

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.”

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

By 1870

California had devised a formula of ten. When African Americans, Asian Americans, or American Indians numbered ten students, a school district was empowered to create separate schools for whites and non-white children.

1921

The California school law (Political Code 1662) was amended once again to read as follows:“
The governing body of a school district shall have power to exclude children of filthy or vicious habits, or children suffering from contagious or infectious diseases, and also to establish separate schools for Indian children and for children of Chinese, Japanese, or Mongolian parentage. When such schools are established, Indian children or children of Chinese, Japanese, or Mongolian parentage must not be admitted into any other school.”

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.

1945

The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) lawyers implement such a strategy to challenge school segregation in California filed by Mexican-American parents in Orange County, California. NAACP lawyers followed the Mendez v. Westminster case closely and modeled the strategy in Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954.

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.

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.

1996

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 efforts are made to pass similar legislation on a federal level.

2008

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell delivered his fifth annual State of Education Address and unveiled an ambitious, comprehensive plan aimed at closing California's pernicious achievement gap that exists between students who are white and students of color, as well as with English learners, students in poverty, and students with disabilities.

2010

The Texas School Board adopts revisions to the Texas social studies curriculum. The revised curriculum plays down the role of Thomas Jefferson among the founding fathers, questions the separation of church and state, and claims that the U.S. government was infiltrated by Communists during the Cold War.

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.

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.