

Historical Timeline of Public Education in the US

1647

The General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony decrees that every town of fifty families should have an elementary school and that every town of 100 families should have a Latin school. The goal is to ensure that Puritan children learn to read the Bible and receive basic information about their Calvinist religion.

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."

1785

The Continental Congress (before the U.S. Constitution was ratified) passes a law calling for a survey of the "Northwest Territory" which included what was to become the state of Ohio. The law created "townships," reserving a portion of each township for a local school. From these "land grants" eventually came the U.S. system of "land grant universities," the state public universities that exist today. Of course in order to create these townships, the Continental Congress assumes it has the right to give away or sell land that is already occupied by Native people.

1790

Pennsylvania state constitution calls for free public education but only for poor children. It is expected that rich people will pay for their children's schooling.

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.

1820

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

1827

Massachusetts passes a law making all grades of public school open to all pupils free of charge.

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.

1820-1860

The percentage of people working in agriculture plummets as family farms are gobbled up by larger agricultural businesses and people are forced to look for work in towns and cities. At the same time, cities grow tremendously, fueled by new manufacturing industries, the influx of people from rural areas and many immigrants from Europe. During the 10 years from 1846 to 1856, 3.1 million immigrants arrive a number equal to one eighth of the entire U.S. population. Owners of industry needed a docile, obedient workforce and look to public schools to provide it.

1836

Slave-owner David Bowie and Indian-killer Davy Crockett are among those killed in the Battle of the Alamo in Texas, in their attempt to take Texas by force from Mexico.

1837

Horace Mann becomes head of the newly formed Massachusetts State Board of Education. Edmund Dwight, a major industrialist, thinks a state board of education was so important to factory owners that he offered to supplement the state salary with extra money of his own.

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 forced a Protestant curriculum.

1845

The United States annexes Texas.

1846

President James Polk orders the invasion of Mexico.

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 first its 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.

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."

1865-1877

African Americans mobilize to bring public education to the South for the first time. After the Civil War, and with the legal end of slavery, African Americans in the South make alliances with white Republicans to push for many political changes, including for the first time rewriting state constitutions to guarantee free public education. In practice, white children benefit more than Black children.

1877-1900

Reconstruction ends in 1877 when federal troops, which had occupied the South since the end of the Civil War are withdrawn. Whites regain political control of the South and lay the foundations of legal segregation.

1893-1913

Size of school boards in the country's 28 biggest cities is cut in half. Most local district (or "ward") based positions are eliminated, in favor of city-wide elections. This means that local immigrant communities lose control of their local schools. Makeup of school boards changes from small local businessmen and some wage earners to professionals (like doctors and lawyers), big businessmen and other members of the richest classes.

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.

1917

Smith-Hughes Act passes, providing federal funding for vocational education. Big manufacturing corporations push this, because they want to remove job skill training from the apprenticeship programs of trade unions and bring it under their own control.

1924

An act of Congress makes Native Americans U.S. citizens for the first time.

1930-1950

The NAACP brings a series of suits over unequal teachers' pay for Blacks and whites in southern states. At the same time, southern states realize they are losing African American labor to the northern cities. These two sources of pressure resulted in some increase of spending on Black schools in the South.

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.

1948

Educational Testing Service is formed, merging the College Entrance Examination

Board, the Cooperative Test Service, the Graduate Records Office, the National Committee on Teachers Examinations and others, with huge grants from the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations. These testing services continued the work of eugenicists like Carl Brigham (originator of the SAT) who did research "proving" that immigrants were feeble-minded.

1954

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. The Supreme Court unanimously agrees that segregated schools are "inherently unequal" and must be abolished. 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.

1968

African American parents and white teachers clash in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville area of New York City, over the issue of community control of the schools. Teachers go on strike, and the community organizes freedom schools while the public schools are closed.

1974

Milliken v. Bradley. A Supreme Court made up of Richard Nixon's appointees rules that schools may not be desegregated across school districts. This effectively legally segregates students of color in inner-city districts from white students in wealthier white suburban districts.

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.

1980s

The federal Tribal Colleges Act establishes a community college on every Indian reservation, which allows young people to go to college without leaving their families.

1994

Proposition 187 passes in California, making it illegal for children of undocumented immigrants to attend public school. Federal courts hold Proposition 187 unconstitutional, but anti-immigrant feeling spreads across the country.

1996

Leading the way backwards again, California passes Proposition 209, which outlaws affirmative action in public employment, public contracting and public education. Other states jump on the bandwagon with their own initiatives and right wing elements hope to pass similar legislation on a federal level.

1998

California again! This time a multi-millionaire named Ron Unz manages to put a measure on the June 1998 ballot outlawing bilingual education in California.