Massachusetts requires all towns with 500 or more families to set up free, public high schools. Other states follow Massachusetts’ example. In 1837, educational reformer Horace Mann supervises the creation of a statewide common-school system that provides schooling for all white children with a uniform curriculum. In 1855, after a decade-long effort by African American parents and their white allies, Massachusetts requires public schools to be racially integrated.

The nation’s first vocational school, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, opens in Massachusetts. Its founders want to create a school that combines academics with hands-on learning in science and engineering to prepare young men for careers in the many growing industries. The vocational education movement will grow in the early 20th century as federal laws provide funds for training and paying teachers.

The Michigan Supreme Court, in a case known as “The Kalamazoo Case,” upholds the right of local governments to tax its citizens to pay for public education. Other communities across the country will begin to impose local taxes to pay for schools.

The College Entrance Examination Board, formed in 1902 by a consortium of Ivy League colleges, introduces the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, which is designed to help predict a student’s chance of success in college. In 1935, the Iowa Every-Pupil Tests, now called the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, is a voluntary testing program for kindergartners through eighth graders provided by the University of Iowa’s College of Education. The tests allow administrators to compare their students’ achievement with students around the country.
Congress passes the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, known as the GI Bill of Rights, which provides World War II veterans with unemployment benefits, home loans and education grants for those who want to continue their education after military service.

The Supreme Court unanimously overturns its 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that “separate but equal” is constitutional and rules that segregation violates the 14th Amendment’s equal protection clause. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the court holds that racially segregated schools are inherently unequal. The court’s opinion, written by Chief Justice Earl Warren, says that to segregate students “solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”

During the Cold War and after the Soviet Union launches the spacecraft Sputnik, policymakers fear that U.S. students are falling behind in math and science. In response, Congress authorizes the National Defense Education Act, which provides federal aid to state and local school districts to improve the teaching of math, science and foreign languages. The act also creates the first federal loans for higher education.

Designed to help break the cycle of poverty, the federal program Head Start provides education enrichment for low-income preschoolers so they can enter school with similar skills as higher-income students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides funds for textbooks and other services in public and private schools to ensure that children from low-income families have access to sufficient educational materials.

The National Assessment of Education Progress, also known as the Nation’s Report Card, is a nationally representative, continuing assessment of what American students know and can do in various subjects. The U.S. Department of Education conducts assessments in reading, math, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography, and the arts.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance which prohibited discrimination against students on the basis of gender.” The law has a significant impact in equalizing educational opportunities for women, particularly in athletic programs.
In Robinson v. Cahill and Abbott v. Burke, the New Jersey Supreme Court rules that the inadequate educational opportunities provided to students in poor urban school districts violate the state constitution’s guarantee of a “thorough and efficient” education. Eventually, the state is ordered to improve the education system and provide additional funds to urban districts. These cases, and the resulting legislative reforms, become a model of school funding reform.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education releases “A Nation at Risk,” a report highly critical of the declining performance of students in U.S. public schools. In response, states and local districts adopt initiatives to raise student achievement. The federal government supports some of these efforts by focusing public attention on school reform and providing improvement grants.

Chris Whittle begins Edison Schools Inc., a private firm that contracts with school districts to manage all aspects of their schools: administration, curriculum and technology. In 1992, Baltimore, Md., is the first large urban school district to hire a private firm, Education Alternatives Inc., to manage some of its public schools and contracts with Sylvan Learning Systems to tutor students. The concept gains popularity, and in 1993, Minneapolis hires Public Strategies Group Inc. to run all of its 75 public schools. The superintendent is replaced by the company’s CEO.

In an effort to increase public school choice, Minnesota adopts legislation that allows the creation of public charter schools – schools that receive public funds but are run separately from the larger school system and are not required to meet all of its regulations. The idea is that freedom from government regulation results in important curriculum innovations, increased community involvement, and overall improvements to public education.

President George W. Bush signs the No Child Left Behind Act, a sweeping education reform law that requires states to develop a plan to identify poorly performing public schools and establish educational standards that all students must meet. Schools that fail to make “adequate yearly progress” toward state proficiency standards must permit students to transfer to better-performing public schools. Schools that persist in low performance must then implement corrective actions, such as replacing certain teachers, or they risk being restructured or taken over by the state.