

An Organizer's Thumbnail Sketch: Milestones in the History of Public Education

A sense of the past is useful for organizing in the present because it provides a context for our work. The historical context for education organizing in the U.S. includes class, race and ideological struggles born of two – frequently competing – goals for public school systems.

One of society's goals has been to help students develop the skills needed to function successfully in a democracy. It is characterized by a belief in democratic ideals including equal opportunity, self-improvement, class mobility, generational progress and achievement through hard work. Another view embraces the role that public K-12 education has played historically in preparing children to become cooperative and effective workers and passive consumers as adults—thereby favoring capitalist goals over democratic ideals.

Inevitably, these two goals come into conflict with one another. But they have shared, over time, a limited notion of democracy articulated by Thomas Jefferson and others of his day and perpetuated in our economic system. Both made distinctions between “laborers and the learned,” between men and women, between black, brown, yellow and white skin. Whether intentional or not, the legacy our society has brought forward through history is evident in the tensions emanating from class and race distinctions in our schools.

Tension between a school's responsibility to an individual (providing *some* children with boundless resources), versus responsibility to society as a whole (insuring that *all* children have access to the highest level of instruction) also serves to separate rather than unite. Despite court rulings overturning the concept of ‘separate but equal’, today's public schools often manifest a sharp contrast in their racial segregation and their uneven distribution of resources.

Is reform being driven by well-documented research about how children learn, or by the political desire to seem tough and push for quick fixes?

All of these competing constructs of public education are evident in the curriculum, the structure of schools and learning, and of course the politics of public school reform. The constant tension between the democratic ideals and the pressure to maintain class and racial divides explains much about how schools are governed and funded and about the rhetoric and reality of reform efforts.

With this in mind, activists and organizers must constantly ask questions that help expose these contradictory interests. For instance:

- ◆ How does education policy in our districts play out along race and class lines? What are the ways that resources – broadly defined – are skewed to widen these divides?
- ◆ Does a school's curriculum encourage creative and independent thinking or does it focus on test scores, rote memorization, and ability grouping?
- ◆ Are standards and assessments being used to evaluate what's working and what's not and assure better outcomes for students and teachers, or to bar access, sort and label kids, or to punish students, teachers, schools or districts?
- ◆ Do politicians and corporate executives dictate policy and practice or do parents, students and teachers take the lead, modeling democratic ideals – or at least have a seat at the table?
- ◆ Is reform being driven by well-documented research about how children learn, or by the political desire to seem tough and push for quick fixes?

Much has been written about the goals, beginnings, and development of public schools in the United States. A list of helpful resources is included in the [Where to Find It](#) section of this action guide. This is not intended to be the definitive history of public education, but rather a thumbnail history, designed to help activists and organizers identify and exploit contradictions in ways that will help them frame their work and move schools issues in their communities.

Education in the Colonies – the 1600s

The first schools in the European colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Hampshire were created by the Puritans in

the mid-1600s. Promoting the twin tenets of work and faith, Puritan schools taught basic literacy – relying heavily on the Bible as a textbook – along with skills needed for work and survival. Very few children had access to these schools, which were often centered in private homes. And even those who did attend found their academic schedule heavily shaped by the colonists' need for young people to work in the fields and trades.

The colonists recognized the role that schooling plays in conveying not just skills but also moral values to children. As Protestants who belonged to sects other than Puritanism arrived in the colonies, they began to object to the theological grounding of the Puritan schools. Without common agreement on a single set of values, these arrivals established schools to share their own values with their children. By the middle of the eighteenth century, private schools, guided by the ideologies of disparate religious groups, were the norm.

Defining Social and Class Roles – the 1700s

Thomas Jefferson was an early advocate of *public* schools, available to all children. But “public” didn’t mean equal. Jefferson was a proponent of both conflicting tenets described in the introduction to this chapter. He wanted education to serve to “maintain democracy,” but also envisioned two sets of schools segregating “the laboring from the learned” and educating them accordingly. Jefferson’s crumb to the poor was a promise of upward mobility: he conceded that his system might “[rake] a few geniuses from the rubbish.”¹

Jefferson’s concept of public schooling didn’t catch on right away, but in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, Jefferson revived his campaign. He argued that public schooling was necessary to teach the values of the new democracy and prepare citizens for civic involvement.

Jefferson’s concept of who was to partake of this training in democracy was hardly democratic. Public education was not envisioned to include women, Native people, enslaved Africans, indentured servants or laborers. Yet even such a stratified system wasn’t enough for some. In the southern states, for example, wealthy plantation owners shunned the idea of public schools

altogether. They were content to arrange for the private education of their *own* children and declined to worry about the larger societal implications of failing to educate all children.

Industrial Schools – the 1800s

Public education received a major boost in the early 1800s with the contributions of Horace Mann, who was appointed as the First Secretary of the State Board of Education in Massachusetts in 1837. Mann campaigned throughout the state on behalf of public schools, and his work resulted in significantly improved financial commitments to schools, and the increased institutionalization of public education in the state. Mann also established the first teacher training school in the United States, and advocated for a system of free libraries. His series of twelve Annual Reports carried his message outside of Massachusetts. In the reports, he called for a free education for all children, rich and poor alike, which he believed would equalize growing class schisms in society. He supported taxation as a means to support a system of public schools, a non-sectarian approach to public schools, and argued that the nation's economic wealth would increase as citizens were educated.

Largely through the influence of Mann, in the first half of the 1800s new state constitutions were being drafted, and most included provisions for public education. Though most schooling continued to be private and highly segregated, public schools began to emerge. They were immediately politicized, with the curriculum designed to reflect the values of the dominant political party or social groupings in their jurisdictions.

During the 1800s, a dramatically increasing population and urban concentration in some states, due to both internal and external migration, was met with a corresponding explosion of public schools. Between 1846 and 1856, over three million immigrants arrived in the United States, a number then equal to one eighth of the entire U.S. population². These immigrants, and the influx of people from rural areas and the south, joined the growing workforce that fueled new manufacturing industries in the north. Factory owners wanted public schools to provide basic skills and a workforce that accepted its place -- a mission that came in direct conflict with the vision of schools that prepared all citizens to participate fully in civic society.

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Reconstruction – 1865 - 1950

At the conclusion of the Civil War there was a rush to bring public education to the South, particularly to some four million recently emancipated slaves. Congress created a federal Department of Education in 1867 to spearhead and regulate this massive expansion of public schools.

Southern states-rights congressmen, however, opposed federal involvement in education. They wanted to control who was educated and what they were taught. As a result of their efforts, the Department of Education enjoyed cabinet-level status for only one year before being demoted to a “bureau.” Education did not return to Cabinet level again until 1979—more than a hundred years later.

Despite this struggle over the federal government’s role in education, public schooling *did* find its way into the lives of millions of citizens. White literacy was almost universal by the beginning of Reconstruction, and grew rapidly in the rural South where school access had been more limited.³ But the rise in Black literacy rates was especially dramatic. While estimates of the growth in Black literacy vary, one more conservative estimate is that Black literacy increased from 10 percent in 1880 to 50 percent in 1910. The Census Bureau reported that by 1930 the Black literacy rate had jumped to 80 percent.⁴ At the same time, the literacy for white adults was 90 percent. Robert Higgs writes:

...even if the true literacy figure a half century after emancipation reached only 50 percent, the magnitude of the accomplishment is still striking, especially when one recalls the overwhelming obstacles blocking black educational efforts. For a large population to transform itself from virtually unlettered to more than half literate in 50 years ranks as an accomplishment seldom witnessed in human history. — Higgs, Robert, *Competition and Coercion, Blacks in the American Economy, 1865-1914*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

After Reconstruction, signaled by the withdrawal of federal troops in 1877, whites regained political control of the South and laid the groundwork for legal segregation through the Jim Crow laws. African Americans were relegated to separate schools. In 1896

“In recognition of the special educational needs of low-income families and the impact that concentrations of low-income families have on the ability of local educational agencies to support adequate educational programs, the Congress hereby declares it to be the policy of the United States to provide financial assistance...to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means (including preschool programs) which contribute to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children.” (Section 201, Elementary and Secondary School Act, 1965)

the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* declared the concept of “separate but equal” constitutional and permitted segregation in virtually all aspects of public life, including schools.

Migration, Immigration and Industrialization

American society, cities and culture continued to change dramatically at the turn of the twentieth century. From 1870 to 1920, 40 million immigrants from Europe came into the United States. Hundreds of thousands were children whose parents looked to public schools to help them forge a better life. Public schools played a major role in the assimilation of immigrant families, as they do today. The forced removal of Native American children from their homes on reservations to attend boarding schools is a grim reminder of the negative aspects of assimilation goals. In many ways the schools were a cultural battleground, with debates over bilingual education similar to the debates going on in schools today. Beginning in the mid-1850s and up through the turn of the century many states enacted bilingual education laws. However, after the massive immigration noted above and the U.S. involvement in the first World War, xenophobia caused a number of states to pass English-only instruction laws. These bilingual education debates reflected biases about which immigrants’ cultures should be valued. For example, European languages such as German and French were frequently taught in the classroom, but Mexican students were punished for speaking Spanish in school.

At the same time, African Americans left the south, changing the face of northern cities and increasing pressure on schools to meet the needs of the developing industries in which they worked. Junior highs and high schools were restructured, with large numbers of students moving from one classroom to another like widgets moving along an assembly line. Teachers specialized and students were placed in groupings that were said to be based on ability, but deliberately or not often reproduced the socio-economic or racial caste of students’ families. Much of this structure remains today: “ability grouping” may begin as early as kindergarten when children are assigned to reading-readiness groups. Once labeled “low-track,” children often have difficulty moving to tracks that will prepare them for more sophisticated secondary school classes or college.

In 1926 the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), a standardized college entrance exam, was used for the first time. The SAT was developed by Carl Brigham, a eugenicist who did research that allegedly proved immigrants were “feeble-minded”. In the next few decades intelligence and achievement tests became widespread in their use. To this day many argue that the SAT and other standardized tests are culturally biased, favoring white students over students of color.

Battles for Equality and Control – 1950s

After decades of behind-the-scenes groundwork, as the civil rights movement was building in the South, the Supreme Court struck down *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1954. In *Brown v. Board of Education* the justices declared segregated schools inherently unequal and ordered them dismantled “with all deliberate speed.” The ruling ignited a firestorm of protest, from northern as well as southern states, and led to decades of sometimes-violent struggles for integration and equality.

Opposition to the *Brown* decision was couched in terms of “states rights,” – the notion that state governments should maintain the ability to do as they please. State’s rights continues to be used symbolically today to avoid talking about difficult issues of race, class and values.

The *Brown* decision was hailed as forcing states and districts to integrate their schools and equalize resources. But in fact, the Supreme Court failed to throw its full weight behind the decision. As the Mississippi organizing group Southern Echo notes⁵, “Instead, the court left it up to the combatants at the local school district level where the local districts had the advantage, often supported by corrupt, racist federal judges who had no reluctance to flaunt and attack the Supreme Court and the United States Constitution.” Echo argues that the Court’s use of the phrase, “all deliberate speed,” while meant to acknowledge the complexity of the task it was demanding, instead signaled to local segregationists that change could wait. While some cities turned to forced busing and gerrymandering school attendance boundaries to reach for a more diverse student body, equity and integration proved more elusive. The courts could order busing, but they couldn’t force parents to participate.

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In response to integration, millions of white families moved away from urban centers, spurring a massive expansion of suburbs, where the new, all-white school districts were unaffected by the Supreme Court's ruling. Housing segregation fostered school segregation. African-Americans were denied access to suburban homes through 'redlining'—banks and realtors simply shut them out of all-white neighborhoods. Through the 1980s, and despite attempts by some urban districts to keep and attract white students with programs such as magnet schools, the exodus from city schools continued. By 1992, the Court was forced to declare itself unwilling to order more drastic solutions to reverse the rapid resegregation of public schools: "Where resegregation is a product not of state action but of private choices, it does not have constitutional implications. [...] It is beyond the authority and beyond the practical ability of the federal courts to try to counteract these kinds of continuous and massive demographic shifts," wrote Justice Anthony Kennedy in the *Freeman v. Pitts* decision.

The Federal Government Steps In – The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

In the 1950s and early 1960s, states and local school boards shared authority over public education, its funding, organization, and content. By then most states had departments of education, established funding mechanisms and regulations guiding attendance, curriculum and other components of the public education system. Within broad guidelines, localities made specific policies and decisions.

Predictably, there were vast differences among districts in the same state and among the states themselves. There was little consistency in the way that students and their families were involved, supported, and challenged in the schools.

In an effort to manage these disparities, the federal government, in 1965, stepped into the fray. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) directed federal funds and programs to disadvantaged students in recognition that children from low-income homes required more educational services than children from affluent homes. Title I of ESEA became the largest federal K-

12 education program, receiving \$8 billion its first year.

In pressing for the ESEA, President Johnson acted less out of altruism than in response to demands from the civil rights movement, widespread civil unrest and the Civil Rights Act passed the previous year. Without directly attacking local or state control of schools, Congress said that the states had failed to meet the educational needs of their most impoverished children and would, therefore, have to live with more federal involvement. ESEA was also a cornerstone of the President's "War on Poverty. In addition to providing new federal resources for schools, the law encompassed the new Head Start program for disadvantaged preschoolers and in 1968 incorporated bilingual education provisions (Title VII), offering federal aid to school districts to assist them in addressing the needs of children with limited English-speaking ability.

Communities Step In – Local Control

While battles over desegregation raged through the 1960s and '70s, the issue of who controlled the public schools continued to be a subtext. One important struggle was the 1968 confrontation in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, a predominantly Black and Puerto Rican community in Brooklyn, New York, which exposed and ignited simmering tensions between communities of color and mostly white teachers over the control of schools.

That conflict emerged when the New York City schools, under pressure from parents, created three experimental school districts and gave local communities control over school budgets, curricula and staffing. One of those districts, Oceanhill-Brownsville, was also assigned the City's first black superintendent. When the new parent council in Oceanhill-Brownsville decided to signal their power to the union by voting to transfer 18 teachers out of the district, the fight erupted into the public arena. To the press, the school council claimed that the teachers were undermining the goals of the community control experiment. But a larger context of the dispute was the emergence of Black and Puerto Rican nationalism across the country, with its call for self-reliance and racial empowerment. The predominantly white teachers of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) were perceived as indifferent and unsympathetic to the needs of the community and its children.

To no one's surprise, the United Federation of Teachers objected. Union president Albert Shankar called a citywide teachers strike. The strike lasted two months, ending when NYC Mayor John Lindsay, who had originally supported the plan for community control, capitulated to the union and brought an end to the experiment.⁶

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict catapulted to the front pages of newspapers around the country. It fueled a debate that rang with the rhetoric of the ongoing civil and workers' rights struggles and pitted parents against teachers with a viciousness that has not been seen since – but has shaped a public perception of conflicting interests between parents and teachers that continues to the present. Even today, many who were involved in the struggle have difficulty talking about Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

Yet, despite the difficulty of the struggle, the demand for more community control has persisted. Two decades later, in 1988, The Chicago School Reform Act signaled a new era in local control. The Act established Local School Councils (LSCs) that gave parents and community activists new power. Among the responsibilities turned over to the Councils was the right to select and evaluate principals, help develop and approve school improvement plans, and control discretionary budgets averaging \$500,000 per school. The Chicago Teachers Union, while initially skeptical and not supportive of the move, now embraces the site-based management structure. In fact, during 2004, the Union has joined with a broad coalition of community organizations to oppose the Mayor's "Renaissance 2010" plan which would, in part, abolish Local School Councils at some schools. (*For more about the Chicago School Reform Act, see the section on [Power Analysis](#)*).

'A Nation at Risk'

The optimism of the 1960s and early 70s, the momentum created by the civil rights movement, and federal mandates that the poor and children of color receive an equal education began to wane in the late 1970s. Students of color were increasingly segregated in inner city and racially isolated rural schools as attempts to integrate schools failed. The growth of the suburbs had drained property wealth from cities and funding from schools serving their residents.

In the face of these defeats, new approaches to education were gaining ground. The civil rights and women's movements influenced many parents and teachers to seek more diverse curriculum content that would give prominence to the roles of women and people of color, and to seek better understanding of how race and gender oppression are manifested in a learning environment. A growing number of educators and community activists rejected adjectives like "needy" and "disadvantaged" to describe children and families. They urged schools and teachers to recognize the strength, talents and resources that exist in every individual, family and community. Furthermore, they argued, teaching styles and expectations heavily influence students' success or failure.

President Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 on a platform that rejected these kinds of ideas. He, his staff and his supporters were committed to going back to some imagined time when everyone could and should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and there was no talk – or recognition – of inequality. He hoped to reduce the size and scope of government and let markets reign. In 1983 Reagan created the National Commission on Excellence in Education to evaluate the nation's education system and propose reforms to help the U.S. maintain international supremacy – economically (the "trade war") and politically (the Cold War).

The Commission's report, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," gave the administration the rhetoric it wanted, warning that U.S. student achievement was slipping and that the country faced the imminent prospect of being overtaken in the global market by other nations. Among the alarmist sound bites the report produced were:

"The educational foundations of our society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people."

"...If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

The Commission's *recommendations*, on the other hand, were a mixed bag. Largely disregarded by the administration and the media was the Commission's support for smaller class size and

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greater access to more sophisticated curriculum and teaching. Also widely ignored were recommendations that teachers receive more autonomy, more access to professional development and more competitive salaries. Instead, the Reagan administration emphasized the report’s discussion of learning “standards,” spawning a standards movement.

Standards were (and are) a potentially valuable mechanism to insure that all students receive high-level curriculum, and might even have led to the elimination of tracking. But the administration took a more conservative tack. Governors, corporate executives and the media were cultivated at regional and national summits promoting a results-driven approach to education that sought to emulate the late 1970s restructuring of American businesses to increase productivity. “Standards” became curricular requirements that could be measured with standardized tests. More recently, many states have implemented “high stakes” testing programs that tie student promotion and graduation to statewide achievement tests. While these various assessments have sometimes proved useful to evaluate school resources and identify needs, they are increasingly used to punish students, teachers and schools. As noted by the Education Commission of the States, “Standards are only one piece in a puzzle that also encompasses assessment, curriculum, accountability, teacher education and professional development, and intervention and support for struggling students and schools.”

Thus, despite its use of specious data and its unfounded conclusions, “A Nation at Risk” left a ‘standards’ legacy that significantly impacts learning today. Though subsequent studies disputed its findings, “A Nation at Risk” fulfilled its mission to open the debate on a fundamental restructuring of public education. Rhetoric found in “A Nation at Risk” and the standards movement’s failure to get quick results provided Reagan, subsequent administrations and conservative governors with justification for free-market experiments including vouchers, tuition tax credits and privatization.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

George W. Bush’s administration swept into office with a plan to seize the Democratic Party’s traditional dominance over public education as a domestic issue. The vehicle for this “education

presidency” was the scheduled reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The development of the new ESEA began on a progressive note. In fact, NCLB contains several progressive principles, including the idea that schools should be judged based on their ability to bring *all* children along educationally, and that the quality of the teaching staff is a key component of successful learning and an area where huge gaps exist between wealthy and low-income schools. But through the course of the debate, conservatives managed to move the details of the law in a much more ominous direction.

In January 2001, with broad bipartisan support, President Bush signed the new incarnation of ESEA, with the title “No Child Left Behind” (the moniker was lifted from the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) slogan ‘Leave No Child Behind,’ though the Children’s Defense Fund has been strongly critical of the new law). NCLB makes sweeping changes in the way schools and districts must operate if they receive federal education dollars. The law requires annual assessments in grades 3-12 and imposes sanctions on low-income schools that do not meet annual goals for improvement in assessment scores. It sets goals for improving teacher quality. It consolidates funding, allowing states the leeway to use federal education dollars for a wide range of programs. And it refocuses the longstanding federal program for bilingual education towards English language acquisition. The fact that the law rests on some solid foundations makes it harder to criticize. As a political move, NCLB was a brilliant strategy. But for kids, it could be a disaster.

No Child Left Behind dramatically expands the federal role in public schools, while at the same time encouraging families to look to less regulated private and semi-private institutions to educate their children.

The immediate effect of the law has been to dramatically increase federal oversight of education, worrying advocates of smaller government and flying in the face of the legacies of Presidents Reagan and Bush senior. However, the Bush Administration’s ultimate goal is undeniably the downsizing of not only the federal role in education, but likely the public role as a whole. The Administration has severely underfunded the law. And NCLB’s promo-

tion of privatization of education and flirtation with vouchers belies a longer term agenda to reduce the role of government in education. In effect, the law sets unrealistic restrictions and mandates on schools and districts, while at the same time encouraging “failing” schools be turned over to private entities that are less accountable and virtually unregulated. It offers “choice” to low income parents to move their children out of poorly performing or “persistently dangerous” schools – without insuring that there will be better quality, safer schools for them to attend. It funnels federal dollars to private supplemental service providers and to advocacy organizations that promote vouchers. And at every step, the law emphasizes measurement, assessment, and curricula that feed business – and federal dollars – to the private sector.

In the first two years after NCLB was enacted, it appeared to have achieved the Republican goal of disarming the Democrats of their traditional dominance over the issue by positioning the Republicans as the party of change, fundamentally restructuring public education in the country. Astute spin from the Department of Education suggests that to argue against NCLB is to support the status quo.

Despite the Department of Education’s attempts to vilify opponents of the law (the Secretary of Education during Bush’s first term, Rod Paige, went so far as to call the National Education Association a “terrorist organization” in the spring of 2004), a wide assortment of teachers, administrators, parents, advocates and education experts have expressed grave concerns about the law. Clearly, the rhetorical goal of leaving no child behind is seen as much more complicated by those on the ground.

As implementation proceeds, a rising opposition to the law, and support for revisions have grown. How school districts, teachers, parents and communities respond to No Child Left Behind is certain to be the major theme of the next several years in the debate on public education in the U.S. Will the law lead to the erosion of federal support for poor children in public schools? Will public schools become even more stratified based on race and class, with the “haves” winning and the “have-nots” losing...again? Or will the focus on assessment and sanctions eliminate unproven or ineffective teaching practices and raise student assessment scores? And if it does so, what will those assessment scores

really tell us about our kids' ability to succeed in post-secondary education and beyond?

The Center for Community Change has developed a range of resource materials on No Child Left Behind, which are specifically targeted to organizers. In addition, education advocates can provide analyses and other tools for understanding the complex provisions of the law. For more information, click on this link to our [website section on No Child Left Behind](#), or to the [Center's NCLB briefing papers](#). Or, see the [Where to Find It](#) section of this guide.

Recent Education Trends

However NCLB plays out, education is an issue that Americans care about, and therefore one that politicians know they have to address. In a poll taken in 2002, 38 percent of those polled said the president and congress should make education their 'highest priority', and another 45 percent said education should be a 'high priority.' The only two issues ranked higher by those polled were terrorism and the economy. In the Latino community, education consistently out-polls all other issues – even immigration reform.

It's no wonder that public schools are a political battle ground. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are 47.4 million children enrolled in the nation's public elementary and secondary schools. And together, billions of federal, state and local dollars support the massive infrastructure of 85,000 school buildings across the country.

Moreover, public schools continue to educate the vast majority of the nation's children, as compared to private and parochial schools, or home schools:

Race and Ethnicity Matter

While the sheer number of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools climbs, with regional variations, we are also seeing a shift in the demographics of public school students over time.

	1972	1976	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
<i>White</i>	77.8%	76.2%	72.8%	69.6%	67.6%	65.5%	61.3%
<i>Black</i>	14.8	15.5	16.2	16.8	16.5	16.9	16.6
<i>Hispanic</i>	6.0	6.5	8.6	10.1	11.7	14.1	16.6
<i>Other</i>	1.4	1.7	2.4	3.5	4.2	3.5	5.4

Source: US Department of Education Common Core of Data, 2002

While the percentage of White students in the public schools is inching downwards, African-American students became a larger percentage of the public school population through the mid-'80s, and have basically stayed constant since then. The big shift is among Hispanic students, who have gone from making up 6 percent of the public school population in 1972 to over 16 percent in 2000. That's a *huge* demographic shift, which is having a big impact on our schools. Similarly, the growth of "Other" students [meaning mostly non-Hispanic immigrants and Native Americans] has grown from 1.4 percent to 5.4 percent, an even more dramatic jump.

These demographic shifts have important implications for education organizing. The issues that matter to parents and their children will depend in part on how schools and districts are addressing the needs of changing school populations, including students with limited English proficiency.

Woven throughout the history of public education in the U.S. are stories of class and race struggles to achieve a decent education—to realize the democratic ideal of equal opportunity. The tension between this ideal and the political, economic and social realities of a given period in time continue to the present. The history and contradictions of public education in America provide an important lens to interpret and understand the current laws, debates, and practices that will be discussed in this guide.

Endnotes:

¹ Keleher, Terry, 1999. "History of Public Education in the United States." Oakland: Applied Research Center.

² Ibid, Keleher, 1999

³ Carter, Susan B, et al, "Race and Ethnicity: Population, Vital Processes, and Education. Policy Studies Institute, University of California, Riverside, February 2003. <http://www.economics.ucr.edu/papers/03-11.pdf>

⁴ Irons, Peter. "Jim Crow's Schools," American Educator, Summer 2004. American Federation of Teachers http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/summer04/crowschools.htm

⁵ "Justice Funding: Experimenting with the language of struggle to clarify policy and strategy choices." By Southern Echo, Inc., 2004.

⁶ "Transforming Urban Schools Through Investments in Social Capital," Part 4. Noguera, Pedro A. In Motion Magazine. May 20, 1999. <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/pncap1.html>