

A Brief History of Education in America

Early American education was primarily private or religious, and it brought mass schooling and literacy to the nation well before the public school system we know today was legislated into existence. Public schooling arose in response to an influx of immigrants who had different religions or cultures. Its primary focus was to establish social order and mainstream vast numbers of immigrant children into a common school setting. A mistrust of parents was common during the birth of public schools. As an 1851 article in *The Massachusetts Teacher* reported: “In too many instances the parents are unfit guardians of their own children ... the children must be gathered up and forced into school” [C 79-80].

Over the past 150 years, mistrusting parents and forcing children into common schools has produced mixed results. Today, while some children receive a decent education, many, particularly those in urban areas, receive a poor quality education. In many instances, public schools have actually segregated the population more deeply between the *have's* and *have-not's*, creating a gulf of learning opportunities that is simply too wide for many parents to cross.

School choice bridges these gaps and returns education to its American roots by empowering all parents, regardless of economic circumstances, with the freedom and opportunity to choose a better education for their children.

--“The ABCs of School Choice,” Friedman Foundation, drawn from the work of Andrew Coulson, author of [Market Education: The Unknown History](#)

Year(s)	Stages of American Education	Events in Education
1642	“PERMISSIVE” ERA	First education law enacted by Massachusetts General Court requiring parents and guardians of children to “make certain that their charges could read and understand the principles of religion and the laws of the Commonwealth” (O 147)
1749		Benjamin Franklin founds a private academy (a private secondary school) that offers a practical curriculum of a variety of subjects and useful skills. By the mid 1800s, many such private academies exist, offering a wide array of curricula and courses ranging from traditional Latin and Greek to very practical, utilitarian studies (O 154).
1821		First government-owned/operated public high school opens in Boston, MA (O 154).
	Marked by complete parental authority	
1826	“ENCOURAGING” ERA	Massachusetts passes a law requiring every town to choose a school committee, beginning the policy of organizing public schools into a system under a single authority. Connecticut follows suit shortly thereafter (O 159).
1827		Massachusetts enacts law requiring public high schools (O 180).
1830s		Seeking to win public support for government schools, chief advocate Horace Mann , who is appointed Secretary of Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837, assures Protestants that the public schools will regularly use the Protestant Bible (Coulson 81).
1836-1920		More than 120 million copies of McGuffey's readers, which emphasize the ideals of “literacy, hard work, diligence, and virtuous living,” are sold (O 163).
Mid-1800s		Despite a trend toward building government-run elementary schools, Maine and Vermont continue their practice of ‘tuitioning’ students (i.e., allowing districts that decided not to own/operate public schools to use public funds to pay costs of a district student’s schooling at a private, parochial, or religious school of parents’ choice).
1850		US Census data reveal that only 1 in 10 people identified themselves as illiterate in the 1850 US census – half a century before public school attendance became common (C 84).
1850		The Maine Supreme Court declares it “legal for all students in the government schools to be compelled to read the Protestant Bible” (C 82).
1851		Mistrust of parents spreads in education leadership, as exemplified in this Massachusetts Teacher article: “In too many instances the parents are unfit guardians of their own children ... the children must be gathered up and forced into school” (C 79-80)

1855	<p>"COMPULSORY" ERA</p> <p>During this stage, government compels the establishment of school districts, taxation for government schools, curriculum and structure, and children's school attendance (O 160).</p> <p>Marked by decline of parental authority; children of certain ages compelled to attend school. (For a brief period in some states, it was illegal for children to attend non-government schools, even if parents could afford to pay tuition.)</p>	More than 6,000 private academies (high schools for occupational and college prep) exist in the US, with an enrollment of 263,000 students (O 164).
1857		National Education Association (NEA) founded with 43 members (O 53).
1865-1900		Influence over children and education shifts from parents to government authorities (C 82-83): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ <i>"Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, education reformers, bureaucrats and teachers' organizations pushed to increase their powers"</i> over children and public schools. ◆ California State Superintendent of Public Instruction writes, <i>"The child should be taught to consider his instructor, in many respects, superior to the parent in point of authority ... [T]he vulgar impression that parents have a legal right to dictate to teachers is entirely erroneous."</i> ◆ Wisconsin Teachers Association asserts that <i>children are the property of the state.</i>
1852-1913		Compulsory school attendance laws are enacted in all states (C 84).
1900		A majority of children, ages 6 to 13, are now enrolled in government elementary schools. By 1980, 99% of U.S. children attend government schools (O 164).
1909		First public junior high school established in Berkeley, California (O 181).
1916		American Federal of Teachers (AFT) founded (C 53).
1917		NEA's Commission on Reorganization of Secondary Education unveils proposal to restructure high schools (adopted 1918 as <i>Cardinal Principals of Secondary Education</i> .) Students sorted into 4 curricular patterns: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. college preparatory or <i>academic</i> program 2. commercial or <i>business</i> program 3. industrial, vocational, home economics, and agricultural program 4. <i>"a modified academic program for terminal students..."</i> (O 169-170).
1922		Oregon revises compulsory school law to make it illegal for any child between the ages of 8 and 16 to attend a non-government school (C 122).
1925		US Supreme Court limits government's authority: <i>"The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in the Union repose excludes any general power of the State to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty to recognize and prepare him for additional obligation"</i> (US Supreme Court, <i>Pierce v. Little Sisters for the Poor</i>)
1944		Congress enacts the G.I. Bill to provide federal funds for college education of veterans at public, private, religious schools.
1950s		Minnesota enacts tax deductions for K-12 expenses. Parental deductions include tuition at private schools, transportation, textbooks, and other supplies.
1954		U.S. Supreme Court , in <i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka</i> , outlaws racial segregation in government schools (O 178).
1954		Maine revises its 100-year-old 'tuitioning' system to prohibit the use of public funds at private religious schools (H 72).
1958		Congress passes the National Defense Education Act , which provides federal funds to local public schools for science, math and foreign language instruction, as well as <u>guidance counseling services</u> (O 181).
1962	Vermont Supreme Court rules that the state's 100-year practice of allowing public funds to pay tuition at religious schools now violates the state's Constitution (H 168).	
1965	Congress enacts the Elementary and Secondary Education Act , providing federal funds for local public schools (O 181).	
1980	The U.S. Department of Education is elevated to Cabinet level status.	

1980	<p>“FREEDOM OR SCHOOL CHOICE” ERA</p> <p>During this stage, education options for children expand through homeschooling, vouchers, tuition tax credits, scholarship tax credits, education deductions, and charter schools.</p> <p>Marked by increased parental authority and options</p>	Between 1982 and 1992, 32 states change their compulsory attendance laws to specifically permit home schooling (C 120-121). By the mid-1990s, all states permit homeschooling.
1983		The National Commission on Excellence in Education releases its report, “A Nation at Risk,” declaring America’s <i>“educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them,”</i> and warning of a <i>“rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”</i>
1987		Iowa enacts tax credits for educational expenses
1990		Milwaukee [Wisconsin] Parental Choice Program is signed into law, giving low-income parents a publicly-funded voucher to send their children to a private non-sectarian school of choice (H 182).
1992		First charter school is established in St. Paul, Minnesota.
1995		Cleveland [Ohio] Pilot Project Scholarship Program is signed into law, giving students a voucher to attend the public, private, or religious school of choice. The American Federal of Teachers challenges the program on constitutional grounds. An appeal has been filed before the U.S. Supreme Court, which will decide in September or October 2001 whether to review the case.
1997		Arizona enacts state income tax credits for scholarship contributions. Legal challenge filed by Arizona Education Association.
		Minnesota enacts a refundable tax credit for education expenses, including tuition, of up to \$1,625 for elementary school and \$2,500 for junior and senior high school.
1998		Iowa increases its state tax credit for tuition expenses from \$100 to \$250 per year.
		Wisconsin Supreme Court declares the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program does not violate the state’s Constitution (6/10/98). The U.S. Supreme Court denies appeal, allows ruling to stand.
1999	Florida enacts “Opportunity Scholarships” (vouchers) to allow children in habitually failing public schools to receive a voucher to attend a private or religious school (or better performing public school) of choice. Constitutional challenges were filed by the ACLU, NEA, People for the American Way, NAACP and others.	
	Arizona Supreme Court rules Arizona tax credits are constitutional and raises legal concerns challenges the intent of the Blaine Amendment in the state Constitution (Jan 1999). U.S. Supreme Court denies appeal, allows ruling to stand (10/4/99).	
1999	Illinois enacts a state income tax credit for education expenses, including tuition, book fees, and lab fees, incurred on behalf of K-12 students in Illinois public or private schools. Two constitutional challenges are filed: one by the Illinois Federation of Teachers, and a second by the Illinois Education Association, People for the American Way, and others.	
2001	Pennsylvania enacts a state corporate educational tax credit for private scholarship contributions.	
	Florida enacts the McKay Scholarship Program for students with disabilities and Scholarship Tax Credits . Florida Supreme Court lets stand a Court of Appeals decision that “Opportunity Scholarships” are constitutional (4/24/01).	
	Illinois Supreme Court lets stand a lower court ruling that Illinois state tuition tax credits are constitutional (6/29/01).	

2002	<p>U.S. Supreme Court rules vouchers do not offend the Establishment Clause when, as in Cleveland's voucher program, they are enacted for a 'valid secular purpose' and the program is one of 'true private choice' (<i>Zelman v. Simmons-Harris</i>, 6/28/02).</p> <p>No Child Left Behind Act is signed into law to remedy a crisis in education and give children in low-performing public schools options to choose better public schools. Of the 45 million high school seniors, according to US Secretary of Education Rod Paige, an estimated "10 million could not read at even a basic level; more than 25 million did not know even the basics of U.S. History; and of students in all high school levels, more than 20 million could not do even basic math" (H vii).</p> <p>Maryland joined 39 other states and the District of Columbia in permitting charter schools. States with the most charter schools are: Arizona (465), California (427), Florida (227), Texas (221), and Michigan (196).</p> <p>Homeschoolers establish their own National Honor Society, Eta Sigma Alpha, with more than 20 chapters nationwide. As many as 2 million children in grades K-12 are homeschooled each year. African-American home-schooling families increased ten-fold from 1999 to 2002.</p>
2003	<p>Colorado enacts Opportunity Grants (vouchers). District of Columbia's Opportunity Scholarship Program enacted by Republican-controlled U.S. Congress.</p>
2005	<p>Utah enacts scholarship program for students with disabilities</p>
2006	<p>Florida Supreme Court strikes down the Opportunity Scholarship Program, but leaves other school choice programs in place.</p> <p>Ohio enacts a 'failing school' voucher program.</p> <p>Rhode Island enacts a corporate scholarship tax credit program.</p> <p>Iowa enacts a scholarship tax credit for donors.</p> <p>Georgia enacts a voucher program for disabled children.</p>
2007	<p>Utah legislature enacts comprehensive K-12 school choice for all children in October; overturned in November by voter referendum.</p> <p>Pennsylvania expands corporate tax credit fund to \$75 million per year.</p>
2008	<p>Georgia enacts comprehensive K-12 scholarship program with no family income limitations.</p> <p>Louisiana enacts 2 programs: a low-income K-3 failing school voucher; and a personal tax deduction for parents for out-of-pocket tuition, books, etc., costs.</p> <p>Arizona and Florida lose school choice programs in court rulings. AZ court threw out 2 voucher programs (foster and disabled child); FL court ruled the state's voter referendum approving choice is unconstitutional.</p>
2009	<p>Washington DC's Opportunity Scholarship defunded by Democratic-controlled U.S. Congress. Obama Administration sends mixed signals: it won't abandon current scholarship children, but won't renew in 2010.</p>

Sources Cited

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