

A Brief History of Public Education in the United States

Sylvia L. Mendez, Monica S. Yoo, and John L. Rury

Schools have functioned as one of the principal institutions from colonial America to the twenty-first century to transmit knowledge and cultural values across generations. Early in their history, schools reflected the interests of local communities, but in the nineteenth century they also began to serve national interests, and today they increasingly address international issues. As this suggests, educational institutions have reflected important social and political changes. In reviewing the history of public education, the symbiotic relationship between schools and society is apparent and aids in our understanding of today's school system. This chapter provides a brief history and review of the current state of public education, with a focus on five periods: Colonial America and the Revolution, the Age of the Common School, the Progressive Era, the Postwar Period, and the Emerging Twenty-First Century.

1.1 Colonial America and the Revolution

At the birth of the United States, schooling practices that began in colonial America served as the educational foundation for the new nation (Bailyn, 1967; Cremin, 1980; Kaestle, 1983). The movement of Europeans to North America entailed significant social and ideological changes as they undertook long-term settlement, rapid economic development, and an adaptable commitment to Protestant perfectionism. Intended to complement the education provided by families and churches, schools were established early in colonial settlements. The curricular underpinnings were dictated by local cultural values and customs, including religious proclivities and the virtues of hard work and deference to authority. Local control became a hallowed principle of American education. Education, although influenced by Western European tradition, was a diverse enterprise motivated by preserving local and individual interests and values.

The colonialists produced different types of schooling: many boys (and some girls) often studied an elementary curriculum of reading, writing, and arithmetic rooted in religious dogma and moralism (Tyack & Hansot, 1990). Along with the Bible, they studied spellers, the hornbook, and other didactic texts, such as the *New England Primer*, first printed in 1690

(Axtell, 1974; Nord, 1995). Higher levels of schooling primarily served affluent boys on pathways to colonial leadership (Cremin, 1970; Vine, 1976). Some attended Latin grammar schools or local academies, the first being the Boston Latin Grammar School. Boys undertook advanced study of Latin and Greek in preparation for admission to colleges such as Harvard (established in 1636). Women were excluded from colleges and Latin grammar schools and were widely held to be intellectually incapable of higher learning.

Despite these institutional arrangements, family was the primary educational influence, as home and farm obligations typically took precedence over school (Axtell, 1974). School terms were short, attendance was inconsistent, and educational standards were highly variable (Cremin, 1970). Some children received early instruction in dame schools operated by educated women in their homes, supported by modest fees (Perlmann & Margo, 2001). These schools provided early instruction for boys and often were the only formalized instruction for girls (Tyack & Hansot, 1990). In addition to basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, girls were taught homemaking skills, such as cooking and sewing. Apprenticeships were the primary rite of passage into a trade (Cremin, 1970).

New England's Puritans sought to mandate basic education by requiring parents to teach their children basic literacy, as well as religious precepts and elementary mathematics. Consequently, literacy rates were higher in the New England colonies than in other colonies (Cremin, 1970; Lockridge, 1974; Moran & Vinovskis, 2007). A Massachusetts act in 1647, popularly known as the "Old Deluder Satan Law," mandated public support of schools to maintain moral rectitude (Nord, 1995). Towns with 50 families were required to hire a teacher for basic reading and writing instruction; towns with 100 families were expected to hire a Latin teacher. This law reflected an early belief that education was not entirely voluntary and that schools were a means for preserving basic values (Cremin, 1970).

The Middle Colonies featured a more culturally and religiously diverse group of settlers. Religious denominations established their own schools, as did independent masters, usually in the cities. Academies offered instruction in such practical arts as navigation, surveying, agriculture, and mechanics, with a focus on English, rather than Latin and Greek (Beadie, 2010). Benjamin Franklin's Academy was among the most famous; established in Philadelphia in 1751 for males who were able to pay tuition.

In contrast to the North were Southern Colonies, in which settlers generally followed the Church of England. Large plantations led to a dispersed population that made communal schooling less manageable. Additionally, wealthy Southern plantation owners hired tutors or sent their children to boarding schools. Few schooling opportunities existed for poor farmers' children and almost none for African slaves (Kaestle, 1983).

Much debate ensued on the role of schooling for Native Americans and African Americans, who represented about a third of the population. While the vast majority received no formal schooling, education through ritual and custom was the tradition. Schools for them were managed by religious groups, such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (Church of England) and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Quaker schools taught basic literacy, numeracy, and religion, as well as vocational training, and were open to boys and girls of all socioeconomic classes and races, although they were few in number (Woody, 1923). These conversion efforts also were found in Spanish-settled lands and were led by Catholic missionaries; participation was mandated by coercive tactics of offering special gifts and favor, and cruel force when necessary (MacDonald, 2004; Weber, 1994). Additionally, freed African Americans and abolitionist groups later developed schools for African Americans in the North, such as the New York African Free School (Rury, 1985). These charity schools and others established later were segregated by race, minimally funded, and focused on teaching children to behave properly (Cremin, 1970; Kaestle, 1983; Szasz, 1988).

Following the Revolution, national leaders suggested that schools could help to preserve the political freedoms and ideals of democratic citizenship (Cremin, 1980). This sentiment was most clearly articulated by Thomas Jefferson, who believed that the common people, not only the elite, should be literate and well-informed. He made little mention of female education, however, or the education of African Americans or Native Americans. In 1779, his Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge called for Virginia to fund state-supported universal elementary schools for boys and girls and merit-based scholarships for promising boys to attend grammar schools (Kaestle, 1983). But the Virginia legislature rejected it largely on the grounds of local control conflicts. Tension between local and state responsibility for formal education influenced the formation of the new nation and its emerging school systems.

The Continental Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance Acts in 1785 and 1787, linking government, schools, and morality by providing resources to support education (Tyack, James, & Benavot, 1987). With westward expansion, the Civilization Fund Act of 1819 supported the use of schools in “civilizing” Native American children, many of whom were later removed from their families and schooled in values opposed to their indigenous way of life. The practice of assimilation through boarding schools endured until the early twentieth century (Adams, 1995; Hoxie, 1984). Altogether, however, state and federal governments played very limited roles in education for most of the nineteenth century.

Another important issue following the Revolution was women’s education. Benjamin Rush and other leaders argued for schooling to expand the role of women to include patriotic socialization through “republican motherhood” (Kerber, 1980; Rudolph, 1965; Tyack & Hansot, 1990). During this period, female literacy rates were on the rise, reflecting a new openness to female schooling (Lockridge, 1974; Nash, 2005; Sklar, 1993; Tyack & Hansot, 1990). This was a portent of future developments in American education.

1.2 The Age of the Common School

As the United States entered the nineteenth century, Thomas Jefferson’s vision of education widely supported by tax monies slowly gained credibility. Common school reform found supporters, as concerns mounted in response to an increasingly diverse nation shaped by rapid industrialization and urbanization. Industry provided models for the growing school system, as leaders were impressed by the power and efficiency of early factories and the virtues of a disciplined workforce (Kaestle, 1973; Kliebard, 1999; Nasaw, 1979; Tyack, 1974). In light of this, reformers, such as Horace Mann, Catharine Beecher, and many others, pushed for a state-coordinated system of education from elementary schooling to college, with local control of institutions and nascent professionalization of teaching. Schools became the central educating institution of the nineteenth century, supplanting the roles once played by families and church. Yet, differences continued to exist in the type of schooling children would encounter based on religion, gender, class, and race.

The greatest champion for common (elementary) schools was Horace Mann; a lawyer, Massachusetts senator, and, beginning in 1837, the first Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education (Binder, 1974; Cremin, 1951; Kaestle, 1983; Messerli, 1972). He promoted the need for a mass system of nonsectarian education supported by public tax monies to ensure that children of all social and economic classes received a “common” education. He believed this would foster national unity by building upon common morals, creating a strong skill base for commercial ventures, and preparing children for democratic citizenship. Mann gained national support for public schools through his *Annual Reports to the Massachusetts Board of Education*, as well as his writings in *The Common School Journal*, which he founded (Messerli, 1972).

in 1838. He envisioned a standardized schooling experience for all children, with a common, nonsectarian curriculum to inculcate children with proper American values.

Mann's desire for a common curriculum was challenged by church leaders who argued that this curriculum was an affront to religion. Catholics, in particular, called for public funding of parish schools (Lannie, 1968; Nord, 1995; Ravitch, 1974). They feared Catholic children would be "Protestantized" in school and turned away from their faith and family. Eventually, Catholics established a parochial system of education supported by local churches and tuition payments. Other religious groups, such as Lutherans, Mennonites, and Quakers, also maintained such schools.

Mann's educational ideas also were debated by others, especially regarding the removal of children from work and concern about increasing taxes, particularly for those without children. Wealthy families often patronized private schools and did not support using their taxes to support the education of working-class children. Historian Michael Katz (1968) argued that Massachusetts working-class and immigrant families rejected school proposals because they believed schools disproportionately benefited upper- and middle-class interests (Herbst, 1996; Reese, 1995). Concerns also were raised about the role of the state in educational matters because schooling had traditionally been a local issue. Despite these debates, however, Massachusetts became a leader in the establishment of a system of public education with an elected school board, the levying of taxes to support schools, and compulsory attendance laws by 1867. Other New England states soon followed suit, but it was not until 1930 that all states had such educational provisions.

The organization of schooling also expanded in the common school era with the advent of the high school; the first was Boston's English Classical High School founded in 1821 (Angus & Mirel, 1999; Herbst, 1996; Reese, 1995). This institution was developed in contrast to the Boston Latin Grammar School, delivering an advanced practical curriculum focused on the English language similar to colonial academies. Students received a mix of college preparatory coursework and commercial courses in business and teaching, as well as geography and government, in response to popular demand. Despite this, relatively few students in this era attended a high school; engendering a perception that it was a luxury the public should not financially support (Angus & Mirel, 1999; Reese, 1995). In 1874, the Michigan Supreme Court held that school boards had the right to levy taxes to support such institutions; a decision widely cited nationally (Angus & Mirel, 1999; Herbst, 1996; Reese, 1995).

Mann and other reformers believed that universal public education could prosper only with formalized teacher preparation and improvement in pedagogical theory and practice (Kaestle, 1983; Perlmann & Margo, 2001). Reformers believed this could be modeled after the French professional teacher education programs, *école normale*. The first public normal school was founded in Massachusetts in 1839. With the rise in rhetoric devoted to the professionalization of teaching, the National Education Association was founded in 1857, and the American Federation of Teachers was later founded in 1916. These developments promoted improvements in the profession, such as fair wages and better working conditions. A diverse array of allies supported this cause, including Catharine Beecher and other female education advocates who proposed that women assume the role of schoolteacher, thus creating a female profession (Tyack & Hansot, 1990). In Beecher's *An Essay on the Education of Female Teachers in the United States, 1835*, she reiterated long-standing beliefs about the natural maternal proclivity of women to nurture and to care for children, as well as women's willingness to work for lower wages (Sklar, 1973). These two arguments made the case for women to transform the teaching profession into one based on a compassionate approach to the moral and intellectual development of children, rather than a traditional focus on order and discipline (Bernard & Vinovskis, 1977; Perlmann & Margo, 2001; Tyack & Hansot, 1990).

As a result, normal schools were developed across the Northeast and Midwest to deliver teacher education programs largely directed toward females. Many newly minted teachers taught in rural settlements, as it became popular to venture west for many young women

(Sklar, 1973; Tyack & Hansot, 1990). Teachers often found themselves in one-room schoolhouses certified by a local school board to teach a basic curriculum with emphasis on recitation and strict discipline (Perlmann & Margo, 2001; Tyack & Hansot, 1990). The *McGuffey's Readers*, first published in 1836, became the popular curricular mainstay. They were age-graded and used in a common curriculum aimed at literacy and the meaning of being a patriotic American; one who reflected the virtues of White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.

While Mann and other common school and compulsory education reformers advocated universal, free education for all, they generally were silent on African American education. In the North, independent African American schools were founded throughout the early nineteenth century, and many fell under the purview of local school boards. These schools generally were segregated and dismally funded by public dollars, and yet served as the center of African American communities (Curry, 1981; Moss, 2009; Rury, 1985). One such school, the Abiel Smith School, was located in Boston. Sarah Roberts, a five-year-old African American girl, and her family challenged the city's school committee in 1849 on the practice of racial segregation (Kaestle, 1983). The Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1850 ruled against them in *Roberts v. City of Boston*, asserting that schools were available for her to attend. However, the Massachusetts legislature integrated all public schools in 1855.

African American education was non-existent in the South. No public education system was established for White or African American children until after the Civil War (Rury, 2006). Yet, Southern state legislatures debated the issue of African American schooling; with slave uprisings, the education of African slaves was deemed illegal in many states (Kaestle, 1983). Despite Southern educational tradition and the barring of literacy among African slaves, some learned to read and write. Frederick Douglass' (2001) 1845 autobiography provided accounts of his early tutelage and called attention to the plight and pride of slaves learning these basic skills. With the Civil War and federal policies during Reconstruction, literacy campaigns sprang up across the South, along with an expansive system of schools supported by the federal government, Northern philanthropists, and African American communities that educated many thousands of African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 2010). This period ended in 1877, when Union troops left the South and the White segregationists' governments reconstituted, leaving African American education in a state of disarray with poorly funded segregated schools, eventually falling under Jim Crow rule (Anderson, 1988).

Between 1852 and 1918, American states passed laws requiring school enrollment for all children under a certain age, ranging from 8 to 14. Enrollment was generally not required at public schools insofar as other officially recognized (later called accredited) schools were available. But the practical effect was to encourage attendance at public schools. Reformers advocating these measures cited the evils of child labor, especially in manufacturing towns. The image of wealthy industrialists exploiting children proved a powerful motivation for change. Enrollment gains were especially high among the poor, including immigrants and African Americans. Altogether, these gains were on the order of 20%, a sizeable increase. Whatever parents may have thought of these new laws, it appears that they abided by them. The result was a new level of school participation in American history. For the first time, almost every family was sending its children to school, and a major objective of school reformers had been achieved (Rauscher, 2014).

1.3 The Progressive Era

The Progressive Era spanned the years from 1890 to 1920 and is often thought of as a time of marked improvement in public and institutional life. Schools were among the more important issues, and the period was marked by new ideas and practices. A major current of reform

propositions and innovations, referred to as “progressive education,” stemmed from this time and has continued to be a recurring source of controversy (Cremin, 1961).

The early twentieth-century industrial development and urban growth represented the culmination of the industrial revolution that had started before the Civil War. Millions of immigrants arrived, and cultural diversity became characteristic of the largest cities. These changes eventually became a focal point for social reform under the general middle-class movement of Progressivism, an effort to control the degree and direction of change in an era of economic development and urban growth (Wiebe, 1967).

Reform affected few issues more than education. It turned out that progressive school reform included different types of change; some quite incongruous in orientation. Similar to progressivism writ large in the larger society, it encompassed many dissimilar viewpoints. Historians have acknowledged two distinct branches of progressive school reform. One represented a compassionate goal to make institutions more receptive to youngsters and responsive to communities. Led by John Dewey, Francis Parker, and William Heard Kilpatrick, it was a conspicuous source of reform. These figures and their compatriots were called “pedagogical progressives” by historians and often focused on improving instruction and related issues of how children learn best (Kliebard, 2004; Tyack, 1974).

Other reformers were somewhat less fervent and focused on such issues as efficiency and skill requirements of the economy. They have been called “administrative progressives” by historians and were preoccupied with refining the executive functions of institutions. As a rule, they wielded greater influence in the growth of school systems. Their watchwords included *efficiency*, *bureaucracy*, and *vocationalism*; terms also associated with Progressivism (Kliebard, 1999; Tyack, 1974).

The viewpoints of these various reform groups were at times opposed to each other, and strident debates occasionally ensued. However, by and large, they coexisted, perhaps due to their dissimilar goals. Many educators were influenced by both groups without concern for inconsistencies, but administrative change ultimately appeared more practical. Larger schools were deemed more efficient and inclusive, and most people agreed that saving money was a desirable goal. Administrative reform also directly affected more institutions. In the countryside, thousands of rural schools were consolidated, bringing organizational changes to smaller communities across the country. Consolidation efforts were met with resistance in rural areas, where these efforts were perceived as an affront to local control as curricular and pedagogical practices were becoming increasingly standardized. Some places attempted to institute progressive teaching methods, such as the Winnetka schools under Carlton Washburn, but pedagogical progressivism remained a remote and puzzling reform impulse to many Americans (Cremin, 1961; Steffes, 2012; Tyack, 1974).

Administrative reform led to important changes in institutional management. As urban systems grew, bureaucratic systems of organization advanced. Administrative progressives focused on achieving goals with limited assets. David Tyack (1974) described this impulse as the “one best system;” a unified and comprehensive approach to management that appeared in cities across the country. Administrative progressives also were enthusiastic proponents of standardized psychological testing, including IQ exams. By the 1920s, districts widely used such tests to match students to specific academic programs, to make curricular decisions, or to inform teachers and parents. Although testing held much promise for those interested in measuring the innate ability of each child, it also held dire consequences for students with special needs, learning difficulties, and those with a primary language other than English (Franklin, 1994). The results of these tests provided a rationale for the segregation of children of low IQ from those of high IQ, adding acceptability to the wide variation in student abilities and the idea that not everyone could gain status through schooling (Brown, 1992).

This time also brought growth of the high school as an institution. Enrollments grew twelvefold between 1890 and 1930, with approximately half the teenage population attending by the latter date (Angus & Mirel, 1999). By then most communities outside the South had some type of high school; typically a public institution. They were guided by the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, drafted by the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. Published in 1918, this report envisioned a distinctive American institution: the comprehensive high school. Unlike earlier reports, it focused on socialization and community spirit rather than traditional academic subjects. The commission attempted to enable schools to preserve democratic ideals of cooperation among students of all backgrounds and interests, while acknowledging the necessity of efficiency. A direct link existed between the expansion of secondary education and college enrollments (VanOverbeke, 2008). The latter also grew, albeit not as rapidly as those of the high schools. Public education was drawn closer to the practical goal of advancing in status and wealth, as schooling became associated with ever higher earnings and prestige (Goldin & Katz, 2008; Herbst, 1996).

Altogether, the progressive period involved important changes at all levels of the education system. By the 1920s, it was possible to identify a unitary system of institutions from the primary grades through the university. It was not fully articulated in all areas, particularly in the South, but the basic structure of today's system was possible to discern.

1.4 The Postwar Period

The end of World War II marked the beginning of many important changes in the United States: escalating birth rates, the so-called baby boom, and steady economic growth. It also witnessed remarkable technological change and a growing degree of importance assigned to formal education. Americans attended school in larger numbers, leading to unprecedented levels of attainment. High schools were becoming a universal institution, and collegiate enrollments climbed dramatically after 1960.

Progressive education came under attack in the 1950s, largely for a perceived lack of standards and rigor compared to traditional academic disciplines. Simultaneously, racial discrimination became a point of criticism in the wake of wartime opposition to Nazi theories of racial supremacy. Additionally, Cold War concerns about the U.S. image abroad contributed to liberalization of racial ideas. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education*, declaring segregated schools to be inherently unequal and thus unconstitutional. This decision was a landmark of national policy and reflected a new openness to change in race relations (Kluger, 1976; Kuhl, 2002; Polenber, 1980).

Brown was welcomed as a milestone in race relations, but its direct impact was largely symbolic. The threat of litigation had led many Southern states to reexamine policies and to increase the resources available to African American schools. This led to a surge in African American attainment across the South during the 1950s. Opposition to integration was widespread among Whites throughout the region, and change was slow in the North and West due to residential segregation (Orfield, 1983). Rather than leading to widespread school integration, *Brown* became the legal foundation that shaped important changes in later decades, as civil rights groups litigated segregationist policies across the country. These cases produced dramatic change, particularly in larger cities where housing discrimination had wrought educational inequality. They ultimately led to an end to widespread racial segregation in Southern public education, as it became the most integrated part of the country in the 1970s. These events occurred decades following the *Brown* decision but signified a watershed in American educational history (Patterson, 2002; Rury & Hill, 2012).

During this period, African Americans left the Southern countryside for the cities leading to racially divided, urban school systems (Lemann, 1991). Rapid population growth in African American neighborhoods led to overcrowded schools, especially as districts resisted integration. Schools serving poor African American students had lower graduation rates and less experienced teachers. These problems led to conflict over inequity in education. Meanwhile, many Whites left the cities in order to avoid their children attending integrated schools. Many moved to suburban communities outside of urban districts; a development that became known as “White flight.” By 1980 only 4 out of 10 metropolitan residents lived in central cities, with the remainder in predominantly White suburbs (Rury & Hill, 2012). These changes meant that many rural schools were incorporated into the suburbs, resulting in those districts becoming larger and fiscally stronger. Correspondingly, suburban schools improved, accomplishing substantial gains over urban institutions (Rury & Saatcioglu, 2011). Metropolitan inequity grew ever more evident, spurred by suburbanization and residential segregation. The financial condition of urban districts declined as the tax base eroded and the academic reputations of city schools suffered (Kantor & Brenzel, 1993).

Federal policy shifted in ways that addressed these problems. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), going well beyond previous federal involvement in the schools, particularly the 1958 National Defense Education Act that provided federal funding assistance in America’s quest to compete globally in the areas of math and science (Kaestle, 2001). ESEA spoke directly to fiscal inequity, as its Title I provided funds to schools serving students from poverty households. This act aided distressed urban districts, along with other poor areas, providing a critical enhancement of traditional revenue sources. Many states offered similar financial support to schools in the following decade and beyond. These additional sources of funding eventually lessened spending gaps, with the trade-off being a weakening of local control and a rise in federal mandates relative to schooling. However, suburban schools continued to retain significant advantages in popular perceptions often because they served a largely middle-class and White clientele. Yet, there was some effort to erode these perceptions and assist in desegregation by the creation of public magnet schools, which intended to draw middle-class students into urban areas by providing a specialized program of study (Kantor & Lowe, 1995; Ravitch, 1983).

The Johnson administration launched other school programs, along with sweeping civil rights and antipoverty legislation. The best known was Head Start, which assisted young children from poor families (Vinovskis, 2005). It proved popular from the outset, with more than one million children enrolled. Such programs exemplified a new method of overcoming inequality: compensatory education to make learning more equitable. Other forms of compensatory education were found in bilingual education with the 1974 Supreme Court ruling in *Lau v. Nichols*, which required schools to provide bilingual education. This act was of great interest to Latino and Asian American communities, as traditionally underserved populations sought to claim greater curricular control of neighborhood schools (Donato, 1997; San Miguel, 1987; San Miguel, 2001). Additionally, the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, signed by President Gerald Ford, required schools to provide special education students with equal access to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, which favored inclusive over separate special education schooling settings (Scotch, 2001).

At the same time, the observed liberal wave of American politics seeped into other aspects of education, particularly the role of religion in public schools. With the United States 1962 Supreme Court ruling in *Engel v. Vitale* and 1963 ruling in *Abington v. Schempp*, the courts found state policy that required students to recite prayers and other devotional readings of the Bible in schools to be unconstitutional (Nord, 1995). These rulings ignited national debate, as concerns mounted about the role of the federal government in local school practices and the

movement away from the Protestant foundation to the American educational enterprise solidified by common school reformers (Zimmerman, 2005).

Baby boomers attended college in historically high numbers, which resulted in immense expansion on campuses. Enrollments grew nearly 800% in the 40 years after 1940, to approximately 11 million; almost a third of all American youth. Female students increased from nearly 30% to a slight majority; and minority students (African Americans, Latinos, and Asians) grew from less than 5% to more than 15%. These increases indicated that colleges had come to serve a broad cross-section of youth; not the traditional White male population of previous eras (Kim & Rury, 2007).

Campuses also became locations for political protest and social conflict. Demands for minority-group representation and new academic studies characterized the day, eventually leading to programs in Black Studies, Women's Studies, and other fields. Affirmative Action policies were intended to aid minority students but also were sources of disagreement. Programs were established for women, particularly Title IX in collegiate athletics. The 1978 *University of California v. Bakke* and later 2003 *Gratz v. Bollinger* decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court held that Affirmative Action was permissible, but arbitrary quotas for minority students were not. These decisions offered judicial support for such policies, although they remained controversial (Thelin, 2011).

During the postwar years, the relationship between education and society became quite dynamic. Schools increasingly were called on to address questions of economic and social inequality; a major element of social policy. Meanwhile, the American educational system was shaped by ideological shifts and by economic and demographic change. While schooling gained greater significance, its accessibility and quality became vital concerns.

1.5 The Emerging Twenty-First Century

Beginning in the 1980s, the federal government gradually began to play a stronger role in the American education. In 1983, a commission under Terrence Bell, U.S. Secretary of Education, issued *A Nation at Risk*, a report framing American schools as being in crisis and in need of major reform. The report drew on international comparisons from the past decade, stating that “on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report highlighted the changing nature of skills needed for the workforce, noting that “computers and computer-controlled equipment are penetrating every aspect of our lives—homes, factories, and offices” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report suggested more rigorous standards for student performance and improvements to teacher preparation, with the recommendation that teachers should “demonstrate competence in an academic discipline” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The rhetoric in *A Nation at Risk* captured the widespread attention of the public, as many Americans were becoming increasingly concerned with the country's position as a world leader. While the report was issued under Ronald Reagan's administration, it was at odds with Reagan's educational agenda, which envisioned a dismantling of the Department of Education, adoption of prayer in schools, and school choice. Although Reagan was unable to fulfill his larger agenda, he was able to increase the national emphasis on school reform. The spotlight on education and the need for reform garnered by *A Nation at Risk* paved the way for Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, to continue the gradual increase in the federal government's role in education, beginning with the introduction of a National Education Goals Panel in 1990. This panel led to America 2000, a plan for creating academic standards aligned to national goals. William

Jefferson Clinton, upon his election as President in 1992, continued to expand the role of the federal government in education by signing into law Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994, which provided a national framework for states' voluntary development and implementation of standards and standards-aligned assessments (DeBray, 2006; Vinvoksis, 2008).

In the same year, Clinton passed the Improving America's School's Act (IASA), which called for linking Title I funds to a state's demonstration of "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) to ensure disadvantaged student populations were meeting the academic content and performance standards implemented in Goals 2000. This legislation also contained a provision for school choice, which included the use of Title I funds for allowing students to attend a school outside of their attendance area or the application of federal funds to start a charter school. Although the public school system initially resisted the implementation of IASA—as evident in findings by the American Federation of Teachers that only 17 states had developed "clear and specified" standards in English, math, social studies, and science by 1997—the accountability "tripod" of standards, assessments, and punishments or rewards, which became the mainstay of No Child Left Behind, had been set in place (Rudalevige, 2003; Vinovskis, 2008).

A Nation at Risk was released at a time when interests and concerns regarding America's role in the global marketplace were beginning to take shape, as the number of domestic manufacturing jobs dropped and labor began to be outsourced to workers in other nations who were paid lower wages (Reich, 1992). As a result, higher education became a necessity for those seeking office and professional jobs requiring postsecondary credentials. With the advent of the internet and the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, technology became central to the production, application, and dissemination of knowledge, as the flow of information and communication became instantaneously available across the globe (Goldin & Katz, 2008). The discourse on globalization began to place an emphasis on education as being central to furthering a knowledge economy (Drucker, 1993; Spring, 2008).

Amidst the changing global economy and expectations for education, disparities between the schooling of the rich and poor continued to widen, as documented in Jonathan Kozol's 1991 book, *Savage Inequalities*, which compared the educational experiences of students from rich and poor communities. In addition to revealing how educational and funding inequalities were widening along socioeconomic lines, Kozol highlighted the intersections among race, ethnicity, and class, and how students of color were systematically disadvantaged. As a response to inequities in the public school system, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, started offering vouchers to families to send their children to private schools. This policy response became a hotbed for political debate. Critics viewed this as a "dangerous idea," which would foster more division nationwide about the role of public education, while possibly muddying the separation between religion and publicly funded schooling (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002; Kaiser, 2009). Statewide referenda on voucher plans have not proven successful, suggesting considerable public skepticism about the idea.

In addition to questions about which schools were accessible to which students, debates regarding the nature of what was being taught to whom contested the accessibility of the curriculum to all students, particularly African American and Latino students. Influenced by the Civil Rights Movement; the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which abolished a quota system; the development of Ethnic Studies on university campuses; and the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII of ESEA) and its amendments, multicultural education in the schools began taking hold with changes to the curriculum in the 1970s (Banks, 2007). The concept of multicultural education began to gain public attention in the late 1980s when several states revised social studies curricula to include greater study of world history and a variety of cultures (Ravitch, 2000). Some of the defining tenets of multicultural education have included preserving a group's culture; promoting social justice through antiracist education and teaching students in

a culturally “congruent” manner; “righting the historical record”; advancing the civic good by teaching tolerance and open-mindedness; fostering a sense of national unity by honoring the contributions of various groups; and fostering children’s autonomy by exposing them to new ideas, beliefs, and ways of life (Levinson, 2010). Controversy over multicultural education erupted in the late 1980s and early 1990s when Afrocentrism became the curricular focus in some inner city schools, with the intent to boost the self-esteem and motivation of their African American students (Ravitch, 2000). Critics of multicultural education voiced their fears that it could lead to the fragmentation of American society and the unequal emphasis on the study of certain groups at the exclusion of others (Schlesinger, 1991).

In 2001, the reauthorization of ESEA through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) under President George W. Bush was initially viewed as a means for minimizing the inequalities of schooling through a focus on the achievement gap by holding schools accountable to the same standards and expectations for all students (McGuinn, 2006). In order to receive Title I funding, schools were required under NCLB to test all students in grades 3-8 annually in reading and math, and at least once in high school. Schools were required to demonstrate that student subgroups, broken down by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, and English language proficiency, could separately attain AYP. Schools that failed to meet AYP for five years were subject to closure. States and schools that made the most progress in narrowing the achievement gap would be rewarded financially. By affecting the manner in which schools implemented standards, assessment, and curriculum through the use of mandates, punishments, and rewards, the federal government was no longer seen as playing a peripheral role in American education.

With emphasis on standardized assessments, NCLB also contributed to the school choice movement. The rationale underlying choice reflected the influence of neoliberalism in education, which emphasized free market competition among institutions for consumers (families and students) to induce greater efficiency, productivity, and quality (Harvey, 2007). Assessment scores published and reported under NCLB provided quantitative and seemingly unbiased indicators of quality, which could assist families in making informed decisions regarding the best provider of education for their children (Hursh, 2007). Concurrently, assessments also indicated to families that schools were inadequately serving their children under a national system that mandated the use of standards and accountability, raising questions about the federal role in decisions regarding their children’s education. Questions of choice and local control were also raised as 42 states adopted Common Core State Standards, national curricular guidelines that were codified in 2009, to prepare students for college and career readiness. Although this was not a federal initiative, it was widely seen in the same light as NCLB in this regard (Hess & McShane, 2013; Ravitch, 2010).

1.6 Concluding Remarks

While the rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk* and NCLB emphasized increasing the competitiveness of American students, data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a series of international assessments, suggest this has not occurred. A comparison of results from 2012 revealed that the United States, on average, scored lower on mathematics, science, and reading literacy than 18 other education systems (Kelly et al., 2013). These results appeared to mirror the outcomes revealed as a result of NCLB and also pointed to inadequacies in American schooling, helping to fuel discontent with long-standing school policies (Rizvi & Lingard, 2006). Given this, it is little wonder that the school choice movement is gaining momentum; it reflects social and political changes that have occurred over the past 35 years. Yet, the movement’s focus on human capital cultivation over the common school principles of equalizing educational,

political, and social opportunity is cause for concern. As access to quality schooling has been increasingly predicated on where a child lives—urban, suburban, or rural—it is also important to question the fidelity and utility of the relationship between schools and society. The ideals of Horace Mann, John Dewey, and other leaders of American school reform who emphasized the public school's vital role in a democratic society must not be forgotten. For millions of families who can ill afford high-quality private schooling, even with the help of publicly funded vouchers, the promise of public education remains a vital part of the “American Dream.” This remains a critically important aspect of the heritage of American education with a critical role to play in the future of our globalized world (Noguera, 2003).

References

- Abington School District v. Schempp*. (1963). 374 U.S. 203.
- Adams, D. W. (1995). *Education for extinction: American Indians and the boarding school experience, 1875-1928*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Angus, D., & Mirel, J. (1999). *The failed promise of American high school, 1890-1995*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Axtell, J. (1974). *The school upon a hill: Education and society in colonial New England*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bailyn, B. (1967). *The ideological origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Banks, J. A. (2007). *Educating citizens in a multicultural society* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Beadie, N. (2010). *Education and the creation of capital in the early American republic*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernard, R. M., & Vinovskis, M. A. (1977). The female school teacher in ante-bellum Massachusetts. *Journal of Social History*, 10(3), 332–345.
- Binder, F. M. (1974). *The age of the common school: 1830-1865*. New York: Wiley.
- Brown, J. A. (1992). *The definition of a profession: The authority of metaphor in the history of intelligence testing, 1890-1930*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. (1954). 347 U.S. 483.
- Butchart, R. E. (2010). *Schooling the freed people: Teaching, learning and the struggle for Black freedom, 1861-1876*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Cremin, L. (1951). *The American common school: An historic conception*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Cremin, L. (1961). *The transformation of the school: Progressivism in American education, 1876-1957*. New York: Knopf.
- Cremin, L. (1970). *American education: The colonial experience, 1607-1783*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Cremin, L. (1980). *American education: The national experience, 1783-1876*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Curry, L. P. (1981). *The free Black in urban America, 1800-1850: The shadow of the dream*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- DeBray, E. (2006). *Politics, ideology and education: Federal policy during the Clinton and Bush administrations*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Donato, R. (1997). *The other struggle for equal schools: Mexican Americans during the civil rights era*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Douglass, F. (2001). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*. New Haven: Yale University Press. (Original work published in 1845.)
- Drucker, P. (1993). *Post-capitalist society*. London: Butterworth Heinemann.
- Engel v. Vitale*. (1962). 370 U.S. 421.

- Franklin, B. M. (1994). *From "backwardness" to "at-risk:" Childhood learning difficulties and the contradictions of school reform*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Godwin, R. K., & Kemerer, F. R. (2002). *School choice tradeoffs: Liberty, equity, and diversity*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Goldin, C., & Katz, L. F. (2008). *The race between education and technology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gratz v. Bollinger*. (2003). 539 U.S.24.
- Harvey, D. (2007). *A brief history of neo liberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Herbst, J. (1996). *The one and future school: Three hundred and fifty years of American secondary education*. New York: Routledge.
- Hess, F. M., & McShane, M. Q. (Eds.) (2013). *Common Core meets education reform: What it all means for politics, policy, and the future of schooling*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hoxie, F. E. (1984). *A final promise: The campaign to assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Hursh, D. (2007). Assessing No Child Left Behind and the rise of neoliberal education policies. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44(3), 493–518.
- Kaestle, C. F. (1973). *Joseph Lancaster and the monitorial school movement: A documentary history*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kaestle, C. F. (1983). *Pillars of the republic: Common schools and American society, 1780-1860*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Kaestle, C. F. (2001). Federal aid to education since World War II: Purposes and politics. In J. Jennings (Ed.), *The future of the federal role in elementary and secondary education* (pp. 13–35). Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.
- Kaiser, L. (2009, March 4). An interview with educator and activist Jonathan Kozol: How racial and economic segregation damage our urban and rural school districts? *Milwaukee Shepherd Express*. Retrieved from <http://shepherdexpress.com/article-permalink-5728.html>
- Kantor, H., & Brenzel, B. (1993). Urban education and the "Truly Disadvantaged." The historical roots of the contemporary crisis, 1945-1990. In M. B. Katz (Ed.), *The underclass debate: Views from history* (pp. 366–401). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kantor, H., & Lowe, R. (1995). Class, race, and the emergence of federal education policy: From the New Deal to the Great Society. *Educational Researcher*, 24(3), 4–11.
- Katz, M. B. (1968). *The irony of early school reform: Educational innovation in mid-nineteenth century Massachusetts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kelly, D., Xie, H., Winquist Nord, C., Jenkins, F., Ying Chan, J., & Kastberg, D. (2013). Performance of U.S. 15-year old students in mathematics, science, and reading literacy in an international context: First look at PISA 2012 (NCES 2014-024).
- Kerber, L. K. (1980). *Women of the republic: Intellect and ideology in Revolutionary America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Kim, D., & Rury, J. L. (2007). The changing profile of college access: The Truman Commission and enrollment patterns in the postwar era. *History of Education Quarterly*, 47(3), 302–327.
- Kliebard, H. M. (1999). *Schooled to work: Vocationalism and the American curriculum, 1876-1946*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kliebard, H. M. (2004). *The struggle for the American curriculum, 1893-1958* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Kluger, R. (1976). *Simple justice: The history of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's struggle for equality*. New York: Knopf.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities*. New York: Crown.
- Kuhl, S. (2002). *The Nazi connection: Eugenics, American racism, and German national socialism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lannie, V. P. (1968). *Public money and parochial education: Bishop Hughes, Governor Steward, and the New York school controversy*. Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University.
- Lau v. Nichols*. (1974). 414 U.S. 563.
- Lemann, N. (1991). *The promised land: The great Black migration and how it changed America*. New York: Knopf.

- Levinson, M. (2010). Mapping multicultural education. In H. Siegel (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of education* (pp. 428–450). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lockridge, K. A. (1974). *Literacy in colonial New England: An enquiry into the social context of literacy in the early modern West*. New York: Norton.
- MacDonald, V.-M. (2004). *Latino education in the United States: A narrated history from 1513-2000*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McGuinn, P. J. (2006). *No Child Left Behind and the transformation of federal education policy, 1965-2005*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.
- Messerli, J. (1972). *Horace Mann: A biography*. New York: Knopf.
- Moran, G. F., & Vinovskis, M. (2007). Literacy, common schools, and high schools in colonial and antebellum America. In W. J. Reece & J. L. Rury (Eds.), *Rethinking the history of American education* (pp. 17–46). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moss, H. J. (2009). *Schooling citizens: The struggle for African American education in antebellum America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nasaw, D. (1979). *Schooled to order: A social history of public schooling in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nash, M. A. (2005). *Women's education in the United States, 1780-1840*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/title.html>
- Noguera, P. (2003). *City schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the promise of public education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Nord, W. A. (1995). *Religion and American education: Rethinking a national dilemma*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Orfield, G. (1983). *Public school desegregation in the United States, 1968-1980*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political Studies.
- Patterson, J. T. (2002). *Brown v. Board of Education: A civil rights milestone and its troubled legacy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Perlmann, J., & Margo, R. (2001). *Women's work? American teachers, 1750-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Polenberg, R. (1980). *One nation divisible: Class, race, and ethnicity in the United States since 1938*. New York: Viking.
- University of California v. Bakke. (1978). 438 U.S. 265.
- Rauscher, E. (2014). Hidden gains: Effects of early U.S. compulsory schooling laws on attendance and attainment by social background. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(4), 501–518.
- Ravitch, D. (1974). *The great school wars: 1805-1973. A history of the public schools as a battlefield of social change*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ravitch, D. (1983). *The troubled crusade: American education, 1945-1980*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ravitch, D. (2000). *Left back: A century of battles over school reform*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books.
- Reese, W. J. (1995). *The origins of the American high school*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Reich, R. B. (1992). *The work of nations: Preparing ourselves for 21st century capitalism*. New York: Vintage.
- Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2006). Globalization and the changing nature of the OECD's educational work. In H. Lauder, P. Brown, J. Dillabough, & H. Halsey (Eds.), *Education, globalization, and social change* (pp. 247–260). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts v. City of Boston*. (1850). 59 Mass. 198.
- Rudalevige, A. (2003). No Child Left Behind: Forging a congressional compromise. In P. E. Peterson & M. R. West (Eds.), *No Child Left Behind: The politics and practice of school accountability* (pp. 23–54). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Rudolph, F. (1965). *Essays on education in the early republic; Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster, Robert Coram, Simeon Doggett, Samuel Harrison Smith, Amable-Louis-Rose de Lafitte du Courteil, Samuel Knox*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

- Rury, J. L. (1985). Philanthropy, self help and social control: The New York Manumission Society and free Blacks, 1785-1810. *Phylon*, 46(3), 231-241.
- Rury, J. L. (2006). Social capital and the common schools. In D. Warren & J. J. Patrick (Eds.), *Civic and moral learning in America* (pp. 69-86). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rury, J. L., & Hill, S. A. (2012). *The African American struggle for secondary schooling, 1940-1980: Closing the graduation gap*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rury, J. L., & Saarcioğlu, A. (2011). Suburban advantage: Opportunity hoarding and secondary attainment in the postwar metropolitan North. *American Journal of Education*, 117(3), 307-342.
- San Miguel, Jr., G. (1987). *"Let all of them take heed:" Mexican Americans and the campaign for educational equality in Texas, 1910-1981*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- San Miguel, Jr., G. (2001). *Brown, not White: School integration and the Chicano movement in Houston*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Schlesinger, Jr., A. M. (1991). *The disuniting of America: Reflections on a multicultural society*. New York: Norton.
- Scotch, R. (2001). *From good will to civil rights: Transforming federal disability policy* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Sklar, K. K. (1973). *Catharine Beecher: A study in American domesticity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sklar, K. K. (1993). The schooling of girls and changing community values in Massachusetts towns, 1750-1820. *History of Education Quarterly*, 33(4), 511-542.
- Spring, J. (2008). Research on globalization and education. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(2), 330-363.
- Steffes, T. L. (2102). *School, society and state: A new education to govern modern America, 1890-1940*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Szasz, M. C. (1988). *Indian education in the American colonies, 1607-1783*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Thelin, J. R. (2011). *A history of American higher education* (2nd ed.) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tyack, D. B. (1974). *The one best system: A history of American urban education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tyack, D. B., & Hansot, E. (1990). *Learning together: A history of coeducation in American public schools*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Tyack, D. B., James, T., & Benavot, A. (1987). *Law and the shaping of public education, 1785-1954*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- VanOverbeke, M. (2008). *The standardization of American schooling: Linking secondary and higher education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vine, P. (1976). The social function of eighteenth-century higher education. *History of Education Quarterly*, 12(4), 409-424.
- Vinovskis, M. A. (2005). *The birth of Head Start: Preschool education policies in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vinovskis, M. (2008). *From A Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind: Federal education goals and the creation of federal education policy*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Weber, D. T. (1994). *The Spanish frontier in North America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wiebe, R. H. (1967). *The search for order, 1877-1920*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Woody, T. (1923). *Quaker education in the colony and state of New Jersey*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Zimmerman, J. (2005). *Whose America?: Culture wars in the public schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.