

# LEARNING TRANSFORMED

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## 8 Keys to Designing Tomorrow's Schools, Today

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# Introduction: A Sense of Urgency

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## The American Education Crisis

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Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.

G.K. Chesterton

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Public outcry that the education system is failing and therefore in desperate need of reform may be as old as the United States itself. A review of the nation's history, alongside the trajectory and evolution of its current education system, indicates that education reform has often been at the center of all significant reform struggles throughout the country's history.

Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin viewed education in the new nation as an extension of democratic principles. Education was seen as a means to an end—a way to solidify colonial independence from Britain—and a tool that would establish and promote the ideals of freedom, liberty, and democracy to ensure a civil society for the years ahead. Formal education was primarily reserved for white males, whereas females (who if they had any opportunity at all) were taught in dame schools, which were often held in the homes of female teachers. Our country's founders advocated for schools that would serve all people of all classes, yet girls were educated in a disorganized, second-tier system and racial motives prevented African Americans from even having the opportunity to go to school. It was an undoubtedly dark time in our nation's history (Gelbrich, 1999).

Although today's public schools hardly resemble the town's dame or private grammar schools of the colonial era, many of today's controversial topics and reform efforts are deeply rooted in our nation's past. Local control of schools, the idea of state-sanctioned standards, and the abhorrent inequities in opportunity for women, students of color, and those from low-income families remain issues that must be addressed today.

In the 1700s, the education system was wrought with significant issues of inequity. Today, more than 300 years later, equity remains one of the largest issues we must tackle as we move forward.

Since the United States was born, its guiding document—the U.S. Constitution—helped shape education policy by omitting any mention of education as a federal responsibility. The Framers purposefully abdicated education decisions to the states, with each state government responsible for setting up its own school-funding formulas, policies, and practice. Today, the issues of state funding, education policies, and desired practice remain front-page news.

By the first half of the 19th century, American society was dealing with unsettling economic and social changes. The rise of factories and the need for workers to perform repetitive, rote tasks became the desired skillset of students leaving the one-room schoolhouse. As towns and cities grew larger, the traditional agrarian work and family structure began to evolve. Simultaneously, the introduction of compulsory schooling brought about the need to manage and educate large numbers of students in a more efficient manner. As the work and school worlds began to collide, skilled workers from small towns were soon replaced by machines capable of doing the work faster and cheaper. Today's machines, through automation and robotics, are replacing workers at an unprecedented pace with the ability to do the work better, faster, and cheaper.

Political changes and the industrialization of our young nation, combined with the growing differences between the North and South over slavery and an awareness of socioeconomic gaps, led to a variety of social reform movements. Land ownership and the rights of women were just two of the areas with which society began to wrestle—and ultimately alter—significantly. The desire to expand educational opportunities, paralleled with the political issues of the time, brought out many key issues during this period, including education for middle- and lower-class boys and girls, access to higher education for women, and a free education for the nation's children of color.

Today, obtaining a high-quality education filled with ample opportunity, access to higher education, and the needs of and opportunities for our children of color remain nationwide issues.

In the early 20th century, educational progressivism, led by the well-known John Dewey, had a significant effect on education. The progressive view that students learn by doing and that students' interests should play a key role in their learning began to grow roots in classroom instruction.

Dewey's progressive style was frequently debated by traditionalists who viewed such notions as communistic and contrary to the American values of that era. As this style of education gained momentum, critics continued to push back and eventually blamed a lack of math and science skills and our failure to keep up with the Soviet Union in the Space Race on the more progressive aspects of the education system.

These same arguments are still being made today.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the U.S. Congress passed its most far-reaching federal education legislation to date with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which included a federal commitment to support both elementary and secondary school funding, established high standards for accountability, and aimed to close achievement gaps. President Lyndon Johnson believed that our primary national goal should be a full educational opportunity for all students.

The 1980s saw the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The premise of the charter leading to this report was that our education system was failing to meet the national need of a competitive workforce. The commission was required to “assess the quality of teaching and learning at the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels” and to “compare American schools and colleges with those of other advanced nations.”

Sound familiar? In the report, the commission made 38 recommendations in the following five categories:

- Content
- Standards and Expectations
- Time
- Teaching
- Leadership and Fiscal Support

“Transition to college or work,” “performance-based pay,” and “meeting the needs of key groups of students such as socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority, and handicapped” were all key aspects of the charter's recommendations outlined in the report. Decades later, “college and career readiness,” “merit pay,” and “subgroups” remain politically debated topics and headline news.

After an outcry to systemically alter the nation's “failing education system,” a bipartisan overhaul of ESEA occurred in 2002 through the introduction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which was signed into law

by President George W. Bush. NCLB pushed a standards-based education reform—bringing with it a focus on student data, achievement transparency, school accountability, and a new focus on traditionally underserved students—as accountability measures exposed achievement gaps for these students and their peers.

With this new push for accountability, standardized testing—something that had already been relatively common in some capacity for decades—became elevated and a focal point at all levels. The premise was that if high standards were set and measurable goals were implemented, then student achievement would improve. In the process, states were required to develop their own standards while the federal reach was expanded through an emphasis on testing, continued improvement, and teacher qualifications, among other things. The fundamental funding structure shifted in the process; schools deemed to be failing could risk a loss in funding or be forcibly taken over by the state. Terms such as *highly qualified*, *adequate yearly progress* (AYP), and *data-driven decision making* became commonplace in the vocabulary of educators.

After more than a decade of NCLB, outcries for reform over funding, testing, accountability, and federal power (from all sides of the political spectrum) had grown so strong that a bipartisan Congress stripped away virtually all of the federal power found in NCLB, returning it to states and local districts in a new, bipartisan law known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Just prior to signing ESSA into law, President Obama declared, “With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamental American ideal—that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will” (White House, 2015b).

The U.S. Department of Education outlined the following key characteristics of ESSA:

- Holds all students to high academic standards.
- Prepares all students for success in college and career.
- Provides more kids access to high-quality preschool.
- Guarantees steps are taken to help students, and their schools, improve.
- Reduces the burden of testing while maintaining annual information for parents and students.
- Promotes local innovation and invests in what works.