

College Guild

P.O. Box 696 Brunswick, Maine 04011

U.S. Education: The History of Education in the United States

Unit 1 of 6

Welcome to the College Guild course U.S. Education.

Overview: Learn about the education system in the United States — where it all began, how it grew, and what it looks like today. This course will also discuss issues surrounding education in the U.S. and give students an in-depth understanding of the state of education in the U.S.

Guidelines for all College Guild courses:

1. **Answer all the questions that are in bold print, using black or blue ink or dark pencil if possible.** After we receive and review your completed unit, we will send you feedback from your reader along with your original work and the next unit. You don't need to return the questions — it saves us both postage.
2. There is no **specific deadline** to complete any unit, but we would get concerned if we hadn't heard back from you after two months.
3. Remember how often the mail service loses things. **If you don't hear back from us after a month, please write to make sure we received your unit** and sent out the next one.
4. Let us know if you need a dictionary, free to students who complete the first unit.

The U.S. education system didn't always look like it does today. It didn't start with the complex system of funding and planning that now props up hundreds of thousands of public and private schools at all levels, from nursery school to medical school. In this unit, we'll cover the modest beginnings of the U.S. education system and discuss its development and growth into the robust giant it is today.

The First Schools

Long before the U.S. won its independence from Britain in 1776, education was present in the thirteen original colonies—but it didn't look like the education we're familiar with. The colonists' system was private, with a focus on religion and basic academic and life skills such as reading and math — it did not stray much beyond these concepts. Schools wanted to give students a baseline understanding of necessary concepts

that they could then apply to helping their families and communities. In contrast to the rigid graduation requirements of today, colonial students or their parents basically got to choose when they were done with school.

1. **Why do you think the subjects taught in the first schools were so limited?**
2. **Imagine you are an advocate for education as it is just starting in the U.S. Write a letter to your town's mayor arguing for the expansion of the curriculum at the local schools, and argue for the addition of one subject of your choice.**
3. **Now imagine you are a student at one of the nation's first schools. Write a 10-line conversation with your teacher explaining why you think you should stop going to school.**

Another huge difference between colonial education and education today is who went to school. In the early days of education, the only students were wealthy, white males whose parents paid tuition for them to attend school. This meant that poor people, people of color, and girls were not able to attend for decades (even centuries) after the creation of the first schools. This left a lasting impact on school demographics (diversity of the student body) that is still felt today.

4. **How do you think student demographics at the first schools affected colonial society? (Think about who was in school, and who wasn't.)**
5. **Imagine you are a seven-year-old girl with two older brothers that go to school. (Alternately, you may choose to write from the perspective of a poor person or person of color who is barred from attending school.) Write a poem or story about wanting to go to school but not being allowed to.**

One-Room Schoolhouses

These first schools didn't look like the schools we see in towns and cities today, filled with up to thousands of students and hundreds of classrooms. Aptly named "one-room schoolhouses," these first schools truly only had one room — they didn't even have bathrooms! Students of all ages sat at desks that filled the room, with younger students toward the front and older students in the back. One teacher would teach all of the children who lived in a town — quite a task, considering the variety of ages and abilities present in one classroom. Students usually had two recesses and 90 minutes for lunch, which they went home to eat. These schoolhouses were where most education took place in the U.S. for many years — in fact, it wasn't until the 1970s that they were almost completely phased out. Today, a few one-room schoolhouses remain in rural towns around the U.S., but they are few and far between.

6. **Imagine you go to school in a one-room schoolhouse with the rest of the children in your town. Write a story about your teacher and what you've learned from them — or haven't.**
7. **Now imagine you're a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. Write an assignment you would give to your students. (Remember the students in your schoolhouse range from age 5 to age 14!)**

The Nation's First Public Schools

Eventually, as the U.S. began to expand and grow as a country, so did the education system — but your access to education really depended on where you lived. Improvements were made on a state-by-state basis (with the exception of a 1785 law requiring that land be set aside for schools in the new Northwest Territories). And your access was also still dependent on your age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. In 1790, Pennsylvania became the first state to require free public education, but it only covered children experiencing poverty; wealthy families were still required to pay. Similar laws were passed in New York and Massachusetts, and by 1820 Boston was opening the first public high school, expanding the levels of public education offered in the U.S.

- 8. Public schools used to be free to only the economically disadvantaged citizens of a town, while wealthy families still had to pay. Do you agree with this rule? Why or why not?**

Demographics and Other Aspects of Early Schools

As schools began to expand and grow, so did the student body. Laws were passed around the country that made education more accessible to children (though you still needed to be white to take advantage of them). More and more girls began to attend public and private schools in the 1730s, but they still weren't accepted at institutions of higher education. And though their numbers were growing, women were still solidly outnumbered by males, a trend that continued into the 1930s and 40s. This enabled wealthy white men to retain access to the best positions in society, a problem that still exists today.

Early schools also often taught Christian and nationalistic values, subjects still present in some modern-day schools. Though these values are not always taught with negative intentions, the pernicious effects of such teachings can be seen in the racism, xenophobia, and hate groups present in the U.S. today.

- 9. What do you think religion's place should be in public schools?**
10. Why do you think it took so long for education to become more accessible to poor students, women, and people of color? Feel free to provide a different answer for each group.

Creating the U.S. Education System

The crux of the U.S. education system is that it is decentralized, meaning that each state has the power to create laws dictating how education will work in their state. In the system's early days, individual states made different decisions and laws to dictate how education would be run in their states, and this system existed for a long time. But over time, the federal government began to intervene out of necessity, or due to requests for funding from certain states. During these early days, the federal government played the role of a wealthy parent, giving money to states to spend on education as they saw fit, and intervening very little in how they used it. (This topic will be covered in more detail in Unit 4.)

- 11. What are the benefits of using a decentralized (state) system for education instead of a federally controlled system?**

12. Imagine you are in charge of education in the state of your choice in the early days of education. Write a letter to the President explaining how you plan on using money from the federal government to improve education in your state.

The Development of Private Schools

The developments in public education we've discussed so far represent only one part of the education system that was growing in the U.S. As public schools became more common with the passage of laws requiring that education be made available to all students. As poor students began to attend public schools, some wealthy families wanted to guarantee their children a higher-quality education, and less interaction with children from the lower levels of society. This led to the growth of private schools where parents would pay higher tuition fees in order to get the best education for their children. These two sectors developed side by side and are still dividing opinions in the U.S. education system today.

13. If you were a parent after the creation of public education in the U.S., would you pay more to send your kids to private schools? Why or why not?

14. What are the advantages to having both public and private schools in the U.S.? What are the disadvantages?

15. If you were a teacher, would you rather work at a public or private school? Why?

The Development of Higher Education

The first college was created more than a hundred years before the U.S. became its own country. Harvard College, which would later become Harvard University, was established in 1636 as a seminary and existed solely to train clergymen. The first colleges in the U.S. were founded during the colonial era, mostly all for religious reasons. Since then, higher education has grown to become a formidable part of the U.S. education system. As colleges became more popular over the decades and centuries, they expanded beyond religious studies to a modern curriculum of arts, humanities, and sciences, which today is inclusive of everything from political science to neuroscience and from visual arts and poetry to sociology and anthropology.

16. How would you define “humanities”? What courses do you think might be included in a humanities curriculum today?

In the early 18th century, when colleges were just beginning to expand beyond religious studies, college students were almost entirely white males from wealthy families. Colleges were private, and these groups were the ones able to pay. But it wasn't long before public colleges began to crop up, beginning with the University of Georgia in 1785. Public universities still had hefty tuition fees, but they were supported by state governments and were much more accessible to the general public than their costly private counterparts.

But even with affordable colleges available, enrollment in higher education remained low at first. Numbers stayed low even following a big boom in the construction of new colleges between 1800–1850. Then, in the

20th century, the U.S. went to war, changing higher education forever. At the end of World War II, the U.S. government passed the G.I. Bill to provide funds to war veterans, allowing thousands of those who served in the war to attend college upon their return. This led to a massive mid-century increase in enrollment that boosted student numbers up to heights that are still maintained even today.

- 17. How do you think high tuition costs affected the atmosphere and education found at the nation's first colleges? Do you think any of those effects still linger at colleges today?**
- 18. Pretend you are in charge of creating a new college. Give it a name, location, size, and curriculum. If you feel inclined, design a logo and draw a map of the campus.**

Discrimination and Segregation in the Development of U.S. Education

Many would argue that the U.S. education system began as a system of oppression, and continues to perpetuate segregation and racism to this day. The roots of this idea are easy to see when examining the creation of the first schools, their student bodies, and their development. Education was strictly for white students until after the Civil War; even after that, schools remained segregated and non-white schools often received less funding than their white counterparts.

- 19. Do you agree that the U.S. education system began as a system of oppression, intentional or otherwise? Why or why not?**

As more black students and other students of color began to attend schools separately from white students, they noticed that the quality of their education was not on par with that of white students, and began to push for equality and desegregation in schools. This idea was first shot down by the Supreme Court in the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which ruled that “separate-but-equal” facilities were legal in the U.S., including schools. After years of advocacy, it was another Supreme Court decision that decreed that segregated schools are inherently unequal — this was *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 case that led to the abolishment of segregated schools.

- 20. Write a poem or fictional story about the experience of one of the first black students to attend desegregated schools.**

While *Brown v. Board* seemed like a huge win for equal rights, the problem was not solved — and it remains unsolved. Schools are still segregated due to the mapping of school districts and inequality at the neighborhood level, and schools with diverse student bodies still report large achievement gaps between white and non-white students. While colleges and universities became less segregated in the 1960s following the Civil Rights Movement, they still have a long way to go to achieve true access and equity. Such huge problems require large-scale change, and will be covered in future units.

- 21. What other issues or contributing factors do you think drive the achievement gaps seen at modern schools with diverse student bodies?**

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

Sources

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