



MINORITY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Brief History of Minority Education in the United States

Early United States

In examining racial disparities in education, it is important to examine the history of education – particularly minority education – in the United States. According to research institute Race Forward, early American colonies established schools to promote Puritan religious education and orthodoxy. Secular schools taught basic reading and math skills and were increasingly required in towns with large populations, funded by a local government; private schools opened for those who sought advanced education. The first public high school began in Boston in 1820, and by 1827, Massachusetts became the first state which required all public school grade levels be open to the public at no cost.

All the while, slavery ravaged the United States and most southern states outlawed slave education. Despite laws against literacy, around 5% of slaves could read. Around the same period, Native American education promoted conformity to White ideology to assimilate Native peoples into White culture. In 1864, Congress made it illegal for Native Americans to be taught in their native tongue, and children as young as four were taken to off-reservation boarding schools.

Reconstruction to Jazz Age (Mid-1800's to early 1900's)

Prior to the Civil War, Massachusetts had uniquely outlawed slavery. However, precedent was established for segregation of schools in *Roberts v. City of Boston*, which went to the Supreme Court in 1850. This case saw a young Black girl seeking

enrollment at a closer White primary school. The committee ruled “that the good of both classes of school will be best promoted, by maintaining the separate primary schools for colored and for white children” by the “honest result of their experience and judgement,” which they claimed did not stem prejudice or concession to public opinion. Early cases like these set the precedent for segregation of schools against which later strides towards equality would fight.

After the Civil War, education was among the liberties Black Americans sought. Advances were made, but for many, the end of slavery meant the beginning of Jim Crow, the era and set of laws which enforced racial segregation. 1930s Jim Crow states spent almost three times as much money per White student as compared to Black students, on average, with gaps extending up to \$45 (Irons). Accounting for inflation, that number would be about \$700 per student.

With the Industrial Revolution of the late 19th and early 20th century, “progress” needed skilled workers to operate machinery and factories. Public schooling provided such an education to the amassment of immigrants entering the U.S., which numbered approximately 12 million between 1870 and 1900 (Immigration to the US), with large groups emigrating from Germany, Ireland, Britain, and China. Educating poor immigrants was exploitative, with the predominant purpose of creating subservient workers.

Civil Rights Era (Mid-1900s)

In the mid-1900’s, the civil rights movement was in full effect. Famous events transpired relating to educational integration. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court unanimously agreed that educational segregation must be abolished because it was “inherently unequal.” This victory led to significant nominal acceptance in some places, but severe pushback in others. For example, Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr. of Virginia called for “Massive Resistance,” a group of laws which prevented racial integration in public schools (Massive Resistance). His movement extended to several other Southern states.



The “Little Rock Nine” saw nine African American students seek enrollment at an all-White high school. State and federal troops clashed over enforcement of anti-segregation orders. In theory, desegregation across America should have followed, but even today, many schools are effectively segregated.

Information Age to Today (Late 1900's to Today)

Undocumented immigrants' children and Hispanic and Latino students faced significant discriminatory action in the American West in the 1990's. Eventually deemed unconstitutional, California's Proposition 187 made it illegal for the children of undocumented immigrants to attend public schools. Later, the outlaw of affirmative action in public employment, contracting, and education by California Proposition 209 disproportionately affected students of color. And in 1998, the state outlawed bilingual education. Over 25% of the documented citizens in California – not accounting for those who were undocumented but accounted for a large portion of the population – identified as being of Hispanic origin, according to the 1990 U.S. Census.

Census estimates from 2018 suggest California has a population of almost 40 million, over 39% of which are of Hispanic or Latino origin. Bilingual education was restored only four years ago, though it was not officially implemented until 2017. Ricardo Lara, former California state senator and current Insurance Commissioner,



clarified for NPR that the new law, Proposition 58, does not require bilingual education, but school districts and parents will determine whether it is implemented. Equal opportunity was made more of a possibility for English language learners.

Moving Forward

America's racial education problems are not new. This country started with unequal access to education for all people groups that were not White. Early establishment of such a system has longstanding effects which still affect minority communities today. By examining U.S. educational history, educators and policymakers can better understand the framework from which peoples of color enter the education system and can strive to make progress towards equal opportunity for all.

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About the Author

Allison McNally is a recent graduate of the University of Arizona. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (Management emphasis) and a Bachelor of Art in Information Science & E-Society with Magna Cum Laude distinction. Allison served as a peer mentor for first year students, recruited students to the Honors College as an Honors College Ambassador, and worked with different nonprofits on planning and marketing projects throughout college.