

Historical Timeline of Public Education in the U.S. - Tidbits, Trivia and Key Events!



Learn more about the history of public schools in the U.S. with this timeline. As you study the timeline, consider which events you feel have been most influential in creating the U.S. educational system we have today.

1607

The first permanent settlement in North America is established by the Virginia Company at Jamestown in what is now the state of Virginia.

1620

The Mayflower arrives at Cape Cod, bringing the "Pilgrims" who establish the Plymouth Colony. Many of the Pilgrims are Puritans who had fled religious persecution in England. Their religious views come to dominate education in the New England colonies.

1635

The first Latin Grammar School (Boston Latin School) is established. Latin Grammar Schools are designed for sons of certain social classes who are destined for leadership positions in church, state or the courts.

1635

The first "free school" in Virginia opens. However, education in the southern colonies is more typically provided at home by parents or tutors.

1636

Harvard College, the first higher education institution in what is now the United States is established in Newtowne (now Cambridge), Massachusetts.

1647

The Massachusetts Law of 1647, also known as the Old Deluder Satan Act, is passed. It decrees that every town of at least 50 families hire a schoolmaster who would teach the town's children to read and write and that all towns of at least 100 families should have a Latin grammar school master who will prepare students to attend Harvard College.

1690

John Locke publishes his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which conveys his belief that the human mind is a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate at birth. Locke believes that knowledge is derived through experience, rather than innate ideas as was believed by many at that time. **Locke's views concerning the mind and learning greatly influence American education.**

1690

The first New England Primer is printed in Boston. It becomes the most widely-used schoolbook in New England.

1693

The College of William and Mary is established in Virginia. It is the second college to open in colonial America and has the distinction of being Thomas Jefferson's college.

1743

Benjamin Franklin forms the American Philosophical Society, which helps bring ideas of the European Enlightenment, including those of John Locke to colonial America. Emphasizing secularism, science and human reason, these ideas clash with the religious dogma of the day, but greatly influence the thinking of prominent colonists, including Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

1751

Benjamin Franklin helps to establish the first "English Academy" in Philadelphia with a curriculum that is both classical and modern, including such courses as history, geography, navigation, surveying and modern, as well as classical languages. The academy ultimately becomes the University of Pennsylvania.

1779

Thomas Jefferson proposes a two-track educational system, with different tracks, in his words, for "the laboring and the learned." Scholarship would

allow a very few of the laboring class to advance, Jefferson says, by "raking a few geniuses from the rubbish."

1783 to 1785

Because of his dissatisfaction with English textbooks of the day, **Noah Webster** writes *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, consisting of three volumes: a spelling book, a grammar book and a reader. They become very widely used throughout the United States. The spelling volume, later renamed the *American Spelling Book* and often called the *Blue-Backed Speller* has never been out of print.

1787

The Northwest Ordinance is enacted by the Confederation Congress. It provides a plan for western expansion and bans slavery in new states. Specifically recognizing the importance of education, Act 3 of the document begins, "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Of more practical importance, it stipulates that a section of land in every township of each new state be reserved for the support of education.

1791

The Bill of Rights is passed by the first Congress of the new United States. No mention is made of education in any of the amendments. However, the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution states that powers not delegated to the federal government "are reserved to the States, respectively, or to the people." Thus, education becomes a function of the state rather than the federal government.

1801

James Pillans invents the blackboard

1805

New York Public School Society formed by wealthy businessmen to provide education for poor children. Schools are run on the "Lancasterian" model, in which one "master" can teach hundreds of students in a single room. The master gives a rote lesson to the older students, who then pass it down to the younger students. These schools emphasize discipline and obedience qualities that factory owners want in their workers.

1817

A petition presented in the Boston Town Meeting calls for establishing of a system of free public primary schools. Main support comes from local merchants, businessmen and wealthier artisans. Many wage earners oppose it, because they don't want to pay the taxes.

1817

The Connecticut Asylum at Hartford for the Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons opens. It is the first permanent school for the deaf in the U.S. **Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet** and Laurent Clerc are the school's co-founders. In 1864, Thomas Gaullaudet's son, Edward Miner Gallaudet, helps to start Gallaudet University, the first college specifically for students who are deaf.

1821

First public high school in the U.S., Boston English High School, opens.

1827

The state of Massachusetts passes a law requiring towns of more than 500 families to have a public high school open to all students free of charge.

1829

The New England Asylum for the Blind, now the Perkins School for the Blind, opens in Massachusetts, becoming the first school in the U.S. for children with visual disabilities.

1830s

By this time, most southern states have laws forbidding teaching people in slavery to read. Even so, around 5 percent become literate at great personal risk.

1836

The first of **William Holmes McGuffey's** readers is published. Their secular tone sets them apart from the Puritan texts of the day. The McGuffey Readers, as they came to be known, are among the most influential textbooks of the 19th century.

1837

Horace Mann becomes Secretary of the newly formed Massachusetts State Board of Education. A visionary educator and proponent of public (or "free") schools, Mann works tirelessly for increased funding of public schools and better training for teachers. As editor of the *Common School Journal*, his belief in the importance of free, universal public education gains a national

audience. He resigns his position as Secretary in 1848 to take the Congressional seat vacated by the death of John Quincy Adams and later becomes the first president of Antioch College.

1839

The first state funded school specifically for teacher education (then known as "normal" schools) opens in Lexington, Massachusetts.

1840s

Over a million Irish immigrants arrive in the United States, driven out of their homes in Ireland by the potato famine. Irish Catholics in New York City struggle for local neighborhood control of schools as a way of preventing their children from being force-fed a Protestant curriculum.

1848

Massachusetts Reform School at Westboro opens, where children who have refused to attend public schools are sent. This begins a long tradition of "reform schools," which combine the education and juvenile justice systems.

1848

The war against Mexico ends with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which gives the United States almost half of what was then Mexico. This includes all of what is now the U.S. Southwest, plus parts of Utah, Nevada and Wyoming and most of California. The treaty guarantees citizenship rights to everyone living in these areas mostly Mexicans and Native people. It also guarantees the continued use of the Spanish language, including in education. One hundred fifty years later, in 1998, California breaks that treaty, by passing Proposition 227, which would make it illegal for teachers to speak Spanish in public schools.

1851

State of Massachusetts passes its first compulsory education law. The goal is to make sure that the children of poor immigrants get "civilized" and learn obedience and restraint, so they make good workers and don't contribute to social upheaval.

1856

The first kindergarten in the U.S. is started in **Watertown, Wisconsin**, founded by **Margarethe Schurz**. Four years later, **Elizabeth Palmer Peabody** opens the first "formal" kindergarten in Boston, MA.

1857

The National Teachers Association (now the National Education Association) is founded by forty-three educators in Philadelphia.

1859

Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* is published on November 24, introducing his theory that species evolve through the process of natural selection, and setting the stage for the controversy surrounding teaching the theory of evolution in the public schools that persists to this day.

1864

Congress makes it illegal for Native Americans to be taught in their native languages. Native children as young as four years old are taken from their parents and sent to Bureau of Indian Affairs off-reservation boarding schools, whose goal, as one BIA official put it, is to "kill the Indian to save the man."

1867

The Department of Education is created in order to help states establish effective school systems.

1867

Christopher Sholes invents the "modern" typewriter. Known as the Sholes Glidden, it is first manufactured by E. Remington & Sons in 1873.

1896

Plessy v. Ferguson decision. The U.S. Supreme Court rules that the state of Louisiana has the right to require "separate but equal" railroad cars for Blacks and Whites. This decision means that the federal government officially recognizes segregation as legal. One result is that southern states pass laws requiring racial segregation in public schools.

1905

The U.S. Supreme Court requires California to extend public education to the children of Chinese immigrants.

1905

Alfred Binet's article, "New Methods for the Diagnosis of the Intellectual Level of Subnormals," is published in France. It describes his work with Theodore Simon in the development of a measurement instrument that

would identify students with mental retardation. The Binet-Simon Scale, as it is called, is an effective means of measuring intelligence.

1911

The first Montessori school in the U.S. opens in Tarrytown, New York. Two years later (1913), **Maria Montessori** visits the U.S., and Alexander Graham Bell and his wife Mabel found the Montessori Educational Association at their Washington, DC, home.

1916

Louis M. Terman and his team of Stanford University graduate students complete an American version of the Stanford-Binet Scale. The Stanford-Binet Scale is among the most popular individual intelligence test today.

1916

John Dewey's *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* is published. **Dewey's views help advance the ideas of the "progressive education movement."** An outgrowth of the progressive political movement, progressive education seeks to make schools more effective agents of democracy.

1919

The Progressive Education Association is founded with the goal of reforming American education.

1919

All states have laws providing funds for transporting children to school.

1926

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is first administered. It is based on the Army Alpha test.

1929

Jean Piaget's *The Child's Conception of the World* is published. His theory of cognitive development becomes an important influence in American developmental psychology and education.

1929

The Great Depression begins with the stock market crash in October. The U.S. economy is devastated. Public education funding suffers greatly, resulting in school closings, teacher layoffs, and lower salaries.

1932

A survey of 150 school districts reveals that three quarters of them are using so-called intelligence testing to place students in different academic tracks.

1945

At the end of World War 2, the G.I. Bill of Rights gives thousands of working class men college scholarships for the first time in U.S. history. Because the law provides the same opportunity to every veteran, regardless of background, the long-standing tradition that a college education was only for the wealthy is broken.

1946

At one minute after midnight on January 1, Kathleen Casey Wilkens is born, the first of nearly 78 million baby boomers, beginning a generation that results in unprecedented school population growth and massive social change.

1946

In the landmark court case of Mendez vs. Westminster and the California Board of Education, the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles rules that educating children of Mexican descent in separate facilities is unconstitutional, thus prohibiting segregation in California schools and setting an important precedent for Brown vs. Board of Education.

1946

The computer age begins as the Electronic Numerical Integrator And Computer (ENIAC), the first vacuum-tube computer is built for the U.S. military by Presper Eckert and John Mauchly.

1953

Burrhus Frederic (B. F.) Skinner's *Science and Human Behavior* is published. His form of **behaviorism (operant conditioning)**, which emphasizes changes in behavior due to reinforcement, becomes widely accepted and influences many aspects of American education.

1954

On May 17, the U.S. Supreme Court announces its decision in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, ruling that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," thus overturning its previous ruling in the 1896 case of Plessy v. Ferguson. Brown v. Board of Education is actually a combination of five cases from different parts of the country. It is a historic

first step in the long and still unfinished journey toward equality in U.S. education. Almost 45 years later in 1998, schools, especially in the north, are as segregated as ever.

1957

A federal court orders integration of Little Rock, Arkansas public schools. Governor Orval Faubus sends his National Guard to physically prevent nine African American students from enrolling at all-white Central High School. Reluctantly, President Eisenhower sends federal troops to enforce the court order, not because he supports desegregation, but because he can't let a state governor use military power to defy the U.S. federal government.

1957

The Soviet Union launches Sputnik, the first satellite to orbit the Earth. Occurring in the midst of the Cold War, it represents both a potential threat to American national security, as well as a blow to national pride.

1958

At least partially because of Sputnik, science and science education become important concerns in the U.S. resulting in the passage of the National Defense Act (NDEA) which authorizes increased funding for scientific research and science education.

1959

The ACT Test is first administered.

1960

First grader **Ruby Bridges** is the first African American to attend William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. She becomes a class of one as parents remove all Caucasian students from the school.

1962

First published in 1934, **Lev Vygotsky's** book, *Thought and Language* is introduced to the English-speaking world. Though he lives to be only 38 years old, Vygotsky's ideas regarding the social nature of learning provide important foundational principles for contemporary **social constructivist theories**. He is perhaps best known for his concept of "Zone of Proximal Development."

+1963

Samuel A. Kirk uses the term “learning disability” at a Chicago conference on children with perceptual disorders. The term sticks and in 1964, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, now the Learning Disabilities Association of America, is formed.

1964

The Civil Rights Act becomes law. It prohibits discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion or national origin.

1965

The **Elementary and Secondary Education Act** (ESEA) is passed on April 9. Part of Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” it provides federal funds to help low-income students, which results in the initiation of educational programs such as Title 1 and bilingual education.

1965

Project Head Start, a preschool education program for children from low-income families begins an eight-week summer program. Part of the “War on Poverty,” the program continues to this day as the longest running anti-poverty program in the U.S.

1966

The Equality of Educational Opportunity Study, often called the Coleman Report because of its primary author James S. Coleman, is conducted in response to provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Its conclusion that African American children benefit from attending integrated schools sets the stage for school “busing” to achieve desegregation.

1966

Jerome Bruner’s *Toward a Theory of Instruction* is published. His views regarding learning help to popularize the **cognitive learning theory** as an alternative to behaviorism.

1969

Herbert R. Kohl’s book, *The Open Classroom*, helps to promote open education, an approach emphasizing student-centered classrooms and active, holistic learning. The conservative back-to-the-basics movement of the 1970s begins at least partially as a backlash against open education.

1970

Jean Piaget's book, *The Science of Education*, is published. His Learning Cycle model helps to popularize discovery-based teaching approaches, particularly in the sciences.

1973

The Rehabilitation Act becomes law. **Section 504** of this act guarantees civil rights for people with disabilities in the context of federally funded institutions and requires accommodations in schools including participation in programs and activities as well as access to buildings. Today, "504 Plans" are used to provide accommodations for students with disabilities who do not qualify for special education or an IEP.

1975

The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) becomes federal law. It requires that a free, appropriate public education, suited to the student's individual needs and offered in the least restrictive setting be provided for all "handicapped" children. States are given until 1978 (later extended to 1981) to fully implement the law.

1975

Newsweek's December 8 cover story, "Why Johnny Can't Write," heats up the debate about national literacy and the back-to-the basics movement.

1977

Apple Computer, now Apple Inc., introduces the Apple II, one of the first successful personal computers. It and its offspring, the Apple IIe, become popular in schools as students begin to learn with computer games such as Oregon Trail and Odell Lake.

Late 1970s

The so-called "taxpayers' revolt" leads to the passage of Proposition 13 in California, and copy-cat measures like Proposition 2-1/2 in Massachusetts. These propositions freeze property taxes, which are a major source of funding for public schools. As a result, in twenty years California drops from first in the nation in per-student spending in 1978 to number 43 in 1998.

1981

John Holt's book, *Teach Your Own: A Hopeful Path for Education*, adds momentum to the homeschooling movement.

1981

IBM introduces its version of the personal computer (PC) with its model 5150. Its operating system is MS-DOS.

1982

Madeline C. Hunter's book, *Mastery Teaching*, is published. Her direct instruction teaching model becomes widely used as teachers throughout the country attend her workshops and become "Hunterized."

1983

The report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, calls for sweeping reforms in public education and teacher training.

1985

Microsoft Windows 1.0, the first independent version of Windows, is released, setting the stage for subsequent versions that make MS-DOS obsolete.

1990

Tim Berners-Lee, a British engineer and computer scientist called by many the inventor of the internet, writes the first web client-server protocol (Hypertext Translation Protocol or http), which allows two computers to communicate. On August 6, 1991, he puts the first web site on line from a computer at the CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) in order to facilitate information among scientists.

1990

Public Law 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), renames and amends Public Law 94-142. In addition to changing terminology from handicap to disability, it mandates transition services and adds autism and traumatic brain injury to the eligibility list.

1991

The Smart Board (interactive white board) is introduced by SMART Technologies.

1993

Jacqueline and Martin Brooks' *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms* is published. It is one of many books and articles describing **constructivism**, a view that **learning best occurs through active**

construction of knowledge rather than its passive reception. Constructivist learning theory, with roots such as the work of Dewey, Bruner, Piaget, and Vygotsky, becomes extremely popular in the late 1990s.

1994

As a backlash to illegal immigration, California voters pass Proposition 187, denying benefits, including public education, to undocumented aliens in California. It is challenged by the ACLU and other groups and eventually overturned.

1994-1995

Whiteboards find their way into U.S. classrooms in increasing numbers and begin to replace the blackboard.

1996

James Banks' book, *Multicultural Education: Transformative Knowledge and Action*, makes an important contribution to the growing body of study regarding multiculturalism in education.

1998

California voters pass Proposition 227, requiring that all public schools instruction be in English. This time the law withstands legal challenges.

1998

The Higher Education Act is amended and reauthorized requiring institutions and states to produce "report cards" about teacher education.

1998

Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin set up a workplace for their newly incorporated search engine in a Menlo Park, California garage.

2001

The controversial No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is approved by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. The law, which reauthorizes the ESEA of 1965, holds schools accountable for student achievement levels and provides penalties for schools that do not make adequate yearly progress toward meeting the goals of NCLB.

2004

[H.R. 1350, The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act \(IDEA 2004\)](#), reauthorizes and modifies IDEA. Changes, which took effect on July 1, 2005, include modifications in the IEP process and procedural safeguards, increased authority for school personnel in special education placement decisions, and alignment of IDEA with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This law also includes language regarding “highly qualified teachers” and “highly qualified paraeducators.”

2007

On January 1, 2007, the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) became the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), joining the trend toward use of the term intellectual disability in place of mental retardation.

2007

Both the House and Senate pass the Labor-HHS-Education appropriation bill which includes reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. However, the bill is vetoed by President Bush because it exceeds his budget request. Attempts to override the veto fall short. Reauthorization (as well as much needed changes in NCLB) appears unlikely until after the 2008 elections.

2008

Barack Obama defeats John McCain and is elected the 44th President of the United States. Substantial changes in the No Child Left Behind Act are eventually expected, but with two ongoing wars, as well as the preoccupation with U.S. economic problems, reauthorization of NCLB is unlikely to happen anytime soon.

2009

[The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009](#) provides more than 90 billion dollars for education, nearly half of which goes to local school districts to prevent layoffs and for school modernization and repair.

2009

The World Health Organization declares a global pandemic for H1N1 influenza on June 11, 2009. Schools close in several states during October due to large numbers of influenza cases.

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