

American education traces history to Constitution

When the United States drafted the Constitution, education was regarded as a province of the individual states. In every state constitution public education is addressed and public schools are designated a responsibility of the state. Such is true of the Alaska Constitution.

Although educational matters were to be state concerns, early national leaders certainly took interest. Thomas Jefferson, for one, envisioned a nation of educated gentlemen farmers actively involved in the affairs of representative government. Because of this, he also envisioned a need for schools.

Massachusetts was an early leader among states in developing a strong system of public schools during the Nineteenth Century. And with westward expansion, one of the first efforts of new residents in newly settled communities was the establishment of a local school.

During the early Nineteenth Century, public schooling was limited to the elementary or common school grades, one through eight. In the less technical agricultural society of the time, this system seemed sufficient, although many capable young people undoubtedly were denied the ability to pursue learning because they could not afford to attend secondary school.

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Public secondary schools had their beginning in Massachusetts in 1830. Not until 1874, however, did the nation decide whether high schools could be considered part of the common school system, and therefore eligible for public support through taxes. It was in that year that the Michigan Supreme Court affirmed that tax funds could be used to support high schools.

Over the past century and up to the present an explosive chain of events has reshaped the public schools and citizens' expectations of them.

The industrial revolution brought about a shift of population from rural to urban areas. Massive immigration, different than that of an earlier time, occurred in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, resulting in a cultural pluralism far greater than that previously experienced.

The population today has become very mobile, with twenty percent of Americans moving to a new locale each year.

The question of equality of opportunity has begun to be addressed. There have been quantum leaps in knowledge. As the nation has come to grips with societal ills—high unemployment among the young and minority groups, drug abuse, prejudice, crime, premiscuity, and

In examining factors that influence societal expectations and the nation's schools, no study would be complete without addressing the impact of media, especially television. Not long ago, Americans were entranced and contented with radio and motion pictures censored by industry.

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others—schools frequently have been looked upon as the means for providing solutions.

Today we also live in an era of instant mass communication which has had a profound effect upon our lives.

With the advent of an industrial society, large numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers were needed to staff the factories and support industries. Thus, migrants from rural areas and immigrants from other countries with little formal education, or at best elementary school education, could be absorbed into the work force. A strong component of the American dream, however, has been the notion that one could better his or her lot by hard work and education.

As the ranks of immigrants swelled and more sophisticated machines were introduced, there came a time when there were more job seekers than jobs. Hence, many more young people attended high school.

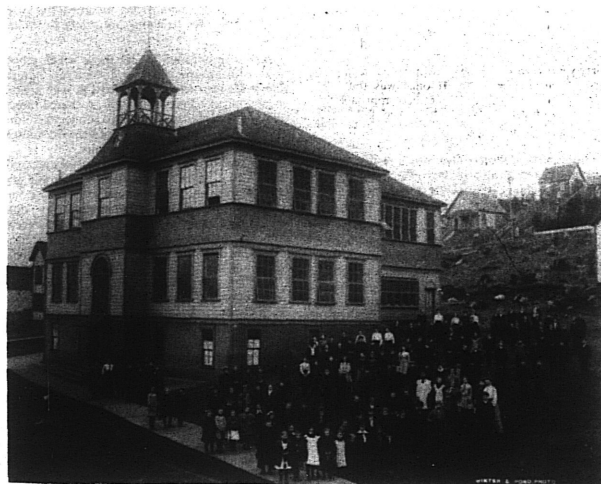
imposed boards of review. Parents had considerable control of the films their offspring viewed.

Culture and media have reflected and influenced one another, and television has had an especially profound impact upon the living generations of our society. Television contributes much to the learning of the young, although it is a passive kind of learning. It enables us to participate in many events of the world on an instantaneous basis and it does much to enrich our lives.

Yet very few advances are without trade-offs. Under the guise of entertainment, television provides fictional models which some people would suggest are far less than ideal. It may tend to discourage reading books and newspapers.

Television also may have an adverse effect upon student performance. A California Department of Education study, in which 530,000 sixth grade pupils and high school seniors were surveyed regarding TV viewing habits, revealed that students who watched the most television received the lowest test scores. The findings cut across all social, economic, and racial lines, the only exception being students who spoke limited English.

It may be argued that those students who are low achievers are more inclined to watch television, as opposed to television watching causing low achievement. However, there should be no doubt that students who watch three or more hours of television a day have little time to devote to school work at home.



Juneau's public school in 1905. Courtesy Alaska Historical Library.