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The History of Education in the United States and the South

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Education has always been a top priority in the United States. Parents wanted their children to have a bright future, and they knew that a good quality education was the key. Education in the United States dates back to the founding of the colonies in the early 17th Century. As time progressed, so did the education of the United States. Over the years, the educational system has changed drastically. At first in the South, education was more locally based. The growth of education was slow, mainly because the South was very rural. Later, public schools were founded for whites only. Eventually, blacks won the struggle to earn a free public education in the South. In contrast, education and schools grew very rapidly in the North. The North was much more urban whereas the South was more agricultural. Thus, it was easier to found schools. As time progressed, education grew in both the North and the South in the form of institutions of higher learning, grammar schools, and high schools. The most drastic changes in education occurred in the South. The educational system went from tutors on local plantations to integrated public schools. However, whether in the North or the South, education has changed for the better over the past centuries.

Education in the United States dates back to the founding of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. From that point, education was a top priority for the colonists. They believed that it was important to educate the future generations. Within no time, the colonists of Jamestown wanted to help educate the native Powhatan Indians. So in 1618, they established The Indian College at Jamestown. It was to help educate the Indians about the tenets of Christianity. However, the college proved to be a failure when the Powhatan Indians attacked Jamestown on March 22, 1622 (Shifflett, 1998). Although the college was a failure, it was clear that the colonists felt a need for some type of education.

Within thirty years of the establishment of Jamestown, institutions of higher learning began being established in the New World. In 1636, Harvard College was founded in Massachusetts. By the end of the century, the South decided that they needed their own institutions of higher learning. As a result, the College of William and Mary was established in Virginia in 1693 (Erikson, 2003). By the time the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, there were nine institutions of higher learning in eight of the thirteen colonies. At the start of the Civil War in 1861, there were 21 institutions of higher learning in 20 states, nine of these in the South (Georgeoff, 2004).

During colonial times, grammar schools were few in number. In 1630, The Latin Grammar School was founded in Boston (Georgeoff, 2004). In 1647, the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed legislation for elementary education. Soon after, the other New England Colonies followed with similar legislation. Pennsylvania was the leader when it came to education. The first school in Pennsylvania was founded in 1683 to teach reading, writing, and accountancy. As time progressed, more schools sprang up throughout Pennsylvania. Within no time, languages, history, literature, mathematics, and science were taught inside Pennsylvania. In addition, Benjamin Franklin founded the American Academy in Philadelphia in 1751 (Thattai, 2001). Thus, Pennsylvania and other colonies in the North began to strive for a good, quality education. The South had similar goals. Like the North, Southern families valued education; however, it was much more difficult to found grammar schools. Plantations and farms were generally far apart in distance. Thus, a common school was difficult to establish. Normally, planters had to hire tutors for their children and neighboring children. Sometimes, even parents tutored

their own children (Erikson, 2003). Thus, in both the North and the South, education at the lower level became very important.

The high school system did not actually get started in the United States until the 19th Century. Prior to the Civil War, most high schools were situated in New England and the Midwest (Georgeoff, 2004). At the time, the South was still very rural, and community schools were very difficult to found. Although The Latin Grammar School had been established, the push for public-supported high schools did not occur until the late 1800s. In 1859, the Kalamazoo School opened its doors in Michigan. The Kalamazoo School was run by the tax support of the citizens of Michigan. In 1873, three local businessmen challenged paying the school tax. As a result, the case went before the Michigan Supreme Court, and it ruled that the school should be supported by tax revenue (Michigan Supreme Court Website, 2004). Consequently, public high schools began to spring up throughout the nation. By 1918, all states required children to attend elementary school (Thattai, 2001). Also that year, there were approximately 25,000 high schools with nearly 1,600 students each in the United States (Georgeoff, 2004).

Although education started in the South with the founding of the Indian College in Jamestown, the North quickly took hold of the idea. Before long, schools were springing up throughout the North. As the North accelerated in education, the South began to lag behind. The South believed in education; however, it was much more difficult to set up schools and institutions in the South. Before the Civil War, only the sons of rich planters and farmers actually attended a structured school in the South. In addition, most blacks were illiterate. For example, in 1831, the state of Virginia passed laws forbidding the schooling of free blacks or slaves (Dailey, 2000). Other Southern

states passed similar laws. When the Civil War ended in 1865, all the Southern states entered Reconstruction. By the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment, slavery had been abolished. Under Reconstruction, Southern states were required to write a new constitution (Roark, Johnson, Cohen, Stage, Lawson, & Hartmann, 1998). In 1870, the Underwood Constitution called for a uniform system of free public schools in Virginia. Tempers began to rage over this notion since Virginians feared an integrated school system. In April of 1870, William Henry Ruffner was named Superintendent of Public Education in Virginia, and he called for separate schools for white and black students. That did not stop the blacks desire to learn and become educated. As a result, the black communities established their own schools called “native schools.” These schools were mostly a one-room structure with few books, benches, and desks (Dailey, 2000). Although the schools were segregated, the Southern blacks did what they could in order to be educated, and more importantly, educate their children. This was the first step for African-Americans in the South to receive an education.

Following the Civil War, the rest of the South followed the pattern of segregation in public schools. The segregation of public schools lasted nearly a century with the support of Jim Crow Laws and Black Codes. Further in 1896, the federal government placed its stamp of approval on segregation with the famous Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This case upheld segregation by stating that separate but equal facilities was acceptable. Segregation remained legal throughout the South until the 1950s. In 1954, the Supreme Court overturned the case *Plessy v. Ferguson* with the historic case, *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Supreme Court ruled that separate educational facilities were actually unequal, thus violating the Fourteenth Amendment. This proved to be a huge

victory for African-Americans in the push for equal rights. The following year in 1955, the Supreme Court called for the desegregation of public schools “with all deliberate speed.” However, the Supreme Court did not set a deadline for desegregation (Roark, Johnson, Cohen, Stage, Lawson, & Hartmann, 1998).

Although the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was handed down, President Dwight D. Eisenhower did very little to enforce the desegregation of public schools. As a result, the progress was slow. In September 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas, nine black students attempted to enter Central High School. Nearly three weeks later, Eisenhower reluctantly sent in federal troops and marshals to aid with the integration process. Similar situations also occurred at the institutions of higher learning across the South. These included the University of Alabama and the University of Mississippi. The South did everything to avoid integration. Many schools in the South closed, and private academies were established for white students only. By 1961 when President John F. Kennedy took office, only 6.4 percent of black students in the South attended integrated schools. (Roark, Johnson, Cohen, Stage, Lawson, & Hartmann, 1998). Nearly eight years after the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was illegal, little had been done to stop it. Several more years would pass before the South fully integrated. It was not until the late 1960s, nearly 15 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, that the South fully integrated public schools. The battle for equal education for blacks and whites was finally over. African-Americans were on their way to a successful public education in the South.

Since the founding of the colonies in the early 17th century, education has grown and went through drastic changes. In both the North and South, institutions of higher

learning were established and grew rapidly. In the North, grammar schools flourished. In the South, schools were not built as rapidly, but education was still held in high regard. As time progressed, education in the South changed drastically. Prior to the Civil War, parents and tutors educated children on the plantations. Later, grammar and high schools began to be built. Following the Civil War, black schools were established. Eventually, Southern schools were integrated. Over the past 400 years, the face of education has changed drastically in both the North and the South. However, one thing remains the same. People have always supported and believed in education. As long as that continues, the next 400 years of the United States will hold an educational system that will continue to grow and prosper.

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