

Education in America

By ReadWorks

How to educate America's children is one of the more controversial and important questions today. But the controversy is not new. Even before the United States became an independent nation, local and regional leaders recognized the crucial role education played in shaping America. Since colonial times, curricula and teaching methods have evolved. That evolution provides insight into the values and aspirations of the country.

In Europe and America in the seventeenth century, education came mostly from private tutors. Only the wealthy could afford to tutor their children—not only a lack of money for tutors' salaries, but also the need for children to help out with household labor, especially farming, meant that most children went unschooled. Some picked up reading and writing from literate family members or friends of the family, but many Americans in colonial times were illiterate. The bulk of the remaining education came from private religious schools, which sought to educate the next generation of clergy in Latin, religious studies, the classics, and the European canon.

The first public school was founded in Boston in 1635. Schooling at first was a matter of socialization: how to fit in, how to be a competent and acceptable member of the community. Children learned religious and community values. Reading was also important, as colonists prized a knowledge of the Bible. Some schools also taught math. On the other hand, the sciences were all but disregarded. Latin was the language of law, medicine, and the ministry, and therefore a necessity for anyone hoping to find success through education. But the cost of a good Latin teacher was a barrier: only wealthy families could afford the education that would allow a child to become successful in the learned professions.

Before the Revolution, education was strongest in New England. Population density factored into a better system of schools. In the more rural South, the fact that people were spaced further apart made it very difficult to organize and send children to school. And in fact, anyone living far from a major city or town would have been lucky to find a school close enough to make education worthwhile, or even possible.

The colonists considered educating boys and girls two distinct concepts. Sending a girl to school was seen as irrelevant by many. When girls did attend, they went to separate, girls-only schools with different purposes. It was assumed that no girl would go on to become a doctor, a lawyer, a scholar, or a minister. Socialization was especially emphasized in schools for girls.

But in the early nineteenth century, the stigma against a full education for girls was weakened. Female writers (educated in schools for girls, schools for young ladies, and finishing schools) promoted the idea of “republican motherhood.” They argued that a happy and virtuous nation depended on a happy and virtuous family. Since mothers spent more time with their children than fathers did, mothers, too, needed to be wise, worldly, and knowledgeable. Thanks to the efforts of these writers, girls gained greater access to subjects that had been reserved for boys: math, science, and philosophy, in particular.

The nineteenth century saw greater educational access for boys, too. Supported by local laws and mandates, public schools flourished, especially in the North. In 1821, America's first public high school was founded in Boston. By 1870, all states had free public elementary schools. By the turn of the century, public schools began to outnumber private schools.

In the mid-nineteenth century, most northern schools adopted the Mann reforms, based on the model proposed by the Massachusetts politician and education reformer Horace Mann. A “common school” (a term coined by Mann) was a public and typically one-roomed school attended by children ages six to fourteen. Common schools brought white children of all classes together, which was revolutionary at the time. The more capable students acted as teachers' helpers, both learning and teaching their classmates. In Mann's model, students were grouped by age, and passed together from one grade to the next. Classes would be lecture-style. Teachers were given more responsibility, as they had to teach a topic almost exclusively by talking about it. Students were given a more passive role: listening and taking notes. Mann believed universal public education, coupled with his more rigid educational model, would instill discipline and harmony in children. Two hundred years had passed and literacy had ballooned, but the purpose of schooling had changed little since colonial times.

Education continued to expand in the early twentieth century. The number of children receiving education and the number of schools educating them rose along with the Progressive Movement, which advocated across-the-board reforms. Americans came to the consensus that education needed to extend beyond literacy, the essential cut-off point for centuries. America's economy was exploding, and the country would need more than barely educated laborers to fill new managerial roles and become leaders in business and industry. In 1910, 9 percent of Americans had graduated high school. By 1940, the number had increased to 50 percent.

Just as the general expansion of education in the eighteenth century coincided with better education for women, the twentieth century's expansions coincided with better

education for blacks. And just as it was women who fought for and won better education for themselves, it would be by the struggle of the country's educated blacks that the notion of “universal” education expanded to include black people.

Segregated schools in the South lasted until the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that state laws establishing separate schools for whites and blacks were unconstitutional. The African-American community had been bringing forward similar litigation for more than half a century, but the courts had, before 1954, upheld the “separate but equal” argument. Nevertheless, efforts to better black education were widespread. Many black schools and colleges were formed in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.

Despite the accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement and predecessor movements, educational inequality has far from disappeared. In fact, the struggle to diagnose and rectify inequality has been a key one in education since the Supreme Court's landmark 1954 decision.

The issue is not easily solved. Though segregation has officially ended, “de facto segregation,” racial segregation that happens “by fact” rather than legal requirement, still exists. To simply increase funding to minority schools is not enough, because the success or failure of education is closely tied to the affluence or poverty of the local community. Students from poor families living in poor communities have worse educational outcomes than their more affluent counterparts, even when school funding is equal.

“No Child Left Behind” sought to redress this inequality. Passed by Congress in 2002, it is a prominent example of the current educational trend toward standardization. The act required states to punish schools that were not meeting certain goals with respect to standardized testing in math and language skills. It was hoped that by 2014, 100 percent of students would be “proficient,” but half the states had to be given passes, as the goal proved unrealistic.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What two elements of education have evolved since colonial times?

2. The text describes the causes of certain developments in American education. What does the text suggest is the cause behind the continued expansion of education in the early twentieth century?

3. Education in America reflects the values and aspirations of the country. What evidence supports this conclusion?

4. Based on the text, what two groups of people have faced inequality in education?

5. What is the main idea of the article?

6. Read the sentences and answer the question.

"To simply increase funding to minority schools is not enough, because the success or failure of education is closely tied to the affluence or poverty of the local community. Students from poor families living in poor communities have worse educational outcomes than their more affluent counterparts, even when school funding is equal."

As used in the text, what does the word "affluent" mean?

7. What word or phrase best completes the sentence?

Black students were forced to attend separate schools from white students _____ the Supreme Court's 1954 decision.

8. According to the text, what is the success or failure of education closely tied to?

9. Identify one argument about educational inequality that the author makes. Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

10. Describe at least one factor which has impacted the evolution of American education. Make sure to analyze how this factor has impacted the evolution of American education.
