



Good Schools  
Pennsylvania

Every Kid Counts.

## A Timeline of Public Education in America

*Public education in the United States dates back to the first "common schools" in Boston, Massachusetts. Almost 270 years later, the system remains intertwined with social and economic problems and solutions.*

**1635** The Boston Latin School, the first publicly funded secondary school in America, and the oldest educational institution in the country, opens. Some notable figures in history who attended this school include: Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock and Samuel Adams.

**1779** Thomas Jefferson argued for universal taxpayer funded public education at the basic level. While he was unsuccessful at this time, his influence was apparent in later years.

**1837** Horace Mann becomes the first secretary of education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. He travels the state on horseback advocating for a system of "common schools." Under his leadership, the legislature provided funds to localities to open the schools. These common schools provided a standardized curriculum at the elementary level and were the precursors to today's public school system.

**1849** Henry Barnard creates a system of common schools in Connecticut.

**1852** The Massachusetts legislature enacts the first compulsory education law requiring every child to get an education.

**1853** New York follows the lead of Massachusetts and passes its own compulsory education law.

**1865** By the end of the Civil War, most state constitutions guaranteed public support for public education.

**1874** Michigan Supreme Court rules that communities could use local property taxes to fund secondary schools.

**1900** By this year, 1.6 million children were attending public schools with 5% of them going on to high school.

**1918** All states now have compulsory education laws through elementary schools. John Dewey, an education professor at the Columbia University Teachers' College, advocates a theory of education called progressive education which eventually turned into the present day vocational education.

**1920** High school has become a more common experience.

**1930** By this year, 29 million children attend public schools.

**1950** By this year, 35% of public school students graduate from high school.

**1954** The United States Supreme Court rules in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that separate educational facilities for black and white children in the South are inherently unequal and unconstitutional.

**1957** President Eisenhower orders federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas to force racial integration of that city's Central High School. The Soviet Union launches Sputnik, the first spacecraft to orbit the earth, causing great concern in the United States about the state of science and math education in America.

**1958** The National Defense Education Act is passed by Congress in a reaction to the Russian launch of Sputnik. The act provided federal funding to public schools to bolster higher level science and math curriculum. This was the first time the federal government intervened in public school policy and curriculum citing the needs of national security.

**1965** Congress passes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as part of President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty. Title I of this act provided the first federal aid to school districts with large percentages of children living in poverty. This act was also the beginning of Head Start, a health, education and nutrition program designed to help low income three and four year old children prepare for school.

**1968** Twelve cents of every dollar spent on k-12 education comes from the federal government.

**1973** The U.S. Supreme Court holds that public education is not a fundamental interest under the U.S. Constitution and therefore, the inequitable public school funding scheme in Texas was not a violation of the Equal Protection Clause. The case was *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*.

**1975** In the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, Congress orders the public schools to provide an education to all disabled children.

**1976** The California Supreme Court holds that education is a fundamental right under the equal protection clause of the state constitution in *Serrano v. Priest*. The high courts in Connecticut and Wyoming followed suit in 1977 and 1980.

**1979** President Jimmy Carter creates the new cabinet level Department of Education.

**1983** A federal commission created by President Ronald Reagan publishes its report, "A Nation at Risk," which states that, "public schools are drowning in a rising tide of mediocrity."

**1989** The National Education Summit is convened by President George Bush, attended by the nation's governors. The Summit produces five national education goals for the year 2000.

**1995** Eighty-seven percent of Americans graduate from high school.

**1996** A second national education summit includes both state governors and national business leaders. The summit calls for national education standards. The discussion of national standards brings into sharp focus the dire straits of poor urban schools.

**1999** The Pennsylvania Supreme Court upholds a lower court ruling in *PARSS v. Ridge* that the issue of equity in school funding among the 501 school districts in Pennsylvania is not a matter to be decided in the courts but must be resolved in the legislature.

**2000** Continuing problems with the adequacy of the education provided by public schools gives rise to a small but vocal political movement in favor of publicly funding charter schools, privately funded vouchers and home schooling.

**2000** Since 1989, the fairness of state school funding systems has been challenged in the courts of at least 28 states. In 18 of these cases, the state's highest court has upheld the challenge and ruled the system was unfair.

**2001** In January 2001, President George W. Bush introduced his plan to help reform American schools, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Congress enacted NCLB, the largest reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) since its inception in 1965.

For more information on the history of public education in America, see the sites below:

**The Merrow Report: In Schools We Trust:**  
<http://www.pbs.org/merrow/tv/trust/index.html>

**The United States Dept. of Education:**  
<http://www.ed.gov>