Schooled in the United States has a long and sordid history. Those who have studied the specifics of its development recognize that schooling is arguably the most important advancement in the nation. Every generation of American citizens has relied on schools to teach children essential lessons and knowledge that will aid them in their future economic, social, and civic responsibilities. How schools became the primary vehicle for inculcating and teaching students these lessons is the focus of this essay. It offers a brief overview, from the colonial era to the near present, of some of the most important developments in the history of schooling in the United States and illustrates how time, space, personalities, and expectations determined its evolution. As we will demonstrate, schools did not benefit everyone equally. Some children, whether because of their race, gender, religion, societal status, or some other extraneous factor, were systematically denied or hindered from receiving a quality education. As such, the legacy of schooling in the United States should not be seen as a linear collective history that everyone, regardless of their background, experienced. Rather, for nearly 400 years schools were the ultimate laboratory for testing and retesting issues of access, equity, affordability, utility, and democracy itself.

Colonial Era (1607–1776)

During the colonial era, schooling was not seen as a priority for the masses or a necessary expenditure for most colonies. Notwithstanding, schooling for all at the public’s expense took root very early in some, particularly in the New England area. The most noteworthy developments occurred in Massachusetts. The colony had a system of schools for its children within 30 years of its establishment. The colony was founded in 1620 with the arrival of Pilgrims from England, and major advances in education occurred after Puritans arrived in 1634. Within 2 years, colonists founded the Boston Latin Grammar School, which to date is recognized as the first secondary school in the United States, and by 1647, colonial Massachusetts instituted statutes that called for the development of a system of schools for all at the public’s expense.

Early settlers in Massachusetts did not come to obtain quick riches or venture upon new lands. They left England primarily to avoid religious and social persecution. The early settlers in Massachusetts came as intact nuclear families, many were educated and were educators, and most came with the intent of establishing a new permanent community in the colony. Schooling was a foremost consideration in this new community. In 1635, Boston town officials saw it necessary to hire a teacher for its children. The towns of Ipswich and Charleston also started schools that year. In 1638, Cambridge set aside three acres of land for school purposes, and in 1639, Dorchester, Newbury, and Salem all established schools. Within the first decade of settlement, according to historians Urban and Wagoner (2004), “seven of the twenty-two towns in Massachusetts had taken some public action on behalf of schooling” (p. 41).
Religion and schooling went hand-in-hand in Massachusetts. This is apparent in the first school law of the colony. The Old Deluder Satan Law (1647) called for the establishment of an elementary school for every 50 families in the colony and for a grammar school to be established in every large town. Similar developments happened elsewhere in the New England region. In 1642, for example, colonial Connecticut ordered that schools be established for the benefit of its children in its two most populated towns, New Haven and Hartford. These schools would be supported from funds drawn from the “common stock of the town” (Urban & Wagoner, 2000, p. 42.) The same was true in Rhode Island and New Hampshire. In fact, by the beginning of the 18th century, both Rhode Island and New Hampshire passed school statutes ensuring that all children within the colonies received a free education. By far the greatest educational advancement to occur in this region was the establishment of institutions of higher education. In 1636, Harvard was founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1707, Yale was founded in New Haven, Connecticut. In 1746, Princeton was founded as the College of New Jersey in Elizabeth, New Jersey. It relocated to Princeton and renamed itself in 1756. In New Hampshire, Dartmouth was founded in 1763, and in Providence, Rhode Island, Brown University was founded in 1765. These institutions of higher education were founded primarily as theological seminaries to train future clergymen for public service in their respective locales. The rise of these universities highlighted not only the advocacy for education, but also the religious tensions and sectarian rivalries among early colonists and how they used schooling to advance their ideals. Harvard was founded by Puritans; Yale was established out of disillusionment with Harvard’s growing tolerance for religious flexibility; Princeton was founded because of the religious rigidness of Yale; Dartmouth was founded out of enthusiasm stirred by the religious revivals of the Great Awakening; and Brown was founded by Baptists. Despite their sectarian differences each of these early institutions of higher education had commonalities; the most noteworthy being that they all expected to preserve their ways of life by using schools to teach and train future generations of children in their ideals. In the southern colonies—North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia—schooling at the public’s expense would not develop until after the Civil War. The primary reason for this underdevelopment was slavery. In an effort to keep African Americans enslaved or free illiterate, Whites in the South invariably undermined their own educational advancement. To slaveholders, a literate slave was dangerous and this contention became even more enunciated in the decades following the American Revolution. Nearly every American colony, and later state, prohibited or stringently restricted teaching free and enslaved African Americans in the South to read or write. South Carolina was the first. As early as 1740, the colony enacted a law that prohibited any person from teaching a slave how to read or write. Thirty years later, colonial Georgia followed South Carolina’s precedent and enacted similar code that forbade the teaching of slaves. The laws against teaching enslaved African Americans to read and write following the American Revolution grew out of a variety of fears and concerns, the most straightforward concerned the use of literacy as a means to obtain freedom (such as the forging of passes for escape). During the antebellum era, other southern states developed their own laws that prevented African Americans—enslaved or free—from learning. These combined efforts to keep African Americans illiterate in the South concomitantly kept Whites from establishing a viable school system for even its educable youth until after the Civil War and slavery’s demise. American Revolution (1776–1800)

During and after the American Revolution, the call for schooling took on greater meaning. Its most outspoken advocate was Virginia native and author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. Three times between 1779 and 1818, Jefferson proposed before the Virginia legislature a plan calling for the establishment of schools at the public’s expense. Each time Jefferson’s plan was soundly rejected. In 1779, Jefferson published A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge. In it he outlined a detailed plan for the establishment of schools in Virginia. Jefferson calculated how many schools should be established in the state, who should teach in these schools, what children would learn, and how schools would be funded through local and state taxation. Jefferson called for nothing less than a three-tiered plan for universal education for all free children in Virginia. The first tier, elementary schools, guaranteed every free child in the state received 3 years of schooling at the public’s expense. These schools would teach children reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history. The second tier, grammar schools, was designed for young boys to continue their learning. In these schools students would learn advanced mathematics, physical sciences, languages, world and American history, and philosophy. The smartest male student of each district elementary school would be afforded a scholarship to attend grammar school and thereafter the university, if he could not afford to continue his education. Through these schools and merit-based scholarships, Jefferson assumed he would find young, bright minds that ordinarily would never be given an opportunity to advance beyond a common status. By way of his educational plan, Jefferson firmly believed a few “geniuses” would “be raked from the rubbish”; the rubbish being the average poor yeoman farmer in Virginia. Notwithstanding, Jefferson was not the only advocate for the development of schools during the revolutionary era. While Jefferson concentrated his energies on Virginia, others, such as Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster, articulated their own ideas of the role schools should play
in their respective states and the new republic. In 1786, Rush, a professor of chemistry and medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote a plan calling for the establishment of public schools in Pennsylvania. In this plan Rush outlined his vision of a new republic that would use schools as a vehicle to promote sound moral values, patriotism, nationalism, and a homogeneous people in thought and action. Although Rush’s plan concentrated on Pennsylvania, his proposal by extension spoke to the educational needs of all citizens in the new nation. Rush believed every child should learn what it means to be a patriotic citizen with sound moral values, and schools could be the catalyst to teach children these important lessons.

Noah Webster, author of the *American Spelling Book* and *American Dictionary of the English Language*, was very much in agreement with Jefferson and Rush that the direction of the nation’s future depended heavily on the amount and type of education its citizenry received. He believed schools should inculcate in youth messages of unity, nationalism, and morality. Children of the young republic should learn American history, even an American language, to best foster a strong sense of nationalism and an identity that was distinct from England and other European countries. Webster devoted most of his time and energies to design and provide the texts necessary to achieve this aim.

**Common School Movement (1820–1860)**

Between 1820 and 1860, schooling slowly began to flourish in the United States. By 1860, of the 34 states in the Union, every state (as part of their admission into the Union) had adopted school law that required public schooling at the state’s expense for its educable youth, and nearly half had effectively implemented a viable school system. Schooling occurred from Massachusetts to California, and the school development to occur in this time span has been labeled by historians as the Common School Movement. “Common schools” was the ideological slogan used by school reformers in this era to describe a particular type of schooling experience. The schools were to be free, universal, centralized, and offer a common curriculum and quality schooling experience to students regardless of their background. No single person should serve as the representative or spokesperson for an era or movement, but arguably the most charismatic personality of this era was Horace Mann.

Mann, aptly named by many educational historians as the “Father of the Common School Movement,” was the first secretary of education for Massachusetts and he served this post from 1837 to 1848. The job was no easy task. Although schooling early in Massachusetts’s history was highly valued, Mann faced a society that had relegated schooling a nonimportant public matter. As such, the statewide school system he inherited as secretary of education was in utter disarray. Schools were underfunded, facilities were in wretched condition, teachers were poorly trained and underpaid, there was very little uniformity, and public interest or resources to rectify these problems barely existed. Nonetheless, during his tenure, Mann addressed many of the problems plaguing public schools in Massachusetts. Within a decade, he instituted a series of schooling initiatives to improve educational facilities, and standardized the curriculum and teacher training; he borrowed and implemented key educational reforms from abroad to advance public schooling in Massachusetts; he made schooling compulsory for 6 months out of the year; and his rhetoric and actions redirected the mindset of many state citizens who, before Mann, saw public education as a burden rather than an asset to society.

Much of Mann’s success came from his deep-seated belief in the transformative power of education. Mann believed every child, whether rich or poor, male or female, immigrant or native born, Protestant or Catholic, should be entitled to a quality education. In school, students would learn more than the rudiments of knowledge. They would learn sound morals, time management and social efficiency skills, and the meaning and utility of integral concepts such as freedom, democracy, and citizenship. In Mann’s mind, education was the birthright of every child born in the nation; it was a panacea to many societal problems, such as crime, illiteracy, and poverty, and if given the proper resources and support, education could serve as the great equalizer of society. It could alleviate poverty, ease religious tensions, produce social harmony, and give immigrants and native born persons a common heritage—even make them a common people.

Despite the fact that countless educational reformers throughout the nation adopted many of the measures Mann proposed and implemented in Massachusetts, not every one agreed with Horace Mann. “Universal” standards or a “common experience” did not necessarily include children who were deemed inferior, different, or strange, such as Black children or Irish Catholics (Urban & Wagoner, 2004). In 1849, one year after Mann resigned from his post as secretary of education, African American Benjamin F. Roberts sued the city of Boston on behalf of his 5-year-old daughter Sarah, accusing the city of perpetuating a system of unequal segregated schools. Sarah Roberts had to walk past five White elementary schools to attend the Smith School, a dilapidated educational facility designated for the city’s Black children. Roberts argued the Smith School was vastly inferior to the five White schools his daughter had to walk past and requested his daughter be allowed to attend one of them to accommodate her educational needs. His request coincided with a new city ordinance that mandated all Boston children attend a school nearest to their residence. The *Roberts* (1849) case went before the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and it was the first legal suit against school segregation in the country. Roberts’s lawyers, abolitionist Charles Sumner and Boston’s first Black attorney, Robert Morris, argued that all persons were equal
before Massachusetts’s law and that race-based distinctions were not permissible in the state. They further argued that racial segregation characterized all African Americans as inferior and that a segregated Black school could not equal a segregated White school because of the stigma associated with segregation.

The Massachusetts Supreme Court was not persuaded by the argument, however, and ruled that schooling segregated by race was not a violation of Massachusetts law as long as schools were equally provided for. Despite the court ruling, Benjamin Roberts was not dismayed. He continued to agitate on behalf of his daughter and, in 1855, Massachusetts legislature passed a law prohibiting race-based school assignments.

Religion revealed similar tensions. In New York City, Bishop John Hughes of the Roman Catholic Church, vehemently opposed the common school model of education. Hughes was Irish Catholic and felt that the city’s efforts to establish a common educational experience for all New York City children denigrated both Irish people and Catholicism. In his mind, the common schools of New York were asking Irish children to give up too much of themselves—their culture and religion—in the name of education. Common schools were inculcating Irish Catholic children in the common culture, religion, experiences, and expectations of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. To Hughes this was unacceptable. In 1840, when city school officials refused to adhere to the request brought forth by Hughes and other concerned Irish Catholics, Hughes petitioned school officials to reallocate a portion of the city’s common school fund for their own personal use. What emerged from these protests and reallocated funds was the creation of a completely alternative school model: Catholic schools.

Beginnings of the Modern School System (1860–1900)

Before the 20th century, the greatest advancements in the history of schools occurred between 1860 and 1900. It was during this time period that schools became more permanent, uniformed, inclusive, and universal. The modern school and university that students today recognize and attend originated during this time period. The schools arose amid a nation at war and during a time of recovery and retrenchment. The Civil War (1861–65) was fought, slavery was upended as a consequence of the war, and the nation amended the Constitution to include a population previously held in bondage. In 1862, in the midst of war, Congress passed the Morrill Act. Under the act, each state would receive 30,000 acres of federal land to use for educational purposes. Every state was expected to use a portion of the lands for the establishment of an agricultural and technical college for the educational benefit of its citizenry. The act, named after House Representative Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont, ushered in a new commitment on the part of the federal government to aid educational reformers in their efforts to advance education throughout the nation. As new states joined the Union west of the Mississippi, so too did schools and institutions of higher education because of the Morrill Act.

Still, not every region equally benefited from the Morrill Act. Because they had seceded from the Union, most southern states could not take advantage of Morrill until their readmission to the Union following the war. These states seceded from the Union in April 1861 in an attempt to preserve the states’ right to maintain and perpetuate slavery. Slavery not only limited the region’s access to obtaining federal lands and monies for the creation of additional institutions of higher education, it also crippled the South’s development of a viable school system. As the East, Midwest, and West were all establishing schools for its general population, the South had only paid homage to the idea. Only North Carolina had taken serious strides to develop a statewide system of schools before the Civil War. Notwithstanding, after the Civil War every southern state amended its constitution to include provisions that promoted the establishment of a comprehensive school system at the state’s expense.

The irony of this development was that former slaves led the call for universal education in the region. Freed people’s universal demand for education invariably served as the catalyst for bringing public schooling to the South. The demand was so great that every southern state revamped its constitution to include provisions for public schools. The African American delegates in attendance at these constitutional conventions were the leading advocates. Their relentless efforts secured public schooling for not only African American children, but for all children—regardless of race, gender, class, or previous condition of servitude. Consequently, African Americans in this era attended school in greater numbers than ever before. From 1870 to 1885, their attendance rates were equal to, if not greater than, Whites. And by 1900, the illiteracy rate among African Americans under the age of 40 was virtually nonexistent. By 1885, however, school gains for African Americans came virtually to a halt. White southerners who opposed Black advancement and the changes that befell the South following the Civil War had regained nearly complete control over the region. Legalized segregation became commonplace and schools for Whites in the South progressed at the expense of schools designated for “colored” children. African Americans had emerged from slavery with a belief that schools would educate them for citizenship, but the schools afforded to them after 1885 primarily educated them for domestic, industrial, and agricultural servitude.

Despite the dual system of schooling that developed in the South, schooling elsewhere in the nation became an ingrained and favored institution. School reformers throughout the nation continued to revamp schools to become more accessible, centralized, uniformed, bureaucratic, and functional to the needs of society. They established the length of
school days and terms, and they passed compulsory school laws that required children to begin school at a certain age and attend school until at least the age of 14. Schools were no longer simply institutions of learning; they were now the pathways to greater social and economic mobility. The more schooling one had, the greater the chances of obtaining the kind of work and lifestyle one desired. Children were now going to school to learn how to live and work in the American social order, rather than going to school to become a more knowledgeable citizen. The expertise and credentials that students attained in schools were quickly becoming valuable commodities for access, opportunities, and resources in adulthood.

Some institutions, however, benefited more from this trend than others. For instance, high schools and colleges, particularly in urban areas, became critical institutions to advance these expectations. Although most children never attended a high school or a college in the 19th century (historians best estimate that only 5% of all children—regardless of background—between the ages of 12 and 17 were enrolled in a high school in the year 1900), both of these institutions would nonetheless become the primary vehicles for promoting these societal expectations and teaching children these practical and life adjustment skills for the greater part of the 20th century.

The Progressive Era (1900–1940)

It is hard to understand the history and evolution of schools in the first half of the 20th century without an understanding of the dynamic and ever-changing political economy of the United States during this time period. At the dawn of the 20th century, America was a nation engrossed in the Industrial Revolution, attending to increased unionization, immigration, and urbanization. With common schools firmly, though unevenly, in place in both the North and the South, progressive reformers at the turn of the 20th century focused their attention on how to Americanize the new wave of southern and eastern Europeans that were entering the nation. By 1920, there were more Americans in cities than in rural areas and many of those city residents were foreign-born or children of foreign-born parents. Diverse groups of progressive reformers decided to restructure schools to scientifically sort students, efficiently organize school administration, and make the curriculum more relevant to the interest of students and the needs of society.

American urbanization came as a result of the shifting national and world economies and as the number of agricultural workers decreased and the number of manufacturing workers increased. The year 1920 not only marked the shift in the nation from rural to urban, but it also marked the shift from predominantly agricultural work to manufacturing work. The United States had become one of the leading mass producers in the world as work moved from complex skilled tasks to deskilled tasks in the age of mass production. With the deskilling of work, there were also decreased wages and decreased power on the part of workers to decide the future of their work conditions and environment. Agricultural mechanization led to the migration of farm workers to cities in search of work. Accordingly, factories increased both in number and size.

These changes led to greater extremes between the wealthy and the poor as unregulated industries meant unimagined wealth for a handful of American businessmen. Historians have aptly named these businessmen robber barons; they included men such as famed industrialists John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie. While they individually amassed great wealth, their workers struggled to live a life above poverty because of the low wages and benefits they were afforded. This led to increased unionization as workers collaborated to ensure fair wages and benefits. Unionization also led to hundreds of strikes as workers protested for better wages, benefits, and work environments.

Immigration fueled these economic and social developments. Immigrants’ nations of origin shifted from northern and western European countries such as England, Ireland, France, and Germany to southern, eastern, and central European countries; Asian countries such as China, the Philippines, and Japan; and Latin American countries such as Mexico and Puerto Rico. Between 1906 and 1910, 4.5 million new immigrants arrived in the United States from Europe, and 78% of those came from Italy, Greece, Russia, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria. Nearly half were Jews who fled persecution from Russia. These new immigrants brought with them their desires to obtain opportunities and citizenship as well as very distinct cultures, appearances, and languages that Americans would use to deny them access to resources, opportunities, and even citizenship.

During this era, schools once again were called upon to address the drastic changes befalling American society. State officials, the business community, and concerned citizens looked to educational reformers to identify ways that schools could ease growing strife, train students to work and live in an industrial economy, and to educate and Americanize immigrant children. Tensions grew as educators quickly recognized that the traditional models of education that proved to be effective in the 19th century could no longer address the changes occurring in society or the increasing demands for all children to be schooled. Both the curriculum and efficiency of schools came under fire. The everyday citizen criticized the traditional classical curriculum for its failure to motivate students. Industrialists were firmly convinced the curriculum was irrelevant and could not meet the needs of the modern industrial age. City officials complained about high dropout rates, rising illiteracy, and increasing incidents of juvenile delinquency among urban youth. And some educators themselves believed that school management practices were wasteful and inefficient.

Enter the progressive educator; an educator that sought to use schools to address many of the societal problems
hindering progress in society. Progressive educational reformers formed two distinct groups: administrative progressives and pedagogical progressives. Administrative progressives were concerned with running schools efficiently. They were not necessarily concerned with using schools as a way to change society. Their main concern was a cost-effective school system with efficient and organized school management. At the time, schools were run by ward politicians who were often corrupt and who squandered school funds. Administrative progressives also dealt with curriculum in terms of social efficiency. They wanted to find the best methods to sort students based on their skills and abilities. They created curriculum differentiation with different tracks for students based on the academic goals of students. Students who were college bound took different classes from those who were going to be common laborers. To justify the sorting of students, intelligence tests were used to determine where students would be placed and their future value to society. The use of these tests began during World War I when army officers were tested with Alpha and Beta tests. Test results determined whether a solider would be in the infantry on the frontlines of war or a commissioned officer who would command soldiers. The rest of the exams were given to schools, and a series of other exams were created and dispersed to schools. Many exams were unreliable—meaning the test did not necessary measure intelligence in any meaningful way—and were culturally biased because they tested not only the student’s aptitude, but also his or her awareness and understanding of the cultural experiences of dominant society. Nonetheless, these standardized tests often determined the curriculum track of a student.

This era also led to increased bureaucracy in schools. For example, school subject departments were created with department heads. There was hierarchy for school cooks, janitors, and administrators. The superintendent’s staff had people to deal with finance, curriculum, and day-to-day operations. Each area had its own hierarchy, which led to further bureaucracy.

The administrative progressives laid the foundation for what we have come to see as normal for schools: tracking, bureaucracy, testing, and elected school boards. They also succeeded in consolidating numerous local school districts into larger city and county districts. They did succeed in incorporating large numbers of immigrants into the American mainstream. But their work did not go without criticism. Historian David Tyack (1974) made the following criticisms about the administrative progressives:

1. Increased bureaucratization led to more concerns about positions and regulation of rules than a child’s educational development. In other words, expanding bureaucracies made it increasingly difficult to respond to the needs of students.
2. The concern about taking politics out of school led to a realignment of power from ward politicians to experts.
3. Efficiency was thought to lead to equal opportunity; however, schools have been systematically ineffective in dealing with children of the poor.
4. The system was created to be good for all, but has not always been best for the pluralistic American society.
5. Because the system is believed to be so efficient, those who are ill-served by it typically receive blame when they are unable to succeed as a result of it.

The pedagogical progressives are the other group of educational progressives; they were interested in changing the instructional practices in schools. Although they had differences in their philosophies and practices, they commonly believed that the traditional classical curriculum needed to be replaced with a varied curriculum to meet the needs of students. They also believed that learning should be more activity based and less rote memorization. Finally, they believed that school content and aims should reflect the social conditions because schools should aid in the solving of social problems.

Among the best known and least understood of pedagogical progressives was John Dewey. Dewey believed that education was an interaction between the child and the curriculum as well as the school and society. He did not want to do away with subjects, but thought that there were better ways for subjects to be taught. For example, students at the Chicago University Lab School he started would take field trips to museums and historical sites to learn history and went to parks and forests to study biology. They used the larger world around them to learn about the subjects they were studying. Dewey also saw schools as essential to the progression of democracy. In his mind, schools should teach democratic values such as tolerance and respect for the rights of others. He saw schools as a miniature model of society and believed in developing individuals to their fullest capabilities; if this was done, they would be able to benefit and contribute to society.

As did the administrative progressives, pedagogical progressives also had their critics. Some argued that educational endeavors such as Dewey’s were harder to convey to poor children and were really just a fad for elites. The methods tended to work best for children from affluent families because of their social and cultural capital. Others felt that the methods were not proper ways to teach reading and computation skills. Still others believed that learning history on field trips meant that students would not learn important dates and names of the past. For the most part, Dewey’s methods were not properly applied even though he and others influenced generations of educators.

High schools also changed during the progressive era. The National Education Association (NEA) had committees study the structure of schools to create a more uniformed curriculum. One committee, named the Committee of Ten, was led by Harvard University President Charles Elliot. The committee decided on little variation in the curriculum. All students would take English, history, math, science, and foreign language. Those destined for
college would study classical or modern languages and take advanced science and math courses. Many thought the committee’s recommendations were inappropriate for the changing economy. A second committee known as the Kingsley Commission, formally Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, created a differentiated curriculum based on various academic tracks for students. Homeroom, physical education, health, and citizenship classes would bring together students from the college bound, vocational, and general tracks.

Secondary education became more necessary as technological changes led to increased white-collar positions. It was believed that more educated workers would lead to more production and efficiency, thereby expanding the economy. In 1890, girls outnumbered boys in high schools 2 to 1 and performed better on tests. Because of concern that girls would enter male dominated fields, a differentiated curriculum, with courses such as home economics and clerical studies, was established for girls. The goal was to steer girls into only certain arenas of the public sphere.

Schooling for African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos (specifically Mexican Americans) was largely segregated throughout the country. As African Americans migrated by the hundreds of thousands to northern urban areas during the great migration from World War I to the Great Depression, many were segregated into separate neighborhoods, and subsequently segregated schools, because of discriminatory practices and restrictive covenants on the part of realtors. As Latinos and Asians immigrated to the United States, separate schools and neighborhoods were also created for them in the Southwest and West. All of these groups used protest and the courts to challenge and upend segregated schooling for their children before World War II. In spite of successful court cases, the majority of African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans remained segregated either by law (de jure) or in practice (de facto) well into the late 20th century.

During the 19th century, national policy for Native American schooling focused on deculturalization, the attempt to strip Native Americans of their culture and replace it with a more "civilized" and Christianized culture. Off-reservation boarding schools were the preferred place to teach Native American children. In the early 20th century this type of schooling was viewed as cruel and unsuccessful because it largely failed to change the culture of Native American children or to create a place for them in mainstream society. The Merriam Report (1928), formally known as "The Problem of Indian Administration," criticized the failed government policies of the past. It suggested that the type of schooling experience Native American children needed was one that directly related to and incorporated their own culture and families. As such, it was recommended that all children be schooled on reservations rather than away from them. Later in the century, government policies focused on self-determination for American Indian education.

By World War II, more students were attending and completing high schools, colleges, and universities; the structure of schools looked much the way it does today; and segregation along racial, and in some cases class, lines was firmly in place throughout the nation. The postwar era would be the time of the Cold War and internal attempts to create equalization in schooling as well as the larger American society.

Schools During the Postwar Era (1945–Present)

During the post-World War II (WWII) era, the federal government became increasingly involved in public schools. The federal government had some involvement in schools before WWII; however, its role expanded after the war. After the Soviets launched Sputnik during the Cold War, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1958. Many felt the United States educational system needed to be more focused on science and math to win the Cold War. The act gave categorical funding to math, science, and foreign languages. The money was allocated in grants for curriculum development.

The 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas Supreme Court decision declared segregation inherently unequal, and Brown II (1955) decreed that “all deliberate speed” should be used to upend segregation in the nation’s schools. The Brown decision was one of many Supreme Court decisions that affected school desegregation throughout the country. Part of the argument was that school segregation was a violation of the 14th Amendment, which guaranteed every citizen equal protection and consideration under the law. This same argument was made in Mendez v. Westminster (1946) in Orange County, California. In Mendez, the court ruled that the school district purposely segregated Mexican American children based on their Latinized appearance and gerrymandered school boundaries. The court also acknowledged that there were no statutes that permitted their segregation and that the 14th Amendment and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) guaranteed equal rights to Mexican Americans. The NAACP also joined this suit, submitting a brief in support of Mexican Americans. The landmark Brown decision, however, had a national effect on segregated education, although many now debate its true effect.

In spite of these cases, many states were extremely slow to desegregate their schools. Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act—passed during the civil rights movement—allowed the federal government to withhold federal funds from school districts and their programs if they segregated or discriminated against children because of their race, color, or national origin. The threat to withhold funds along with other Supreme Court decisions led to desegregation throughout the nation, but more successfully in southern states. Desegregation was highly controversial because it pitted governors against presidents, Black and
Brown against White, and neighborhood against neighborhood. Busing was one of the desegregation remedies approved by the Supreme Court, because in many northern areas segregated neighborhoods led to segregated schools. But busing, like other remedies for desegregation, resulted in protest, with people blocking school doors, assaults on students who participated in desegregation attempts, and financial burden on school districts. As many Americans became fed up with civil rights and busing, the Emergency School Assistance Act was passed in 1972. It provided funds to reward districts for voluntary desegregation. Funds could not be used to pay for court ordered activities and regular educational programming. The act was a clear opposition to busing.

Segregation and discrimination were not the only issues affecting schools during this era. During the 1960s, considerable attention was given to the effect of poverty on the progress of society. Countless academic studies illustrated that poverty was a systemic problem in the country. President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the War on Poverty campaign in an attempt to combat the issue. Numerous acts were passed. The Economic Opportunity Act (1964) provided programs such as Upward Bound, Head Start, Job Corps, and work study for college students. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed; it provided funds to aid underresourced schools or build new schools. Title I provided compensatory funding for basic education of poor children through pullout programs. Separate Title I personnel were included. The Bilingual Education Act (1968) was an extension of the ESEA; it provided funds to encourage local school districts to use approaches incorporating native-language instruction. Lau v. Nichols (1974) reinforced the Bilingual Education Act. In Lau, non-English speaking Chinese students sued officials of the San Francisco Unified School District because they felt officials used their limited proficiency in English to deny them equal educational opportunities. The Supreme Court ruled that the civil rights of these non-English speaking Chinese children were violated and that schools had to put forth a better effort to accommodate the linguistic educational needs of students with limited English proficiency.

Title IX was passed in 1972, and it provided gender equality in sports and higher education. This act led to greater access to higher education, professional schools, career education, employment, and math and science education; it also addressed sexual harassment and the treatment of pregnant and parenting teens. Before Title IX, medical and law schools had quotas on the number of women they would accept. In 1972, women received just 9% of medical degrees, and in 1971, just 7% of law degrees. By 1994, however, 38% of all medical degree and 43% of all law degree recipients were women. Another act passed by the federal government was the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. This act provided handicapped children with public education to meet their special needs. It gave access to public schools for students with disabilities. Many of the acts enacted and court cases won were steps taken to correct past inequalities and to bring the nation closer to its promise of equality. But as the century neared its close, movements for civil rights, women’s rights, Black and Brown Power, and Native American and Asian American rights waned. Many of the acts were in place to lead to more equitable education for all students. The last quarter of the century saw a backlash against these laws and court cases as White students now had to compete with everyone for what seemed like limited access to privileges White men with means had for centuries. Beginning with University of California Regents v. Bakke (1978), in which the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that the University of California, Davis School of Medicine could not establish racial quotas in admissions, the courts began to chip away at affirmative action. Bakke implied that public education should operate as if colorblind. Other court cases continued to chip away at affirmative action and the Brown v. Board decision. The nation’s schools have resegregated and continue to be unequal.

The end of the century also led to efforts to create more school choice with charter schools, homeschooling, vouchers, and high-stakes testing. Some argue that these moves are meant to lead to a more privatized form of schooling, which could spell the end of the public school system as we have come to know it. Others argue that choice would improve the education for all as public schools would have to work harder to compete for students. Charter schools are one of the attempts at more school choice. These schools are a part of the public school system; a local agency applies for a charter at the public’s expense. They are allowed to bypass local and state bureaucracy in their decision making. Another form of school choice, homeschooling, has become more popular as parents who reject the common morality of schooling want to educate their children in their own religion or traditions. States have varying regulations of these schools. Another school choice option is vouchers. Vouchers allow the public funding for a child to attend a private school of their choice. Vouchers are particularly controversial because funding could be used for private religious schools, possibly blurring the separation of church and state. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (also part of the ESEA) allows parents to transfer their children from low-performing schools to better schools within the district if there are seats available. This allows a limited choice to parents. The schools are determined to be low-performing if the students have not met the adequate yearly progress on the high-stakes test. These various choice options are currently available to only a limited number of students.

The turn of the 21st century saw new immigration challenges as the Immigration Act of 1965 led to yet another shift in immigration. Latinos, Asians, West Indians, Africans, and other groups migrated in mass to this nation. Complaints from native-born people sound similar to the complaints at the turn of the 20th century. As cities declined and suburbs expanded, cities sought redevelopment and
gentrification. Changes in the economy from manufacturing industries to service and technological industries, from national to global, has led to new challenges for schools and the American society. Schools are now more segregated than they were at the time of the Brown decision, and the Supreme Court has recently ruled against voluntary desegregation plans in Seattle, Washington, and Louisville, Kentucky, that allowed the use of race to ensure resegregation would not occur. While many things have changed in schools and the larger American society, many things also seem to remain the same.

References and Further Readings


