

Public Education  
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## History

The public education system in the United States started in Virginia when Thomas Jefferson decided to revolutionize the education in the country. Before the 1840s, education was reserved for the wealthy. Besides Jefferson, Horace Mann and Henry Barnard made influential steps to create an education system and created the Common School Journal and believed that common schooling would generate better citizens, reduce crime and poverty, and unite classes in society.

In the 1800s, the "Public School Society" was replaced by state Board of Education, which to this day, is comprised of elected officials. By 1860, state laws provided government funded education in certain states. By 1918, all states had passed laws requiring children to attend at least elementary school. The Catholics created their own private institutes because they opposed common schools. In 1925, in the *Pierce vs. Society of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary*, the U.S. Supreme Court's rulings expanded the coverage of the Due Process Clause in the Fourteenth Amendment and allowed children to be home-schooled or attend state-recognized private schools. It should be noted that these laws did not include education for girls or colored children.

In 1896, in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation for public services, including schools, under the "spate but equal" doctrine. The rulings of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case was later overturned in 1954 with the *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* which declared that racial segregation was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. This case led the way for integration and the civil rights movement.

## Justification

There has been some argument for the privatization of public education. Nathaniel Branden, in his 1963 essay, argues that the private enterprises would be more efficient at providing education than the government. The Alliance for Separation of School & State argues that public education discourages innovation and creativity. They also believe that Government intervention in education fosters unquestioning obedience and acceptance of authority. While there are arguments against government provision of education, many people believe that the government has a responsibility to provide free public education.

According to Michael Peddle in *Does Government Need to be Involved in Primary and Secondary Education*, there are two schools of thoughts justifying the need for free public education. The first is that general education provides people with the basic knowledge necessary to become competent members of society. Since society is the main beneficiary of primary and secondary education, society, rather than the individual, should have the responsibility of providing financing for such education. The second school of thought states that if a certain level of education is legally required, the government must provide a way for individuals who lack the financial ability to meet the mandated level of education.

Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*, stated that education generated a sense of domestic tranquility and improved the overall judgment of a society. Also, Smith believed education contributed to the orderly operation of society, particularly in democratic nations in which, ideally, the people are

participants in the government. Education made for better citizens thus the social benefit from widespread education justifies government intervention in education.

According to Alfred Marshal in his *Principles of Economics*, general schooling allowed people who were exceptionally talented to become more innovative and productive. Marshal believed the additional innovation and productivity would more than pay for the expense of providing education.

According to the 2002 Population Survey, a high school graduate will make almost \$400,000 more over the course of his/her lifetime than an individual without a high school degree. Widespread education provides benefits for both the individual and society which justifies, at the very least, government financing of education.

## **Reform**

In 1983, Ronald Reagan published "A Nation at Risk". This document expressed Reagan's disappointment in the achievement level of U.S. public schools. One of his concerns was that Americans were scoring significantly lower on standardized test than other developed nations.

A major argument in the report was that U.S. schools are inefficient bureaucracies. Since then, this sentiment has been nestled in the general public's perception of public schools and many modern reforms, such as the privatization of education, are the manifestations of this sentiment. This document was also a landmark in U.S. history because it was the first major reform movement by the federal government in education. This involvement created the precedent for future federal reform movements.

The next major federal reform movement was Clinton's Goals 2000, which was a set of goals that both Clinton and Congress created in the 90's and were expected to be met by 2000. This program was outcome-based in theory, which promoted the idea of maintaining measurable records to track an individual's progress through school. This program was also competitive in nature and allocated federal funding to schools that demonstrated significant progress. One of these grants was known as the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund.

Unfortunately, by 2000, only a few of the act's goals had been realized. This however has not been the large focus of Goals 2000. Goals 2000 has received most of its celebrity in that it was the predecessor to the next big reform act, No Child Left Behind.

Initiated during the Bush Administration in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act is a controversial federal law that aims to improve the performance of primary and secondary schools. Details of the act include providing parents with more flexibility in choosing the school their children attend through voucher programs and open enrolment. Also, the act increases accountability standards for schools which have resulted in increased standardized testing. The act also declares that schools may lose their federal funding if they don't meet the mandated goals.

There are many criticisms against this act, such as its unconstitutionality. Some believe that the act violates the Tenth Amendment by disrupting the states' local authority over education. Also, some feel that increased standardized testing has adverse effects on students' learning environment because teachers are forced to "teach to the test." Some also argue that the government did not provide adequate funding for the programs set by this act.

Current reform pertaining to Colorado is the proposed Amendment 59 which is attempting to lift constitutional limits on state spending and direct additional revenue created during strong economic times into a general education fund. Some criticize that 59 would encroach significantly on TABOR and that it places too much emphasis on education alone without considering funding to other state agencies.