

## The 1900s Education: Overview

The American educational system faced many challenges during the earliest years of the twentieth century. The average American child attended only a few years of formal schooling, in which only the most basic grammar and mathematical skills were taught. More than two-thirds of American schools were located in rural districts. Most of these schoolhouses were one-room buildings staffed by teachers with little formal training. Classrooms were filled with students who generally ranged in age from five to twenty years old. The most common teaching methods were memorization and repetition. Unlike those in rural schools, urban students were grouped according to age and had a longer school year. Although children had been educated under these conditions for decades, many enlightened citizens began to realize that traditional schools were not serving their students well. They increasingly demanded that American education be reformed.

One of the primary concerns of many Americans was that society was changing rapidly during the 1900s and the nation's schools were failing to prepare their students for the many new challenges that lay ahead. The most important cultural shift was the economy's transformation. Large industrial corporations were gradually replacing agriculture and small manufacturing, which had once been the most powerful sectors of the economy. A related cultural shift was the increasing percentage of the population residing in cities, as rural Americans moved to urban centers in search of employment. They were joined in the cities' factories by millions of immigrants (many from southern and eastern Europe) who were arriving on America's shores. The working and lower classes were filled with native-born Americans who had little education and immigrants who often could not speak English. The nation's political and educational leaders realized that they must work to improve education in the United States to assist the millions of citizens who were unable to read, calculate numbers, or understand American history and social customs.

As American schools restructured to accommodate new circumstances, many educational leaders patterned their efforts after the examples set by successful businesses. Just as a CEO (corporate executive officer) leads a company, in the same way a superintendent would head a school system. Principals were seen as filling management positions, while teachers were akin to individual workers. More emphasis was placed on improving productivity and efficiency within each school. The connections between America's educational and economic institutions were strengthened, as employers became increasingly concerned about the ability of poorly educated employees to meet the demands of the changing workplace. In addition, vocational schools were founded across the nation to train students to enter industrial jobs upon graduation.

In 1900, 78 percent of all American children between the ages of five and seventeen were enrolled in schools; by 1910, that percentage had increased only slightly, to 79 percent. The amount of time the average student spent in school was much less than it is for students today. For example, in 1905, the average school year was only 151 days long and the average student attended school for only 105 of those days. Educators worked to increase the amount of time children would be required to spend in class. They also created programs to help students with special needs, such as the many foreign-born students who could not speak or understand English. Not only did these children learn the common American language, but they also were given special instruction on American social customs so that they

would better conform to mainstream society. One of the most important reasons for the vast improvement of many schools was the higher quality of teachers entering the classroom. Many universities expanded their teacher education programs. It was no longer acceptable to hire teachers who were barely more educated than their students.

The movement to improve American educational standards gained steam throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. One of the movement's leading principles was that a formal education must meet not only the intellectual needs of students, but also larger social concerns. Many traditional teaching methods that were no longer useful were discarded and replaced by practices that stressed child development. Despite the push to improve the nation's educational standards during the early 1900s, very few students advanced beyond grade school. In 1900, only 11 percent of all children between ages fourteen and seventeen were enrolled in high school, and even fewer graduated. Those figures had improved only slightly by 1910. At the decade's end, the average number of school years completed by Americans over the age of twenty-five was only slightly more than eight.