is trapped in a failing school.

The act, which reauthorizes the ESEA, includes increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools; greater choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low-performing schools; more flexibility for states and local educational agencies in the use of federal education dollars; and a stronger emphasis on reading, especially for our youngest children.

The act reinstates Title I accountability by requiring states to implement statewide systems covering all public schools and students. These systems must be based on challenging state standards in reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades three to eight, and annual statewide progress objectives ensuring all student groups reach proficiency within 12 years.

Assessment results and state progress objectives must be broken down by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability and limited English proficiency to ensure no group is left behind. School districts and schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals will, over time, be subject to improvement, corrective action, and restructuring measures aimed at getting them back on course to meet state standards. Schools meeting or exceeding AYP objectives or closing achievement gaps will be eligible for State Academic Achievement Awards.

On August 22, 2005, Connecticut became the first state to file suit against NCLB. (Ascione, eSchoolNews) The suit charges the federal government with violating state law as well as a federal law prohibiting unfunded mandates.

The 2005-06 brought a dramatic rise in outright opposition. In addition to the complaint filed by the state of Connecticut according to a new report by NCLBgrassroots.org, 47 states have expressed some sort of rebellion including Minnesota, Maine, Nevada, New Jersey and Virginia as hot spots likely to flare up.

Problem areas for schools include the failure to comply in special education reporting including individualized learning plans and demonstrating the school has actively worked with the student to help them improve. In addition, general low test scores in high school literacy areas of math and English are forcing schools to scramble to understand the challenges surrounding improvement of their curriculum and instruction methods.

In general, schools, districts and states appreciate the intent of the act but are frustrated by the lack of funding associated with this new accountability. NCLB should be closely monitored as changes should be expected.

No Child Left Behind – National Education Association's View

The NEA's Web site states about the act:

....the NCLB established laudable goals – high standards, accountability for all, and the belief that all children can learn, regardless of their background or ability.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (the latest revision of ESEA) presents real obstacles to helping students and strengthening public schools because it focuses on:

punishments rather than assistance.

rigid, unfunded mandates rather than support for proven practices.

bureaucracy and standardized testing rather than teacher-led, classroom focused solutions.

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