

Schools in US Cities

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Summary

“Urban infrastructure” calls to mind railways, highways, and sewer systems. Yet the school buildings—red brick, limestone, or concrete, low-slung, turreted, or glass-fronted—that hold and seek to shape the city’s children are ubiquitous forms of infrastructure as well. Schools occupy one of the largest line items in a municipal budget, and as many as a fifth of a city’s residents spend the majority of their waking hours in school classrooms, hallways, and gymnasiums. In the 19th and 20th centuries urban educational infrastructure grew, supported by developing consensus for publicly funded and publicly governed schools (if rarely fully accessible to all members of the public). Even before state commitment to other forms of social welfare, from pensions to public health, and infrastructure, from transit to fire, schooling was a government function.

This commitment to public education ultimately was national, but schools in cities had their own story. Schooling in the United States is chiefly a local affair: Constitutional responsibility for education lies with the states; power is then further decentralized as states entrust decisions about school function and funding to school districts. School districts can be as small as a single town or a part of a city. Such localism is one reason that it is possible to speak about schools in U.S. cities as having a particular history, determined as much by the specificities of urban life as by national questions of citizenship, economy, religion, and culture.

While city schools have been distinct, they have also been nationally influential. Urban scale both allowed for and demanded the most extensive educational system-building. Urban growth and diversity galvanized innovation, via exploration in teaching methods, curriculum, and understanding of children and communities. And it generated intense conflict. Throughout U.S. history, urban residents from myriad social, political, religious, and economic positions have struggled to define how schools would operate, for whom, and who would decide.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, U.S. residents struggled over the purposes, funding, and governance of schools in cities shaped by capitalism, nativism, and white supremacy. They built a commitment to schooling as a public function of their cities, with many compromises and exclusions. In the 21st century, old struggles re-emerged in new form, perhaps raising the question of whether schools will continue as public, urban infrastructure.

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Persistent Questions About U.S. Schooling

For Whom?

Since the early 19th century, white advocates for publicly funded schooling in the United States adopted a language of universality. If dollars from the public coffer—pulling from everyone—were to sustain schools, then it was both logically and politically sensible to claim that schooling would benefit all young people as students as well as all others as their fellow citizens. In practice, though, schools rarely met this claim. Whole swaths of U.S. citizens and residents were at various points—and until quite recently—wholly excluded from the enterprise of schooling. Categories of race, nationality, gender, dis/ability, class, religion, and language were deployed to constrain access to education and to condition the content and shape of schooling. Describing the U.S. history of education for African Americans, historian James Anderson writes that schooling for first-class citizenship (with full political rights and economic power) and schooling for second-class citizenship (with curtailed rights and limited economic opportunity) are basic American traditions. An observation rooted in his careful study of the Reconstruction and Jim Crow South, Anderson's words demonstrate that inequality of various forms and across many categories was a purposeful rather than incidental outcome of schooling.¹

Who Decides?

During the 19th century, public schooling came to mean schooling provided by public dollars collected via taxation. Yet the provision of public funding did not answer the question of public governance. What defines public or democratic decision-making about schooling? What decisions are made by whom and how? For much of the 20th century, city residents elected or appointed school district-level bodies called school boards that performed this work. But at various moments across the history of public education in the United States, citizens imagined and advocated different configurations, with more or less power for popular or expert, corporate or individual, influence. Urban residents disagreed sharply over which arrangement they favored in various political and economic moments.

With What Meaning?

Although they operate in cities shaped by the pursuit of profit, schools were never only that. In schools as in all other urban spaces, people built, created, and made meaning. Schools were at once sites of self-making, labor, cultural production and transmission, imagination, and even liberation, even as they were also places of governance and discipline, coercion and oppression.

The Informal Educational Landscape of the Colonial and Early Republican Years

Before the American Revolution, arrangements for educating children in urban contexts were as varied, as inconsistent, at times as haphazard, as those in towns and the countryside. Children learned at the knees of a local mother who brought youngsters into her kitchen (a “dame school”), or attended a tuition-charging private academy or a charity school run by a church or association serving black or white students, or in a few cases both. The school “year” may have only been a few months, or many more. Perhaps youngsters were taught to read, write, and calculate by a tradesperson completing his obligations to his apprentices. Enslaved children living in cities risked their safety to learn with family or community elders, or participated in classes offered by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel up and down the eastern seaboard. Arrangements for girls’ schooling were even more uncertain than those for boys in the colonial period, through explicit exclusion or via lack of regular provisions for girls. But girls’ schooling became more stable in the early republican years. Access to education depended on race, class, religion, status—but the elite as well as the poor navigated this landscape of various informal arrangements.²

Despite colonial examples, such as the 1635 creation of the Boston Latin School for the sons of that city’s elite white families, or the 1647 Massachusetts law requiring any settlement of more than 100 families to create a grammar school, colonial education often depended on borrowed infrastructure. Families, churches, and apprenticeships lent the physical and social structures in which instruction took place. Gradually, in the early republican decades, formal school structures expanded through the work of churches, charity groups, manumission societies, and other collections of citizens. These operated alongside the many independent masters, or teachers, who “kept school” funded by modest tuition payments for the children of workingmen’s families and the middle and upper classes. Population density meant that cities often led the way in the making of formal educational institutions. New York was earlier than others in bringing public funding to support and expand schooling, in 1796. But even when tax dollars augmented private tuition dollars, the operation of these schools remained in private hands.³

Making the Public School in the 19th Century

Across U.S. cities before the Civil War, schooling became an increasingly common experience. By the early 19th century, the majority of white U.S. children attended school at some point during the year; between a quarter and two-fifths of free black students did. Girls were as likely to attend primary schools as boys, and they usually attended together. But many questions remained unresolved. White people, and in some contexts free people of color, were educated, but how, by whom, for how long, and at whose expense? In the mid-19th century North and Midwest, multiple arguments and organizing efforts coalesced into a broad commitment to publicly funded, publicly governed primary or elementary schooling. After the Civil War this commitment reached the South as well, but was soon undermined by Jim Crow violence and disfranchisement.

In both regions, cities led in the growth of the idea of public education and the infrastructure that supported it, even as in both the nominal and legal commitment to public education was limited by segregation and inequality in many forms.

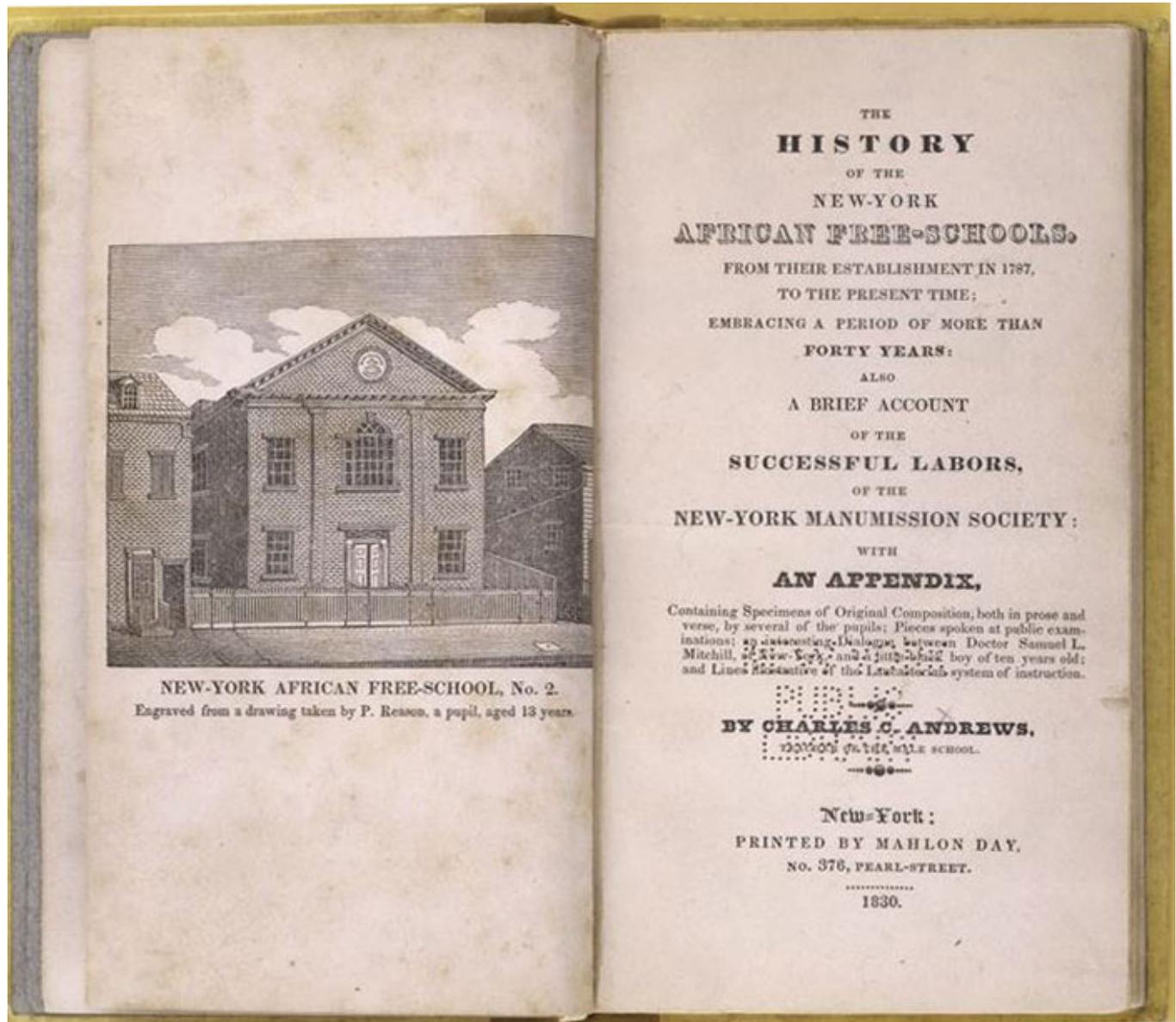


Figure 1. NY African Free School, No. 2, engraved from a drawing taken by P. Reason, a pupil, aged 13 years (1830).

Photo courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 486249 <<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-cbb8-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>>.

The idea of the “common school” took form and spread from 1820 to 1860. The notion drew sustenance from many currents in early 19th century thought. Republican ideology provided one, especially as white male suffrage broadened when many states removed property-holding qualifications. But white peoples’ thinking about citizenship had sharp limits—vividly captured by the 1820s push to disfranchise black Northerners and the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) U.S.

Supreme Court decision denying citizenship to people of African descent, enslaved or free. White Americans appealed to schooling to buttress their democratic citizenship, while seeing black peoples' exclusion from or segregation within schooling as a reinforcement of their position outside of the body politic.⁴ Lawmakers in slave states, especially after a wave of anti-slavery activism in the 1830s, passed legislation to ban the education of enslaved people. Like Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists, slaveowners saw literacy as a threat to the institution.⁵ Nonetheless, free black people in cities North and South built and sustained schools that aligned with their own views of citizenship and community.

Even with suffrage limited to men, ideas of democracy encouraged schooling for boys and girls alike. As of 1857, Boston's 213 primary schools were coeducational. Divisions in educational provision and access still held for later grades, there as in many other cities, but at the common school level ideas about women's participation in civic life through their influence in the home supported expenditures on girls' education as well as boys.⁶

Economic realities provided another prompt for public schooling. After the revolution, residents in cities such as Boston hoped that literacy and numeracy would stimulate commerce. Educators across many cities spoke about their hopes for students' abilities to support themselves as well as to function as citizens and moral actors in a new nation growing quickly via immigration. For those focused on new factories more than traditional crafts, industrial work required time and work habits of compliance that were cultivated inside the proto-industrial structure of the schoolhouse. The school bell and the factory bell had a similar ring. British educator Joseph Lancaster pioneered a method of schooling large numbers of young people for little money, using older students to teach younger ones. In the eyes of New York Governor Dewitt Clinton, the method was for education to be "what the neat finished machines for abridging labor and expense are in the mechanic arts."⁷ Industrial analogies continued to grow in 19th- and 20th-century education.

Industrial production was a model, and a danger, in the eyes of common school proponents. Massachusetts' Horace Mann, Connecticut's Henry Barnard, and New York's Catharine Beecher returned time and again to claims that public education could ameliorate or even resolve social problems associated with mid-19th-century cities—many of which more than doubled in size from 1840 to 1860. Those who held to a Jeffersonian republican vision of a nation of yeoman farmers saw the growth of urban industrial production and landless industrial workers as a threat to the foundation on which they imagined (white, male) citizenship to rest. How could those without financial self-sufficiency via land become independent agents in a democracy rather than tools of their patrons or bosses? What could prevent the making of entrenched classes or castes, and the potential radicalization of working people, evident in Europe's cities in the 1830s and 1840s?⁸

Horace Mann did not extend his worries about caste and citizenship to black people. Massachusetts abolished slavery and established, earlier than most cities, a public common school network. But black residents were barred from admission in various ways and thus turned to build their own institutions (even as they paid taxes to support the public schools). Later, when one of these became absorbed into the public system, all of Boston's black students were assigned

to the same school. Baltimore offered a different mixture of common schooling, urban port economy, caste, and segregation. In the slave state of Maryland, Baltimore's sizeable free black population also supported public schools with their taxes. Black students were banned from these schools, but the profitability of black workers' literacy and numeracy opened spaces for African American education.⁹ Baltimore did not fund education for its black residents, but unlike other southern states it did not legislate against their learning. Black educators operated schools and black craftspeople educated their apprentices. Yet in Baltimore as in the rest of the South, enslavement provided the most potent barrier to schooling. Enslaved people sought learning for themselves and their children, but had to do so in secret and informal spaces.¹⁰

With a mixture of civic and economic goals for common schooling, cities expanded the available public schools for their children and developed paradigmatic forms of schooling. Scale was the key variable. Where rural communities had small populations of students scattered inconsistently across ages and levels, cities with large populations made it a certainty that students would fill separate age-graded classes. City schools featured and helped spread "egg-crate" floor plans with classrooms on each side of a long corridor, predominantly female elementary school teaching forces, and mechanisms of testing and promotion from one level to another.

Growing European immigrant populations raised new questions about the content, and governance, of schools in cities. By 1855, more than half of all New Yorkers were foreign born. Religion, language, and culture all became terrain for conflict in city schools, and New York provided some of the most vivid examples. Many of the newest European immigrants to U.S. cities were Catholic, and they perceived rampant anti-Catholicism in schooling at the time. Urban dioceses sought to meet the demand for education by expanding their own institutions—but their parishioners were often poor and the demand was greater than their resources. In New York, tax dollars already flowed to schools run by the quasi-public, historically elite Protestant Public School Society. New York Catholics asked, if universal schooling, or at least universal white schooling, was a public good, why not send tax dollars to schools that the Catholic Church would run, in ways amenable to Catholic families?¹¹

New York City and state politicians wrestled over this question in dramatic conflict during the 1840s. The debate defined the ambitions as well as the limits of "common school" ideology. Advocates of publicly funded and publicly run schooling pressed for common-ness: the same structure, the same institution, the same curriculum to bind together students across different class, ethnic, linguistic, and previous national, if not racial, lines (as New York's schools were segregated by law). But Roman Catholic Bishop John Hughes, the lead spokesperson for the New York Catholic cause, rejected nonsectarian or even secular public schooling smoothed of its anti-Catholic edges. He wanted an affirmatively Catholic education, run by the Catholic Church, with the benefit of public funds—a model not unlike that taken by many other European nations in the 19th and 20th centuries. Some of Hughes' opponents suggested, as a threat, that if Catholics were granted this autonomy, black communities might want the same authority over their own schools. New York officials never gave Hughes what he sought, but New York's Catholic schools continued to grow—serving as many as 100,000 students per year by the end of the century—as did the privately funded Catholic educational system in many other northeastern and Midwestern cities. Hughes' proposal and its rejection helped solidify what public education meant in the later

19th and 20th centuries: schooling that was not only public in its stated purposes and its funding, but publicly governed by elected or local boards with some supervision by a state department or commission of education.

New York's "school wars" were one early and dramatic example of a struggle that recurred in many forms into the 20th and 21st centuries. Those who felt their beliefs, communities, and children were poorly served by public schools sought ways to access public funds but administer schooling in their own vision.

While New York Catholics faced one form of nativist sentiment, other immigrant groups experienced blunt exclusion at the nexus of nativism and racism. San Francisco schools excluded Chinese and Japanese students in the 1860s and 1870s; El Paso's schools admitted only English-speaking students, effectively barring the large Mexican population.¹²

For decades, historians saw the U.S. South as an outlier in the story of common school development. They described a region that decided not to invest in public schooling because of the distortions of slavery—a hegemonic white planter elite schooled its own children privately, an agrarian white workforce saw little economic or political benefit from schooling, and black populations were separated from schooling by slavery and Jim Crow. The story of U.S. public education was northern, and the South fell behind. Many southern states lagged behind the North, but in fact many southern cities moved quickly to establish common schools for white students in the mid-19th century. In New Orleans, local leaders built a system drawing directly on Horace Mann's counsel. And in New Orleans, black community leaders founded autonomous black schools to provide instruction for both material and civic gain. Even in Georgia, where no state system of education existed before the Civil War, networks of black educators in Savannah were immediately ready to establish an extensive network of weekday and Sabbath schools establishing schooling at the end of the war.¹³ Southern cities came closer than did many rural areas, but the idea of public education for all remained not fully achieved in the South in the 19th century.

During the 19th century, the United States made the gradual, controversial, and still incomplete turn to publicly accessible, publicly funded, and publicly governed school systems. This turn was motivated significantly by the opportunities of, as well as worries about, U.S. cities as growing, industrial, immigrant spaces. By the close of the century, when few other structures for social welfare were in place, schools were a core part of the urban infrastructure. As of 1910, nationally, 92.9 percent of U.S.-born white children under the age of 13 were enrolled in school. The rates were lower—70.1, 72.1, and 62.9 percent, respectively—for African American, Native American, and Hispanic students. This variation reflected both racism and the related economic pressures families faced, but it also reflected the predominantly rural location of these groups in the United States.¹⁴ While white Americans consolidated state mechanisms around common schools as one mechanism of exclusive white citizenship, black, Latino, and Asian American communities created their own spaces within or outside of public funding to demonstrate their view of their own citizenship and of education as a tool in its pursuit.

Making the Urban School System at the Turn of the 20th Century

A grand and massive building rose at the corner of Division and Sedgwick streets on Chicago's North Side and opened for operation in the fall of 1908. The Albert Grannis Lane Manual Training High School, or "Lane Tech," symbolized many features and ambitions, as well as limitations, of U.S. urban public education systems of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the eyes of the newly minted education experts who led schools such as Lane, and districts such as Chicago, the institutions were efficient as well as accessible, crucibles of both the city's economic and its civic future in an era of dramatic urban growth.

The U.S. population grew by 30 million residents between 1900 and 1920; 14 million of them were new immigrants. Growth via immigration, as well as from southern African American migration to cities, meant that city classrooms swelled and schools expanded. But Lane Tech stood for a rapid expansion in the length of public schooling as well, not only its volume. The common school offered primary or elementary education. New kinds of skilled work emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in factories as well as offices, made secondary schooling seem appealing and worthwhile to more students and families. So, too, did the new idea of adolescence—a distinct life phase, best served in a distinct institution—and the slowly rising compulsory school age alongside tightening restrictions on child labor. An additional boost to high school enrollment came with the Great Depression—in which rising adult unemployment pushed younger workers out of the labor market and reduced previous opportunity costs for schooling. More U.S. students chose to continue their schooling into high school than ever before, with girls attending at rates greater than or equal to boys.¹⁵



Figure 2. Girls High School, Brooklyn, 1907.

Photo courtesy of the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, 836937 <<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-8dff-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>>.

But if more people attended school for longer periods of time, what kind of schooling did they receive? When secondary schooling was an elite institution, enrolling fewer than 10 percent of the population, courses of study focused on preparation for college or for work as a teacher. With enrollment growing, educators increasingly linked high schooling to a broader economic landscape and a labor market marked by racial, ethnic, and gender segregation. School superintendents, principals, and university professors bearing new graduate degrees from recently created schools of education turned to business and industry for models of efficiency. Psychology—and particularly the pseudoscience of early intelligence testing—promised “social efficiency” via swift sorting of students by their future destination in the economy. Although claiming to measure innate capacity, in practice, tests reflected racist and cultural bias and worked to further inscribe social and political hierarchies. As more students entered secondary schooling, new divisions between types of schooling hardened. Names such as “technical,” “manual,” or “commercial” appeared in school titles—replacing or coexisting with academic offerings.

Early 20th-century high schools were microcosms of the economy and politics in which they operated. The industrial city created opportunities for economic mobility for those hired—recent immigrant arrivals alongside native-born white workers. With or without a high school diploma,

employers often relegated black men to the lowest-paid and most unstable parts of this work. By contrast, white men and women with commercial or secretarial training found work in the expanding corporate offices and clerical pools of the day, but few black workers were hired into these positions until World War II. Formal education's emphasis on sorting students did not create the unequal labor market, but certainly reflected it. Surely many black students swam against the tide to access higher levels of schooling and employment. Despite then-powerful and universalizing messages of mobility through hard work and education, racism consistently pushed black students down or out in high school as in the workforce.

For the increasing numbers of women doing paid work outside of the home, early 20th-century high school curricula provided one preparatory route aligned to new kinds of employment—especially in the offices of growing corporations and government bureaucracies.¹⁶ Working-class boys sought pathways to industrial and other employment via vocational and technical courses. For some among waves of European immigrant women, academic training in high school opened the path to careers as teachers, marking a first step into the middle class.¹⁷ As relationships between schooling and the labor market were at once lauded and unstable, the crucial question was who decided. Did schools enable students and families to select their path, or did teachers or counselors make those decisions for them? Gendered, nativist, and racist stereotypes figured both in the shaping of the high school curriculum and school culture as well as in the assignment of individual students to courses.¹⁸

Segregated southern Jim Crow high schools for black students provided sharp examples of how schooling could simultaneously include and exclude. And they showed how communities, educators, and students resisted. High schools for black students remained rare in the South before World War II, but those that existed were overwhelmingly urban. Northern philanthropists encouraged black education, but on a model that constrained black students to the “Negro trades” of the segregated economy. Some black leaders such as Booker T. Washington supported this approach as a gradualist path to uplift. Others refused, most notably W. E. B. DuBois and many black educators, who worked quietly to provide rigorous academic preparation even when their sponsors or supervisors thought they were doing otherwise. They worked in the context of Jim Crow disfranchisement, but they were guided by a vision of first-class citizenship. Presented with donations to support a new vocational school in New Orleans, black leaders rejected the proposal rather than accept it and its limitations.¹⁹



Figure 3. Howard University, Washington, DC, circa 1900—Elementary Students Exercise.

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-40471 <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001705794/>>.



Figure 4. Grammar School No. 33, New York City, Assembled for morning exercises, circa 1880–1890.

Photo courtesy of the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, G91F216_059F <<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-ebe8-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>>.

Within urban school systems, similar inclusions and exclusions coexisted as well. Chicago's schools—including Lane—not only sorted students by race between vocational and academic tracks or schools; educators were more likely to place black students in lower-skilled branches of the vocational curriculum than their white peers.²⁰ In the small California city of Oxnard, white board of education officials assigned Mexican students to separate classrooms, creating school-within-a-school segregation in the 1930s.²¹ Meanwhile many cities, from Atlanta to New York to Kansas City, deployed a varied and adaptive set of technologies of racial segregation in schooling. These techniques built on and helped constitute the segregated residential landscape. On that terrain, though, black educators and community members turned segregated institutions into hubs of black community life and learning. Nashville's Pearl High School, Washington, DC's Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, and Atlanta's Booker T. Washington High School trained generations of local leaders and employed black teachers who anchored the local middle class. While buffeted by the storm of Jim Crow, these institutions served as shelters as well.



Figure 5. Electricity class at work, Harrison Technical High School, Chicago, Ill. Chicago Illinois, 1929.

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-stereo-1s12620 <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2018649067/>>.



Figure 6. Cooking class making salads, John Hay School, Chicago, Ill. Chicago Illinois, circa 1929. Meadville, Pa, the Keystone View Company.

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-stereo-1s12631 <https://www.loc.gov/item/93502210/>.

High schools such as Chicago's Lane Tech were not only markers of expanded participation in schooling. They were also capstones of new, elaborate public school systems that developed at the turn of the century. Earlier, reformers such as Horace Mann intended high schools to push the widely varied and inconsistent landscape of common schooling toward standardization. Mann, hoping that educators would adopt uniform approaches to everything from student desk design to chalkboards to textbooks, believed that high schools would guide the larger school system, including the goals and methods of primary schools. He wanted crucial decisions—about what constituted a qualified teacher, for example—to be made by a centralized bureaucracy and not individual school administrators. By the early 20th century, high schools stood atop large and increasingly centralized school systems at a numeric and bureaucratic scale greater than what Mann ever imagined.²²

Making and regulating urban schooling presented a perfect opportunity for turn-of-the-century social reformers. These new middle-class professionals and their elite allies celebrated university- or philanthropy-sanctioned expertise and professional decision-making over the

street-level politics of the local ward, which they critiqued in ways that revealed anti-immigrant sentiment as well. New appointed boards that ran city systems pulled power away from (or replaced entirely) local ward boards, or gave more power to superintendents, in large cities such as New York as well as smaller ones including Cleveland and Kansas City. An “interlocking directorate” of local manufacturing and finance executives—celebrated for their managerial competence and their presumed political disinterest—and their favored education professionals claimed authority to make educational decisions for burgeoning city schools.²³ Leaders in these cities became nationally influential in education, bringing a distinctly urban perspective to the broader stage.²⁴ The managerial, professional, often northern elite inhabited a refined, urban milieu seemingly far from the blunt and brutal imagery of southern Jim Crow. Their aesthetics were different, and they worked with different tools, but many were equally comfortable advocating and instantiating segregation.²⁵

Despite the centralizing agenda, crucial decisions remained in the hands of the teachers who saw students each day. The overwhelming majority of these teachers at the elementary school level were women (the 19th century saw a steady decline in the number of men in these roles, although most principals and district leaders were male). Female teachers faced a conflicting mix of external and internal expectations—that they were kind because of their inherent maternalism, that they were compliant cogs in a massive bureaucracy committed to tallying and ordering students, that they were employees in a public service occupation interested in shaping the terms and content of their work. Despite these fundamental and deeply gendered contradictions, teaching became a pathway to middle-class stability for European immigrant women, as well as for black and West Indian migrant women. Some men who negotiated often racist teacher hiring systems assumed positions in growing and segregated urban school systems.²⁶

By 1900, the overwhelming majority of Americans attended a publicly operated primary school—if the duration and quality of that schooling still varied widely by region, and access and quality were both limited by racism and economic power. For Americans born between 1886 and 1890, 73 percent left school at or before eighth grade. For those born between 1926 and 1930, by contrast, more than 60 percent completed high school or beyond, and more than 80 percent attended at least some secondary school.²⁷ Not only did U.S. urban school systems accommodate the radical increase in their number, but they expanded the reach of schooling into the secondary years. Fewer 20th-century Americans spoke of “common” schools than did their 19th-century forebears. Schooling was more extensive and more regularized in U.S. cities of the day, but it was sharply divided and unequal.

Challenging the Urban School System After World War II

The post-World War II urban school landscape saw nearly constant motion—from struggles over desegregation to school governance to increased federal pressure for testing. Most of these changes represented modifications to the existing structure of the school system. At the end of the 20th century, fundamental challenges to that structure were gathering strength. These reform efforts operate in the context of a wildly unequal economic landscape in the late 20th and

early 21st centuries, with gaps in wealth and income by race widening since the 1970s. Weakened union protections and the loss of decently compensated work for those with a high school degree or less make the stakes of schooling greater than ever.²⁸

The Great Depression catalyzed educational change by increasing high school enrollment. But the federal response to the Depression, in the form of the New Deal's housing policy, signaled a quieter but deeper transformation in the urban, and thus the urban educational, landscape. Federal dollars, in the form of mortgage guarantees for white residents purchasing homes in segregated white suburbs, eased the pathway of white families out of U.S. cities and to the metropolitan collar.²⁹ And federal dollars, in the form of subsidized low-income housing, flowed to urban centers. These policies produced the massive demographic transformation of the mid-20th-century United States—white middle-class suburban outmigration alongside the concentration of working-class and poor African American and Latino communities in central cities. Previously loose or fluid patterns of segregation tightened. Schools played a part in this process, as municipal leaders planned, zoned, built, or moved schools in ways that reinforced residential segregation and privileged white suburban communities despite the activism of black and Latino urban communities for equitable and at times desegregated schools.

Urban school systems were locally funded entities. Therefore metropolitan demographic and economic shifts changed urban schooling substantially. Resources to fund city schools were constrained by a declining urban tax base (via the suburbanization of manufacturing and corporate headquarters) as well as by tax policy that favored retaining or recruiting local businesses over funding services that residents needed. Resource scarcity resounded through schools, shaping how often—or rarely—classrooms were painted, windows replaced, or libraries stocked. It shaped teacher salary levels and thus competition for qualified teachers in metropolitan areas. And as rates of urban childhood poverty rose, cities struggled to provide social, medical, and welfare services to support their populations. Schools tried to serve students whose academic and personal needs were substantial.

Southern urban districts, like their rural counterparts, were formally and rigidly segregated by race until at least the 1960s. Segregation was equally evident—but depended on more veiled mechanisms—in urban districts outside of the South. Fully a decade after the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* (1954) finding school segregation unconstitutional, a tiny proportion of American students, North and South, attended schools that had sizeable proportions of both black and white students. (Hispanic students experienced sharp segregation, too, but this was often obscured in a bimodal categorization that identified them as black or white, as suited local segregationist purposes.)³⁰ Not until the combined leverage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—which tied growing federal resources in education to some compliance with desegregation—and the acceleration of federal court pressure for desegregation in the late 1960s—with decisions calling for desegregation “now,” undoing segregation “root and branch,” and using affirmative measures including busing across school zone boundaries and neighborhood lines—did levels of segregation within school districts start to fall, reaching a national low around 1980. White families resisted desegregation mightily, however, and the number of white families willing to move to avoid schooling with black and brown children added

to the federally funded outflow to the suburbs.³¹ High levels of segregation operated increasingly across district lines, with urban systems (and some poorer suburban ones) isolated from relative suburban wealth.

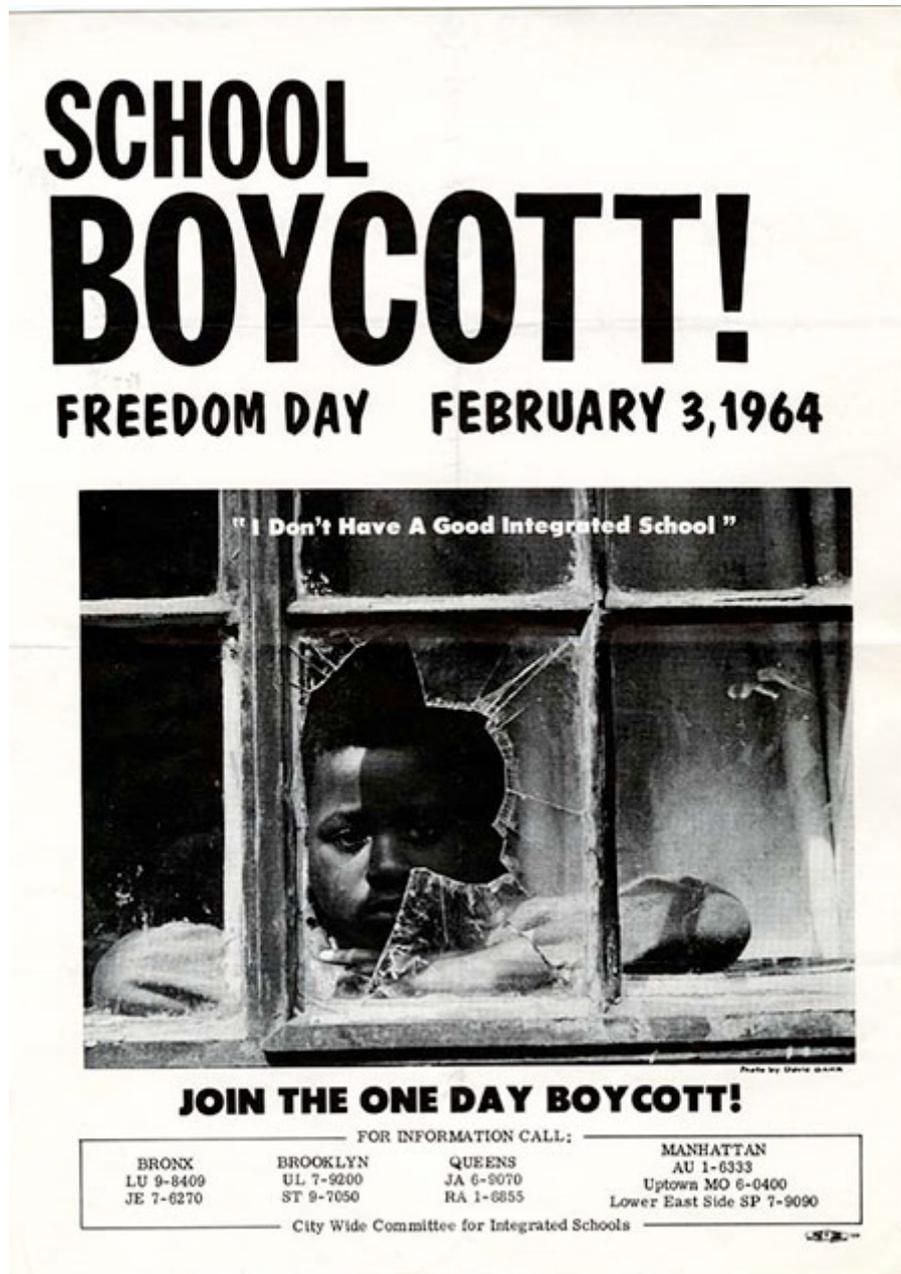


Figure 7. Flyer from 1964 New York City school boycott, in which nearly half a million students stayed home from school to protest segregation.

Photo courtesy of the City Wide Committee for Integrated Schools, "School Boycott! Flier <<http://archives.qc.cuny.edu/civilrights/items/show/130>>," *Queens College Civil Rights Archives*.

Too many accounts of urban education in the post-World War II years essentially stop here. They equate segregation and financial struggle with the absence of educational ambition, innovation, or success. Or worse, they imply that rising proportions of students of color in urban school systems produced “decline,” locating the difficulty in the bodies of the students rather than in the policy choices that erected barriers to schools’ operations and to students’ positive life chances.

In fact, many black and Latino communities reimaged schooling in the 1960s and 1970s. Some conceptualized fully autonomous educational institutions aligned with nationalist or other political traditions.³² Others took aim at the unresponsive bureaucracies in big-city school systems—ones that had sustained segregation within their districts and tolerated inequality in material and human resources for decades. Community control activists in New York City gained the support of the Ford Foundation and other philanthropists in launching an experiment in local democratic governance of education. New “demonstration districts” gathered together a handful of nearby schools and a locally elected school board, scaling down from the million-plus student district with its appointed board. Put differently, black and Latino city residents sought democratic governance of schools on the scale that most white suburbanites enjoyed as a matter of course. The New York City experiment foundered on the question of teacher hiring—whether it would be governed by the local board, or the recently won collective bargaining contract with the teachers’ union. But it illustrated a partial reversal of the centralizing impulse of the turn-of-the-century school system.³³

Spurred by decentralization, as well as by community activism and legal pressure for greater inclusion of students who spoke languages other than English, who had physical, mental, or emotional disabilities, or who had recently arrived in the United States with or without documentation, urban schools became sites of pedagogical innovation. In New York, Puerto Rican parents and student activists pressed for, and some allied educators helped develop, new approaches to bilingual and bicultural education to serve Spanish-speaking communities. In Los Angeles and Texas, Chicano communities did the same.³⁴ Teacher leaders created new alternative schools that rejected the massive feel of urban schools in favor of smaller, human-scale interaction.³⁵ Black educators worked through their own community networks to produce and share curricular materials that connected their students to black history. Students brought political movements of the day into schools in Chicago and Milwaukee, pressing for changes within schools and in their surrounding communities.³⁶

While some innovations in urban education practice reflected black and Latino communities’ best hopes for their children, others were guided by backlash politics of fear and racism. Deficit-minded ideas of communities and children scarred by a “culture of poverty” demeaned students’ capacities. Austerity policies worsened fiscal strain on institutions and families. In the worst cases, community members and critics experienced public school systems as indifferent or malicious institutions, warehousing rather than supporting children. A disciplinary vice tightened around black and brown children as police began to patrol schools in the 1970s and disproportionate rates of school punishment became a step on the carceral continuum.³⁷

City schools in the late 20th century sat at the intersection of two ideas of “crisis.” The “urban crisis” notion met a crisis of educational achievement pronounced in the 1980s via statements such as the Reagan administration’s *A Nation at Risk*. The 1983 report declared that U.S. educational provision was so lacking that it left the nation vulnerable internationally. This announcement of crisis was national, not specifically urban. But it aligned with and reinforced popular cultural representations of urban schools in the 1980s and 1990s, portrayed as dysfunctional institutions that were home to troubled young people of color who could be reached and transformed only by the heroic efforts of maverick educators.³⁸

Ideas of crisis opened the way to major changes in urban schooling. Many of these reforms operated nationally, but had more intense impact and visibility in urban contexts. Some offered new versions of centuries-old questions about how public dollars would flow to schooling and under what decision-making structures. Some attempted to bring ongoing inequality in education by race and class more to the fore. Together, these efforts revealed that the relatively stable century-long relationship between cities and public school systems was in question.

Ideas of crisis also set the stage for a more expansive federal role in education. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) made a major federal investment in schooling as part of the War on Poverty. In the 1990s and 2000s, federal influence shifted to the idea of accountability—first, in setting and testing for achievement of academic standards, and then as of the 2000s in measuring how the achievement of students across categories of race, class, language, and disability compared. Mandates for frequent student testing, attached to funding and threats of closure, applied to all schools, but shaped urban schooling more intensively. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (an amendment to the ESEA) and subsequent iterations created mandates for testing that pressed urban schools to narrow their curricula to focus on tested subjects, to accelerate opening new schools and closing old ones in efforts to generate higher achievement levels. Declarations of educational failure under these measures had various consequences—from loss of funding, to transfer opportunities for students, to catalyzing state takeovers of local city systems as in Newark, New Jersey or groups of local schools, as in Tennessee’s Achievement School District.

In the same years, states around the country adopted charter school legislation that allowed for the creation of new publicly funded schools authorized for a fixed period of years by a public entity (such as a school board, university, or state educational board) but managed and governed by private entities. Charter schools—like proposals for public vouchers that paid for individual students to attend private schools—appealed to those who saw public education as one example of many in which private rather than public management was more efficient, more flexible, and more effective. They also resonated with those community activists who for decades sought more autonomy from school district bureaucracy. In some states, legislation intentionally focused charter schools on city systems and, within city systems, on students who had attended low-performing schools. For much of the first two decades of charter school development, the strong majority of charters operated in city school systems. Early 21st-century cities became testing grounds for relationships between traditional public schools and growing numbers of charter schools, where the two compete for students, space, resources, and perceptions of educational success.

New institutions such as charters embodied a criticism of the urban school system as well as a shift from local democratic governance of schools to parental engagement in an educational marketplace as consumers. This appeal of the market and its supposed efficiencies and expertise helped support as well the 1990s and 2000s turn to reconfiguring urban school governance in many major cities away from an elected or appointed school board and to mayoral control. Chicago made this switch early, in 1995, and New York followed in 2002. Bringing school governance under the mayor's office, advocates claimed, meant more accountability for school performance in the office of a highly visible official. Opponents noted, however, that mayoral control meant many fewer points of leverage for parents and citizens interested in acting on or for schools. Centralized governance and privatizing education reforms coincided in a few dramatic cases, as when, as part of the Hurricane Katrina recovery, almost all of New Orleans' schools were reopened as charter schools.

Late 20th- and early 21st-century educational reforms were fueled both by frustrations with the urban school system and by impressions of failure. The historian Michael Katz noted the unusual consensus among both left- and right-leaning scholars that the story of the 20th-century city was a story of failure. From the perspective of the beginning of the next century, nearly everyone agreed that segregation, deindustrialization, and concentrated poverty plagued cities, and that the state interventions to mitigate these ills proved insufficient, misguided, or ineffective. Urban historians had “naturalized public failure as the master narrative of urban history” for the 20th century.³⁹

Education in the post-World War II years, as Katz well knew, fit tidily into this master narrative. But Katz urged his readers to recognize that “all of this is true, but it is not complete.” Urban school systems indeed faced massive structural, political, and social challenges in the second half of World War II. Often they perpetuated or worsened inequalities by race and class. But this narrative was incomplete. Post-World War II urban schools were crucial parts of a multifaceted expansion of access to and achievement in public education in the United States. High school attendance became normative across all racial categories as well as previously excluded ability and linguistic categories. More than 80 percent of Americans born between 1946 and 1950 completed high school. Rates of white high school graduation, however, were separated from those of black high school graduation by a wide chasm: Only one-third as many black students graduated from high school as did white students in 1940. By 1980, the fissure narrowed: 78 percent of white students graduated, while 64 percent of black students did so.⁴⁰ These improvements were achieved even in the context of policy choices that sharply constrained cities' finances and political position. Simultaneously, individual and community action around education was robust, creative, and persistent—evidence of energy and vision that should not be obscured by discussions of failure.

Yet for many parents and community members, as well as teachers and educators who sought to serve them, the enduring question remained: Would public resources sufficiently support the education of black and Latino children residing in cities? And if so, would that education be for first- or second-class citizenship? Historians better understand the ways in which schools were

historically linked to the search for profit in cities via land and labor, and how visions of citizenship in schooling were delimited by white supremacy. Educators and educational advocates face hard questions about what kind of lever for a more just and humane world schooling can be.

Discussion of the Literature

Urban history and the history of education grew up as scholarly subfields in the same decade—the 1960s—but operated largely on parallel tracks. Previous scholarly work on the historical origins and meaning of U.S. public education, such as that of Stanford’s Elwood Cubberley, was created within the education profession and often took a celebratory view. In the 1960s and 1970s, historians of education turned to urban cases to uncover the roots of U.S. public education and the shaping of school systems. Scholars such as Michael Katz and David Tyack portrayed schools as expressions of social and economic hierarchy, rebutting earlier views of benevolence.

In the context of the 1980s United States, ideas about urban crisis and educational crisis shaped the questions historians asked and led many scholars of education to focus on urban spaces. Historian Jeffrey Mirel and others sought to explain the “rise and fall” of urban school systems, or to zoom in on the politics of white response to desegregation, as in the work of Kevin Kruse and Matthew Lassiter. Many of these interpretations left out the perspectives of black communities and educators or treated them as recipients of policies and conditions made by others.

As urban social history, and particularly African American urban history, developed as a field, it inspired new views of the experience of schooling and the nature of community advocacy for education. James Anderson, Vanessa Siddle Walker, and Jack Dougherty, among others, trimmed the too-deterministic nature of earlier accounts, recognizing that parents, community members, and students have long pressed to shape education and schooling in the directions they sought.

A new wave of urban histories published in the last decade dig deeply into *how* schools and cities interact. Andrew Highsmith, Ansley Erickson, Walter Stern, and Emily Straus trace connections with urban planning, with housing markets, with labor markets, and with industrial development. They seek to recognize both the power of these structural connections with schooling in the context of racial capitalism and the diagnoses and strategies for change that communities of color deploy in contestation.⁴¹ These accounts rest on detailed case studies, and there is no broad scholarly synthesis of urban educational history that works at national scale.

Many rich avenues beckon for further investigation, including social histories of education that work outside of the black–white binary, that consider schooling as one part of the historical experience of childhood (with connections to health, policing, social welfare policy, and criminalization and incarceration), and new considerations of the history of work, labor, and vocationalism in connection with schooling in shifting forms of capitalism.⁴² And as historians of schooling have long noticed, but few have taken up the charge, a full history of urban education would be more than a history of schooling. There is much to do to understand how people have learned and been part of educational processes in all of their varied forms and meanings, well beyond schooling.

Primary Sources

Scholars in the history of education often work across multiple archives, in search of individual as well as institutional perspectives on schooling. While schools generate copious amounts of paper, very little of it makes its way into the archive. The highly decentralized nature of U.S. schooling marks the record as well—as what is archived depends on the varied choices of local school districts and municipalities.

Scholars seeking to understand the experience of children in schools, at any point in time, will find the search challenging. Children leave limited traces in most aspects of their lives, including in schools. Diaries of school-going, discussion of school experiences in oral histories, published student writing, all can offer incomplete but useful views into what children experienced in school. Adults' experiences in schools are more likely to be captured, but often the best documented educational practices or experiences are those farthest from the classroom. Historians have made productive use of the individual manuscript collections of individual teachers or school leaders, as well as of their collective work in unions (including the extensive UFT and AFT collections at the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State <http://reuther.wayne.edu/>). Oral histories with educators have also provided a rich source of material.

Few schools have consistent mechanisms for archiving their work. Renovations result in old materials being thrown out, or school closures mean a whole building is emptied. Researchers are wise to check with schools to see what might be held—in the form of old yearbooks, diplomas, student prizes, or the like. (Some of these materials, alongside photographs of school buildings, can be found in digital repositories such as the Digital Public Library of America <https://dp.la/> or the Library of Congress's digital collection <https://www.loc.gov/collections/?c=160>, and in the digital collections of larger archives.) But unfortunately, much of what can be perceived about a particular school depends on the extent to which a school district made it visible within their records.

Archives of city school systems vary widely—some have their own dedicated archives, as in the Charles Sumner School Museum in Washington, DC or the archives of the Atlanta Public School; some are established parts of city archives, as in New York; and some have neither. The depth of their collections varies tremendously as well. School board minutes, policy statements, enrollment data, and the like all convey important elements of the system's work, but do so behind a bureaucratic veneer.

More multifaceted views of what happened in schools—and how individuals and communities experienced this and made meaning of it—can be found in moments when schools became the locus of conflict. The papers of activists, community organizations, lawyers, and others can be rich sources on schools. Black and Latino archives are good sources for these materials. When this activism led to litigation, court records can be valuable sources not only for legal proceedings but also for the documentary record amassed in the process.

State and federal education agencies often hold quantitative reports on school systems, and at times have sources that offer qualitative views as well.

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