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@why.schooled Questioning High School Practices and Purpose via Instagram

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Abstract: Schools are a social construction. There is so much that we take for granted as inherent to schooling, that in fact originated in a particular social and historical context. The purposes behind the creation of these patterns and practices that have been utilized for decades may or may not align with what we view as the purpose of education today — which itself is not widely agreed upon. My capstone will demonstrate what it can look like to conduct a public questioning of school norms through a creative project. I created an Instagram account that investigates common school practices: standardized testing, tracking, and school uniforms. The posts will make academic information accessible and invite a young-adult audience to begin wondering and uncovering why we do school the way we do. Through engaging with this account, people of all backgrounds will start to see the connection between practice and purpose, understand the reasons behind what schools do, and come to their own conclusions about whether it needs to change.

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Education Studies Capstone

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	4
Abstract.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Schools Today.....	7
Part 1: Establishing the Real School.....	10
Review of Theoretical Frameworks	
Historical Review	
Part 2: Creative Project.....	24
Audience	
Format	
Content	
Conclusion.....	29
APPENDIX.....	31
Bibliography.....	53

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Abstract

Schools are a social construction. There is so much that we take for granted as inherent to schooling, that in fact originated in a particular social and historical context. The purposes behind the creation of these patterns and practices that have been utilized for decades may or may not align with what we view as the purpose of education today — which itself is not widely agreed upon. My capstone will demonstrate what it can look like to conduct a public questioning of school norms through a creative project. I created an Instagram account that investigates common school practices: standardized testing, tracking, and school uniforms. The posts will make academic information accessible and invite a young-adult audience to begin wondering and uncovering why we do school the way we do. Through engaging with this account, people of all backgrounds will start to see the connection between practice and purpose, understand the reasons behind what schools do, and come to their own conclusions about whether it needs to change.

Introduction

After I completed the third grade, my mom pulled me out of public school, and we began our homeschooling journey. In particular, what we did was “unschooling,”¹ which is when children completely control what they learn. Despite being given all this freedom for what, when, and how I learned, I still found myself structuring my day like I had in school: creating time blocks for each subject, making sure to have a bit of reading, writing, science, math, and social studies, and wanting to feel validated with grades. These are practices that we associate with “real” schooling, but why? The truth is none of these structures are inherent to education. Rather, they are products of a particular history and politics.

Education² is a topic where everyone has an opinion about what the problems are and how to fix them. These different opinions have manifested into hot-topic issues like charter schools, No Child Left Behind³, school vouchers, the teaching of critical race theory, and so many more. For every deficiency observed in our educational system, someone comes up with an innovation to solve it and make schooling better — but what exactly does “better” mean? The truth is that good education is more subjective than people want to believe. What someone considers to be a good education, and subsequently what they believe are the problems in our schools, depends on what they see as the purpose of education. Furthermore, while some people might be able to articulate their opinion on the purpose of education if asked, it is much more difficult to recognize the origins of our ideas about what constitutes schooling.

¹ Unschooling is a type of homeschooling where instead of mimicking traditional school curriculum, children’s interests guide learning. It is self-directed learning where children shape their education and parents are there to support when necessary rather than dictating what their children should learn.

² From this point forward, I will be using the term education to refer to the curriculum and design of schooling, however, I recognize that that is a very narrow definition of the term. Education is not in fact limited to schools nor are the terms “education” and “schooling” synonymous. But for the purpose of this essay, it will be referring to education as it is structured in the school system.

³ No Child Left Behind was a 2001 federal policy from the Bush administration. It reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and included provisions that led to high-stakes testing.

When I say that schools are socially constructed, I mean that their structures are not essential to education, but rather a product of human creation from a particular societal need. This paper utilizes the theoretical frameworks of Stigler and Heibert's cultural scripts, as well as Berger and Luckmann's habitualization, institutionalization, and legitimation to explain how the structure of schools was created, passed down, and maintained through generations. It has been so long since the creation of these school patterns that we now view them as "just the way that school are." Is the purpose behind the original creation of these practices that have been utilized for over a century really the same purpose of education that we have today? If our purposes have changed, why hasn't the structure of schools changed to reflect that as well?

Even figuring out what the purpose of education is or should be is debated among policymakers, teachers, educational leaders, and parents. We have several ideas or beliefs about the purpose of education but the same system – which purpose does this system serve? If we want to ensure schools serve modern purposes, we must understand the origins of our current educational practices, their implications, and whether they are relevant to our goal. Additionally, if they are not working, what are the alternatives? Furthermore, because any effective change in schooling practices will require a shift for all participants (teachers, students, parents, administrators, etc.), more parties besides educational leaders need to partake in this process of inquiry. Students are often the most left out of these conversations despite being the most impacted by these school structures.

My capstone will demonstrate what it can look like to invite a young adult audience into an investigation of school norms through an Instagram account. This essay provides the background for the decisions made in the project. In the first part of the essay, I explain the need to question school norms today, provide a theoretical framework for the issue, and some historical

context to understand the origins of high school practices. The second portion goes into detail about the methods of creating the @why.schooled Instagram account and why I believe this approach to be useful for solving the problem presented in part one.

Schools Today

What is the state of public schools today? The most common narrative is that of the failing school. This narrative began in the 1970s with the Back-to-Basics movement, however, the turning point was the release of the Reagan administration's report, *A Nation at Risk*, in 1983.⁴ A look at Google Book's Ngram Viewer shows the dramatic and sharp increase in the usage of the phrase "failing schools" after 1980⁵. Interestingly enough, in Phi Delta Kappan surveys of public opinion on schools, parents are more likely to rate their children's/community schools highly than they rate public schools in the nation as a whole.⁶ This indicates that the *idea* of public schools is tied to the failing schools narrative, even when lived experience says otherwise. As education historian and policy analyst, Jack Schneider, so eloquently put it, "Today, pessimistic policy talk is now so standard as to constitute a form of truth."⁷ But what exactly is this narrative based on?

The preeminent historian of American education, Dave Tyack, makes the argument in his book *Tinkering Towards Utopia* that schools have been perceived throughout history as a means of ameliorating social ills, many of which are structural and baked deeply into policy practices of broader society that have little to do with education, and if those ills are not solved then schools are used as a scapegoat. There is a fantasy that schools ought to progress society by creating equal

⁴ Schneider, "Perspective | How Are America's Public Schools Really Doing?" 2018

⁵ "Google Books Ngram Viewer."

⁶ "PDK Poll | of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools."

⁷ Schneider, "Perspective | How Are America's Public Schools Really Doing?"

opportunity, even as society is riddled with economic, political, and social inequalities at all levels of society and governance. Yet, as Tyack put it, the perception of progress, or lack thereof, is subjective.

Notions of progress or regress in education and society are, of course, highly debatable... A sense of progress is always relative—now compared with then, one group compared with others. Since the expectations and experiences of people differ, so do their appraisals of whether things are getting better or worse. If one group advances, its progress may undermine the comparative advantage of another group, so that gain for one can seem loss for another.⁸

Whether schools are progressing, successful, or failing is highly subjective. Progressing compared to what? Successful in what goals? Failing to do what? To answer this, we must first define what our goals are for education. Possibilities range from preparing students to attend college, to teaching the skills necessary to compete in the economy, to becoming conscientious citizens in our democratic society, to developing social skills. For each goal, one must determine how to measure the achievement of that goal. Then using that measurement one can indicate success or failure. Yet the connection between the goal and what is being measured is not always clear. The general public is not trained in data analysis or interpretation, and so what ends up happening is the mentioning of various numbers/results as pieces of an argument for a particular reform. But even when there is a valid assessment of school failure according to a particular goal and a reform is proposed, that reform is usually a minor tweak — we rarely think to question or change the deeper structure of school.

Let's take, for example, *A Nation at Risk*, which was a major contributor to the failing schools narrative. The report utilized standardized testing data to argue that American schools were falling behind domestic and international standards. The report states, for example, "The College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to

⁸ "Tinkering toward Utopia — David Tyack, Larry Cuban."

1980. Average verbal scores fell over 50 points and average mathematics scores dropped nearly 40 points.”⁹ However, the report does not acknowledge the fact that throughout those years there was also an increase in the number of test-takers, as well as an increase in the diversity of those taking the SAT.¹⁰ To compare a smaller number of more privileged students to a much larger population including students in lower socio-economic and minority groups is not a statistically sound way to prove decline in achievement — furthermore, the SAT is not even designed to measure general achievement.¹¹ In 1990, the Sandia Report examined those results again, this time disaggregating the data, and found that SAT scores for each subgroup of test takers had actually held steady or improved during those years.¹² The changing proportions of those subgroups caused the national average to dip, not a decline in educational quality.

A Nation at Risk, like any document, was also a product of a particular historical and political context. The report was commissioned by the Reagan administration during the Cold War, and it created a sense of urgency by claiming that U.S. schools were falling behind those of other countries. The authors bring up the economic achievements of other countries and the need for the United States to keep up in the world market. This seems to place investment in education as an issue of national and economic security. So, is the goal of the American education system to ensure economic competitiveness on the international stage? If so, then why do schools have the same structure that they did before international economic competition was of national concern? Schools were not developed for that purpose, yet policymakers assume that by simply pushing for higher standards that the structure of schools will work for our new goals.

⁹ United States. 1983. *A nation at risk: the imperative for educational reform*.

¹⁰ Kamenetz, *The Test: Why Our Schools Are Obsessed with Standardized Testing - But You Don't Have to Be*.

¹¹ “Tinkering toward Utopia — David Tyack, Larry Cuban.”

¹² Kamenetz, *The Test: Why Our Schools Are Obsessed with Standardized Testing - But You Don't Have to Be*.

Now, this is not to say that I believe international competition should be the goal of school. It was simply an example of how modern arguments over schools often lack an explicit connection to the purpose of schools or are rooted in the historical development of school structures. If we get too caught up in hot-topic discourse, without a unified goal for education, all the while taking these historical structures for granted as “just the way it is,” then we limit our chances of creating genuine, impactful, and long-lasting change.

Part I: Unpacking the “Real School”

We will begin by reviewing theories of cultural scripts, institutionalization, and socialization which will help us to understand why we, as a society, have a shared idea of what schools ought to look like. Then we will look at the history of public schooling in America to locate the origins of this structure we view as schooling. As mentioned earlier, schools are a product of human creation and what we consider schooling today is based on practices that have been passed down through generations. This common idea can be harmful because years after their creation we now take these practices for granted, as just the way that schools are, and rarely question their purpose. We end up getting stuck on this singular idea, which ends up limiting the possibilities to improve schools in the United States. To break away from the script, we must first become aware of its existence.

Theoretical Frameworks

A cultural script is an assumption and vision about something that a society shares. As Stigler and Heibert describe, cultural scripts constitute generalized knowledge that is shared widely in a society about particular activities. People learn scripts implicitly through observation and they

guide individuals' behavior. For example, when someone says they are a teacher, most would envision them standing at a chalkboard/whiteboard in front of a classroom of children in desks facing the teacher. Based on this picture, we have certain ideas about the way a teacher is meant to act and how we should interact with a teacher based on our position as a student, parent, or administrator. Therefore, we act out a certain "script" based on a shared cultural vision about a situation. It is not something that is taught explicitly, but rather learned through experience and observation. When you see someone act differently from these expectations, it is shocking because it deviates from that norm — reinforcing the existence of that norm. It is important to note however, that what we consider normal or standard is not the only way to do things.

Take a second to imagine yourself experiencing a typical day in a typical high school: *You start your day in math. The desks are arranged in rows facing the teacher as they demonstrate a new algebraic formula. In the back of class a few students have their heads down, asleep. The teacher hands out worksheets and you do practice problems until the bell rings. Packing up your belongings, you make your way to English. The class is reading Shakespeare. Some kids snicker as the student reading out loud mispronounces a word. At the bell you switch to P.E. and change into gym clothes. A brief hour later, yet another bell rings signaling the transition to lunch. After lunch, the social studies teacher struggles to get the students to focus on the topic of the U.S. Constitution.*

The United States is 3,794,083 square miles,¹³ made up of 50 different states, and over 332 million people of varying backgrounds — yet most Americans would agree that the above example is exactly how they imagine high school. Theodore Sizer, an education reformer, studied secondary

¹³ Writer, "How Many Miles Wide Is the United States?"

school across the country and recounted his observations in the book *Horace's Compromise*. He found that the structure of schools in every state was incredibly similar.

This big country contains numerous educational jurisdictions, with authority decentralized. Nonetheless, as one visits communities one is gradually struck by how similar the structure and articulated purpose of American high schools are. Rural schools, city schools; rich schools, poor schools; public schools, private schools; big schools, little schools: the framework of grades, schedules, calendar, courses of study, even rituals, is astonishingly uniform and has been so for at least forty years.¹⁴

This quote is astonishingly as relevant today as it was at the book's publication in 1984. While there are certainly exceptions, even those who attend a non-traditional school are familiar with this image of the "American high school" as it is often depicted in media. Another important note is that most non-traditional curricular models take place in private, charter, or wealthier public-school districts. Curriculum centering creativity, agency, and interdisciplinary work tend to be prioritized by higher socioeconomic groups whereas in lower-income schools there is a greater emphasis on discipline and raising test scores.¹⁵ While a fascinating comparison, for the purposes of this essay I will be focusing on the structures of traditional public schools — which still permeate many of these more "alternative" models.

These scripts both create and are reinforced by structural practices that have been institutionalized. The organizing structures of high schools include the following: students are grouped by age into "grades," they are all expected to take 4 years to complete graduation requirements, the day is scheduled into multiple time blocks, subjects are separated into different time periods and students switch between them throughout the day. Perhaps the most particular of these to the image of the high school is the presentation of subjects, as Sizer puts it: "High school

¹⁴ Sizer, *Horace's Compromise*.

¹⁵ Hayward, Clarissa Rile. 2000. *De-Facing Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

is to ‘teach’ these ‘subjects.’”¹⁶ School subjects are presented as discrete objects, with little relationship or coherent sequences between them, and students move between them through the day in a random order. Most can name the traditional subjects (English, math, science, social studies, etc.) but rarely is the reason behind their presence articulated.¹⁷ For people from families with roots in the United States, this is how school was for many of our parents and their parents, and we might expect the same for our children.

Sociologists Berger and Luckmann’s theory of habitualization, institutionalization, and legitimation can explain the development of these structures. All aspects of our society/social order, including schools, are ongoing productions of human activity. “All human activity is subject to habitualization,” meaning an action gets repeated and becomes a pattern that is easy to reproduce. A byproduct of habitualization is that individuals begin to see that pattern as the only way to go about that action. On a broader scale, when these habitualized actions become represented by a symbol carried out by a type of person, they are then institutionalized. In the case of schools, the habitualized action is the way that we teach and when that practice became associated with the image of a school, the school became an institution that reproduces those patterns.

Legitimation comes in as institutions get passed along to a new generation. Those who started the habit understand its purpose, but once it gets passed down it is simply seen as “this is how these things are done.” Children are not exposed to the original purpose, and in early phases of their socialization, come to view those institutions as a concrete and objective world. “All institutions appear in the same way, as given, unalterable and self-evident.”¹⁸ Those who inherited

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in Sociology of Knowledge*.

the tradition do not have a connection to its original purpose, so they must find a justification for it. “Legitimation is this process of ‘explaining’ and justifying.”¹⁹ In this way, institutions like schools, get passed down and explained in new ways. Their origins are so obscured that the institutions appear more and more “real” throughout time. An upside that we will turn to later is that Berger and Luckmann also add, “institutionalization is not, however, an irreversible process, despite the fact that institutions, once formed, have a tendency to persist.”

The framework of institutionalization, while focusing more on the origins of habitualized actions, is extremely similar to the framework of cultural scripts. James Stigler and James Hiebert, a psychologist and education professor respectively, explain cultural scripts as “generalized knowledge about the event that resides in the heads of participants.”²⁰ Cultural scripts guide behavior, tell people what to expect, and are “learned implicitly, through observation and participation.”²¹ Because they are widely shared by members of a society, they are difficult to notice and taken for granted as the truth within that culture. Often, we become aware of our own culture’s scripts when we contrast them to another. In the one of the first large-scale cross-cultural examinations of instructional practices, Stigler and Hiebert compare math lessons from the U.S. and Japan (via video analysis) and found that one difference is how American teachers “try hard to reduce confusion by presenting full information about how to solve problems,” while Japanese teachers choose challenging problems and “encourage students to keep struggling in the face of difficulty...”²² When we contrast these different practices together, we realize that there is no single, inherently natural approach to education.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Stigler and Hiebert, “Teaching Is a Cultural Activity.”

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

Authors who have written about the cultural scripts of schools have used different metaphors and terminology to describe them. Sociologist Mary Haywood Metz positioned the cultural script as a drama of “The Real School”: this idea about what school should look like, which is the example outlined earlier.²³ She concludes that we strive to make all schools fit the structure of “the Real School” so that no matter where a school is located or who it serves, because it is the same, we achieve equality and legitimacy.²⁴ Tyack and Tobin called this structure the “grammar” of schooling.²⁵ Essentially, they use the idea of grammar to represent a particular format, rules and procedures that is applied to various contexts — in this sense schools may vary superficially but they all follow the same deep structure. Haywood Metz gave examples of “The Real School” as characteristics like the school schedule, hallways and classrooms, class size, subjects, textbooks, methods of instruction, and teachers.²⁶ Tyack and Tobin summarized the “grammar of schooling” by describing two practices that once instituted into American schools have been practically impossible to get rid of: the graded school and the Carnegie unit. The Carnegie Unit is the name for the original measurement of time and subject knowledge, now commonly referred to as high school credits; they were invented by the Carnegie Foundation at the start of the 20th century to clarify and standardize the level of high school attainment required to enter college.²⁷ This very basic structure of separating students into grades by age and prescribing a certain number of credits in each subject for completion of secondary education has gone essentially unchanged since their inception at the turn of the 20th century — even in schools that experiment with alternative pedagogies.

²³ Metz, “Real School.”

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Tyack and Tobin, “The ‘Grammar’ of Schooling.”

²⁶ Metz, “Real School.”

²⁷ Tyack and Tobin, “The ‘Grammar’ of Schooling.”

Tyack brings up four primary and interrelated reasons why the grammar of schooling has persisted for so long: 1) “it enabled teachers to discharge their duties in a predictable fashion and to cope with the everyday tasks that school boards, principals, and parents expected them to perform... Habitual institutional patterns can be labor-saving devices, ways to organize complex duties,” 2) “teachers and students socialized to such routines often find it difficult to adapt to different structures and rules,” 3) these structures come to be seen as “necessary features of a ‘real school’” and 4) “they become fixed in place by everyday custom in schools and by outside forces, both legal mandates and cultural beliefs, until they are barely noticed. They become just the way schools are.”²⁸ In other words, because we share a similar “script” regarding the roles of teacher and student it makes it easier to go about the daily tasks of schooling. We rely so much on people’s familiarity with the script that when it is changed, suddenly there is extra effort required to learn the new script. Therefore, maintaining the structure becomes necessary to running classrooms smoothly and outside forces fix it into place. Think for example of the representations of high school in television and how this continued portrayal of a single school structure reaffirms that structure as essential to what school is.

The Creation of the “Real” School

As these scripts are products of human creation, if we want to understand the development of these structures, we must also explore their historical context. As Berger and Luckmann say, “institutions always have a history, of which they are the products. It is impossible to understand an institution adequately without an understanding of the historical process in which it was produced.”²⁹ In this section, I will provide a brief history of schools in the United States to help us

²⁸ Tyack & Cuban, “Tinkering Toward Utopia”

²⁹ Berger & Luckmann, “The Social Construction of Reality”

understand the original purpose of our school structures and show how they have been legitimized for several generations. In this brief overview I will focus on the early history when these structures were established and then briefly touch on other key moments.

There was a time when schools looked and held very different meanings than they do today. Prior to the 19th century, there were very few “public” schools; rather, the U.S. had a constellation of schools organized by various local groups.³⁰ Attendance was not mandatory, and schools were supported through a combination of tuition and local taxes. Only a small portion of the population attended school. For one, there were more schools in the North than in the South. The low populations in rural areas made it difficult to establish a school. Slave states also passed various laws banning Blacks from receiving an education. Private donors funded a few charity schools for the urban poor, however, there was a stigma attached to attending those institutions, so attendance was low.³¹ Career skills were taught via apprenticeships and very few people had a need for college education.

Changes in society in the 19th century led to the need to create a new system of education. Government sponsored mass education was first developed in Western Europe around the time of industrialization, urbanization, and mass immigration. The shift in the economy was certainly a major influence on the need for mass schooling, and it is also argued that mass schooling was a way to garner a national identity.³² In the United States, the education reformer Horace Mann became an advocate for public education: arguing that it was of national interest to invest in public schools for all, in order to ameliorate social ills like poverty and crime, thus improving society.³³ The additional influx of immigrants around the turn of the century also gave schools the purpose

³⁰ Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars*.

³¹ Reese, *America's Public Schools*.

³² Goodson and Marsh, *Studying School Subjects*.

³³ Ravitch, *Left Back : A Century of Failed School Reforms*.

of transforming these “newcomers and other ‘outsiders’ into individuals who matched [educational leaders’] idealized image of what an ‘American’ should be.”³⁴ In the tradition of John Dewey, education was concerned with promoting the literacy required of democratic citizenry.

Therefore, the original purpose of mass public education can be tied to a desire to ameliorate social ills, resolve class tensions, and promote assimilation. As such, schools were less concerned with academics than they were with moral education. We see the remnants of this purpose in cultural scripts today, particularly in urban schools, when schools are more concerned about instilling discipline than encouraging critical thinking. Education historian Diane Ravitch summarizes the goals of education in the 19th century as the following:

Everywhere the goals were few and simple: Children learned not only the basics of reading, ‘writing, and ‘rithmetic, but also the basics of good behavior. Principals and teachers considered character and intelligence to be of equal value, and neither was possible without ‘disciplining the will,’ which required prompt, unquestioning obedience to the teacher and the school rules.³⁵

However, Horace Mann’s Common School movement focused on elementary schools — public high schools were few and far between. So, what prompted the development of the high school and what was its original purpose? At the turn of the 20th century, cities began opening public high schools to prepare students for the new industrial economy (and some would argue to also keep adolescents off the job market too).³⁶ The familiar high school structure of course requirements, grades, and exams had their roots in a need for standardization. In the 1890s, there was no standard system of college admissions— it was a chaotic mishmash of requirements at each university. “Educators wanted a predictable system of education... like the practitioners of other nascent professions at the time, educators sought order and stability.”³⁷ Enter the Committee

³⁴ “Tinkering toward Utopia — David Tyack, Larry Cuban.”

³⁵ Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*.

³⁶ Sizer, *Horace’s Compromise*.

³⁷ Tyack & Cuban, “Tinkering Toward Utopia”

of Ten, whose job it was to conduct the nation's first study of schools and provide recommendations for colleges and school districts. Determining that the primary purpose of the high school was to "prepare all its students for 'the duties of life'," the Committee released its report in 1893. Here is a summary of the report, written by Diane Ravitch:

It urged colleges to admit students who had not studied the classical languages. It supported new subjects such as history, the sciences, and modern foreign languages as coequals with Latin, Greek, and mathematics. It recommended active teaching methods instead of rote memorization. It endorsed the democratic idea that all students should receive a liberal education.³⁸

There was much criticism of the report, and though it still had influence, their recommendation to give all students the same education was one that was not implemented by schools. Of the Committee's legacies, the establishment of the College Entrance Examination Board was the most significant. "It set uniform standards for each academic subject, while allowing schools maximum flexibility about what to teach and relieving colleges of the burden of administering their own entrance examinations."³⁹

The biggest conflict with carrying out the Committee of Ten's idea of giving students the same education was the belief by social efficiency educators⁴⁰ that not every child was capable of success in the traditional curriculum – leading to the development of another institutionalized structure: tracking. In 1917, a paper called the Cardinal Principles was published and authors were concerned with those students who would not go to college. Policy makers between 1910 and 1950 were concerned with "how to teach the increasing numbers of students, many of whom were weary of school and many of whom, allegedly, were incapable of learning the traditional academic curriculum."⁴¹ The principle of social efficiency, in which people believed schools should sort

³⁸ Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Social efficiency educators wanted to create a system of schools that would efficiently sort and prepare students into their predetermined roles in society.

⁴¹ Tyack & Cuban, "Tinkering Toward Utopia"

students and prepare them differently to reflect their various “destinies in life as adults,” was popular at the time. This is the same time that IQ testing (which itself was culturally biased and promoted by leaders of the eugenics movement) began being used in schools to give an empirical justification to the separation of races in different curricular tracks.⁴²

Similar to the original purpose of public schools, the Cardinal Principles reflected the belief that education could solve social ills resulting from changes in society like the factory system, “the presumed atrophy of traditional socialization of children by parents in urban settings,” and mass immigration.⁴³ Schools needed to retain students in order to solve these issues, therefore the Cardinal Principles stressed “activities,” “democracy,” and “efficiency.”⁴⁴ This structure retains the original focus on value-based education within schools rather than seeing the purpose of schools as imparting academic knowledge. There was an assumption that students enter school disinterested in academic subjects and unable to succeed in the traditional curriculum, therefore, differentiating curriculum through tracking would engage adolescents and keep them from dropping out.⁴⁵ It is important to note that curricular differentiation was the defining structure of the comprehensive high school, which was developed at a time of increased school enrollment and diversity from new waves of immigration. Therefore, the purpose of school for minorities and the privileged was different, and this was reflected by a different quality of education.

In the 1950s, a new combination of historical events led to pushback against the social efficiency efforts of the Cardinal Principles. The Cold War brought fears of international security and the launch of Russian satellite Sputnik caused a panic that American children were falling behind. There was a call for more academically challenging curricula, with a focus on science,

⁴² Kamenetz, *The Test: Why Our Schools Are Obsessed with Standardized Testing - But You Don't Have to Be*.

⁴³ Tyack & Cuban, “Tinkering Toward Utopia”

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ *ibid*

mathematics, foreign languages, and other traditional liberal arts subjects rather than the current “watered down curriculum.”⁴⁶ Increasing school rigor and academic achievement was now being viewed by the federal government as a national security interest in terms of international competition. This is a big departure from the focus on ameliorating social ills through moral education and social efficiency of the late 19th and early 20th century — the purpose of school has adjusted (legitimation) but the basic structure remained the same.

A shift in the demographics of schools began with the 1954 decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled school segregation unconstitutional. Prior to this, most students of color attended separate, and inferior quality, institutions than their white peers. Similar to how tracking sorted students within the same school into different courses, segregated schools were an extreme of differentiated education for different populations. There were — and arguably still are — starkly unequal distributions of resources. Throughout the 60s and 70s, education reforms centered on issues of access and as more people got involved in policy, minorities started to get more of a say on the state of secondary education. “The high school became an arena for achieving the forms of equality, participation, ethnic self-determination, and liberation from bureaucratic controls.”⁴⁷ The curriculum reflected this with new courses like ethnic studies, bilingual and ESL programs, remedial courses, and several electives.⁴⁸ These new courses, however, were not revolutionary to the system but rather add-ons that fit into the pre-existing structure (namely, they are additional classes in a system of distinct courses spread throughout the day in class periods).

By the late 70s into the 80s, which (coincidentally?) was also the peak of school desegregation, there re-emerged a concern over the quality of public schools. SAT scores were

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ *ibid*

⁴⁸ *ibid*

declining, graduation requirements lowered, and colleges began offering more remedial courses due to lack of prepared high school graduates.⁴⁹ As Tyack and Cuban describe, “reformers attacked the mediocrity of academic performance, the proliferation of elective courses, poor discipline, and lax teachers.”⁵⁰ The galvanizing event was the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, a report geared towards the public and a call to action⁵¹. In response to this “crisis” came a focus on the “basics,” hard work, and competition⁵², as well as a search for standards. In 1989, governors from across the nation adopted national educational goals for 2000 that “targeted higher academic achievement for all students, “graduation rates, school readiness, adult literacy, and “reducing substance abuse and violence in schools.”⁵³ And so the push for high stakes testing and accountability began.

With the turn of the century came the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which increased accountability efforts in an attempt to improve schools. Despite added accountability and standardized testing, each state still had its own standards. So, in 2009 the process of incentivizing states to adopt a single set of standards called the Common Core began; which would ideally ensure students across the nation would receive the information necessary to prepare them for college.⁵⁴ In 2015, Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which replaced NCLB, keeping the general structure but with added flexibility. Standards-based reforms have received criticism for unintended consequences like teaching to the test and neglecting subjects like history, social science, and art.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Ravitch, “Left Back” 2000

⁵⁰ Tyack & Cuban, “Tinkering Toward Utopia”

⁵¹ Ravitch, “Left Back” 2000

⁵² Tyack & Cuban, “Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform.” 1997

⁵³ Ravitch, “Left Back” 2000

⁵⁴ “The History of Common Core State Standards.”

⁵⁵ “Standards - Are We There Yet? | Testing Our Schools | FRONTLINE | PBS.”

Most recently, the events of the 2020 pandemic led to many discussions about education. School closures accentuated pre-existing inequalities, the shift to online learning led to rapid changes in the uses of technology in the classroom, and discussions of systemic racism after the murder of George Floyd permeated into the school. Amid current debates about school reopening, mask mandates, and “critical race theory,” we are dealing with the recent emergence of parents’ rights in education. Again, we return to some essential questions: what is the purpose of school? Who gets to decide?

Despite changing societal and political contexts and differing views on the purpose of education (whether it was democratic equality, social efficiency, social control, or social mobility)⁵⁶ the basic structure of schools has remained essentially the same: age-based grade levels, tracking, letter grades, class periods, required subject credits for graduation, etc. Through all these years, most educational reforms since the establishment of the modern school (for example: the creation of the middle school, coeducation, the addition of courses like home economics, etc.) have been peripheral. “Reforms that were structural add-ons generally did not disturb the standard operating procedures of schools, and this noninterference enhanced their chances of lasting.”⁵⁷ Overall, it is hard work to change the traditional structure of schooling because it provides a lot of ease and convenience. Creating something new requires more effort for already strained teachers and it is especially difficult when change is being pushed from outsiders. It is important to get those most involved and affected by schools into the conversation of change. Students in particular are often left out of these discussions, despite being the most affected by these norms. As we move towards the second part of this essay, we will explore

⁵⁶ #126 *What Ever Happened to the Public Good?*

⁵⁷ Tyack & Cuban, “Tinkering Toward Utopia”

potential avenues for getting students involved in questioning these practices that we take for granted.

Part II: The Creative Project

Audience

Because they are rarely interrogated, cultural scripts are difficult to change. As demonstrated from my sources, deep investigation seems relegated to the academic sphere or even if intended to reach policy makers or teachers, its written format is generally a barrier. These works are rarely directed towards or accessible to a general audience. However, as Tyack so eloquently put it, "... in a democracy, fundamental reforms that seek to alter the cultural constructions of a "real school" cannot succeed without lengthy and searching public dialogue about the ends and means of schooling."⁵⁸ By moving this discussion away from the academic sphere and into the public format of social media, my project will make this information accessible and invite a wider audience to begin questioning school norms.

Through its wide audience and variety of posting features, Instagram makes an excellent platform for my creative project. Instagram is used predominantly by younger adults; according to Pew Research Center 71% of 18-29-year-olds use Instagram. Pew's last study about teens' social media usage was in 2018, but a similar percentage was found among ages 13-17. The @why.schooled Instagram will primarily be targeting teenagers, as they are the ones experiencing high schools structures and norms on a regular basis; however, college students and young adults can also relate to these posts as their high school experience is still recent. By making these posts accessible enough for teenagers (in both language and format), I will make them accessible to

⁵⁸ "Tinkering toward Utopia — David Tyack, Larry Cuban."

older adults and anyone else who might come across one of my posts as well. While there are not very many studies about Instagram as an educational platform, I did find one study that found that when presenting the same information on Instagram versus Twitter, “the visually dominant platform of Instagram was more effective in terms of information recall.”⁵⁹

Why am I catering towards a younger audience in particular? The idea of the “real school” is hard to break partly because it is convenient — it makes everyone’s jobs easier because they know what things *should* look like. The definitions, expectations, and relationships are set; they are the same as teachers and parents experienced when *they* were students. If one could begin questioning these practices earlier in the process of socialization, before these processes become too internalized, it is more likely that they would be open to change. Furthermore, high school practices are closer to teenagers than any other group – it is a time when these topics would be most pressing as they directly affect teenagers’ everyday lives. Targeting the young with this project will hopefully help them imagine the potential for change and feel a sense of agency questioning and reimagining their day-to-day life. They can demand better and if any go on to become educators, politicians, or just voters they will not take their past experience for granted as the way schools are and ought to be.

Furthermore, students are often the most left out of reform discussions despite being the ones that schools are meant to serve. In previous reform efforts, changes to this fundamental structure were extremely difficult to handle, as described here by City et. al.:

Students are unfamiliar with the new classroom demands and, for the most part, don’t understand why content that was familiar to them in the past now seems strange and unfamiliar. Teachers find their established ways of teaching disrupted and are confronted with classroom management and pedagogy issues for which they may have only minimal preparation. Administrators are faced not just with responding to teachers’ expressions of uncertainty, but also the reverberations of this uncertainty through students and their parents.

⁵⁹ Arceneaux and Dinu, “The Social Mediated Age of Information.”

These changes are so disruptive because they are rooted in the instructional core: the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the content.⁶⁰ Therefore, if anyone hopes to make a change to part of the grammar of schooling, they will need to attack the problem from all angles of the instructional core. If outside policymakers adjust a fundamental practice, teachers and students must be prepared as well. It helps to have everybody on the same page and to get buy-in from administration, school boards, and parents. But since students are often left out of these conversations, and as the ones who directly experience the effects of these practices, it is important to me that they are centered in the conversation and given access to information necessary to argue for a better future. And again, by making my posts accessible enough for students, they will also be accessible to all other participants in the schooling process — prioritizing them means everyone will also be able to get involved.

Format

The main type of Instagram post created for the account was the carousel, which is a collection of up to 10 images that someone posts at once and viewers can swipe through the different slides. The format was launched in 2017, but its use for education and advocacy blew up in 2020 during the George Floyd protests.⁶¹ The trick with this type of post is getting people to swipe through the entire carousel. The Instagram algorithm prioritizes photographs, so some advocacy accounts have had to “Trojan horse” their infographic posts to try to trick the algorithm. One particular strategy used by the account So You Want to Talk About (@so.informed), which posts on a wide array of topics to try to get people more informed about politics and other political

⁶⁰ City, Elizabeth A., Richard F. Elmore, Lee Teitel, and Sarah E. Fiarman. 2009. *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*. Harvard Education Press.

⁶¹ Terry Nyugen, “PowerPoint activism is taking over your friends’ Instagram accounts” Vox 2020

issues, was using a minimalist aesthetic common among users she describes as “corporate-minded, girl-boss feminists” as she tried to target more apolitical millennial women.⁶² Therefore, the aesthetics of these posts rarely have to do with the content itself, but rather trying to make the posts visually appealing to the target audience.

Of course, the medium of Instagram has a few disadvantages. Some issues include the potential for misinformation, minimizing the content being shared, oversimplifying leading to misunderstanding, the loss of context, and that any facts presented are susceptible to manipulation by other groups. To try to combat these, I have taken several steps including providing citations from reputable sources. I also signed my username on the images so that I am held accountable, and the images can be traced back to my account which will provide more context. Additionally, I created posts explaining my project, who I am, and the goals for the account so that I am perfectly transparent.

The oversimplification of information or making these “thick” topics “thin” on social media can certainly be a concern. However, I would argue that considering this is the medium through which many young people are getting their information (whether that is good or bad, it just is), it makes sense to try to appeal to them when trying to share new information. As the goal of this project has always been to just get people to begin questioning the way we do things, these posts serve as a method to pique interest and provide the beginnings of some background on the topics. I included links and recommendations for in-depth sources that viewers can check out to learn about the topics with greater complexity. I also tried to introduce some nuance to my posts, making sure to include a few different perspectives or exceptions so that it is less of me spinning

⁶² Ibid

a “here is the whole truth” narrative. The account will⁶³ later include Instagram Lives, where I will live-stream with other Education Studies students who are specializing in some of the topics I will be covering and we can have a more in-depth conversation about them, which I can save to the account for viewers to watch later.

The Content

The topics covered for this capstone were chosen by prioritizing the practices and structures that would be most relatable and impactful to current high school students: standardized testing, tracking, and school uniforms. The first few posts provide some historical context on the creation of public schools, the high school, and on the different purposes of education. With this background, it will be easier to contextualize the specific practices. Each of the topics have a primary carousel post in the main feed. To get a variety of post-types, some of these topics also have stories, reels, or Instagram lives to go along with the main post to add more depth.

Each post type was selected based on the type of information being conveyed. The primary carousel posts serve as an introduction to a topic, and generally covers the history of the practice. Swiping through the slides helps convey the information like a self-contained narrative/quick guide. However, the 10-image limit minus the cover image and source page leaves only 8 slides to deliver content, meaning the information is extremely summarized. Therefore, I created the Source Spotlight, a collection of Instagram stories with quotes from my readings that provide very insightful and thought-provoking ideas. I also created reels (video posts) to give a slightly more nuanced perspective on hot-topic issues. To promote engagement with my audience, I created stories with interactive elements like polls and question boxes so I can open the conversation to

⁶³ The Instagram Lives will be hosted after the submission deadline for this capstone. If you are reading this after May 2020, then you should be able to see the recordings!

followers and share their responses. Lastly, Instagram Lives with other Education Studies students will create a space for more in-depth and nuanced conversations.

Since I will be releasing these posts over the course of a few weeks (to maintain a consistent schedule and gradually build up an audience), the full lineup of posts will only be up on the [@why.schooled](#) account sometime in May 2022. For now, you can view the graphics in the appendix of this document. Lastly, the [@why.schooled](#) account does not need to end with the completion of this capstone. I plan on creating additional posts including more topics in the future.

Conclusion

Investigations of cultural norms in schooling are not exactly new — academics in various disciplines have been engaging in this work for decades. However, the vast majority are presented in academic papers and books full of jargon intended to be read by other researchers in their field. Occasionally articles have been directed towards policy makers or teachers, urging them to conduct these investigations in order to improve the quality of instruction in schools. None of these works is directed towards or accessible to a general audience, especially not high schoolers — which is where my creative project comes in.

Additionally, the purpose of my project is not to assert whether current practices are “good” or “bad,” nor to propose a particular alternative, but simply to guide people through the process of questioning things we typically take for granted. Depending on the follower’s perspective about the purpose of education, they can come to their own conclusions on whether these practices are useful and effective. Regardless of their answer, they will have embarked on a journey of questioning and discovery that will give them a better understanding of one of school norms. They will realize that the structures we associate with schooling today are not necessarily inherent to education. Without being bound to a single idea about what schools should look like, there will be

more possibilities for improving the quality of education for the next generation. Whether we want to change education or not, understanding the origins of our school practices allows us to properly deal with the implications of those practices and ensure that our vision of schooling truly reflects our purposes and goals of education.

Appendix

Profile Picture:



Bio:

Why are high schools the way they are? 🤔

🔍investigating school norms

A Yale Education Studies Capstone by Simone Costa 📖

References & Recommendations ⬇️

[*link to references & recommendations doc*](#)

Figure 1 – Introduction Reel



Reel Script:

Have you ever wondered why schools are the way they are? Why do we have grades? Why do we take the classes we take? Why do I need to have three years of math? Why this, why that? The goal of this Instagram account is to show people that these things were human creations, grades, testing, all of these requirements, these are not inherent processes of education. They are not natural. They did not come about universally. They were created. Schools were created by human beings in a particular historical context motivated by different interests, political motivations, and various other factors and forces in society at the time. A lot of times these practices are continued mainly because of tradition. “That’s how I learned. That’s how my parents learned.” How we experience schools shapes our idea of what schools are supposed to look like and we continue these practices, rarely questioning or noticing why we do them in the first place. I don’t want us to take these things for granted. And I don’t want us to tie these very particular practices to what school must look like. Does school really have to look like that? Maybe there’s a completely different option that you might have never thought of that will work a

lot better for what our goals are with education. So again, the purpose of this project is to get people to start thinking they start asking these questions, thinking about why do we go to school? Understand, where did these practices come from? What impacts might they have today? And do we really want to continue this legacy? Or maybe as a community we can start thinking of ways and talking about other options. What would your ideal school look like?

Figure 2 – Introduction Story/Highlight



The graphic is a vertical teal banner divided into two main sections. The top section features the text 'Welcome to Why.Schooled!' in white, slanted font at the top left. Below it is a circular logo with 'WHY.SCHOOLED' in a semi-circle above an orange book with a question mark. A white arrow points right from the text 'Start Here!'. The bottom section contains the text 'I created this account as a part of my Education Studies senior capstone project' in white. The right side of the banner has a white background for a portrait of Simone, a young woman with brown hair wearing a maroon blazer. Above her portrait is the heading 'A Little About Me:' followed by a bulleted list of her credentials. Below her portrait is a smaller version of the 'Why.Schooled' logo. At the bottom of the teal banner, there are two more 'Why.Schooled' logos, one on the left and one on the right.

Welcome to Why.Schooled!

WHY.SCHOOLED

Start Here! →

I created this account as a part of my Education Studies senior capstone project

A Little About Me:

- My name is Simone
- Yale University '22
- Bachelors in Sociology
- Education Studies Scholar

WHY.SCHOOLED

My Goals:

- 1. Make information accessible**
- 2. Start questioning school practices that we take for granted**
- 3. Open up a conversation about the purpose of schools and whether these practices serve that purpose**

WHY.SCHOOLED

WHY.SCHOOLED

Figure 3- History of Schools Carousel, part 1: Schooling Before Public Schools

Caption: Did you know that schools as we have them today did not always exist? Can you imagine not having the structures of schools that we have today?

Where did schools come from?

Schools as we think of them today did not always exist.

What we often associate as essential elements of school
(ex: mandatory attendance, age-based grades, testing, and more)
were actually products of particular historical need and the interests of those in charge.

Let's take a look at what schools were like in the U.S. before the 20th century...

The State of Schools

When the United States was founded, **public schools as we know them today did not exist.**

Attending school was **not mandatory** and the majority of schools were **not free.**

Schools were a local issue, up to individual towns to decide to fund or not.

There was not a great need for schools...

- Families and church** were primarily responsible for the teaching of values
- Schools would help with **literacy to read the Bible** and reinforce lessons from the home
- Career skills** were learned through **apprenticeships**
- Only an elite **few went to college**

So, what did schools look like?



Tuition academies
&
Female seminaries

Latin grammar schools
&
Rural district schools



&
Charity schools for
the urban poor

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The one room schoolhouse

There was no such thing as K-12 grades, children of **all ages** were in the **same classes** with the **same teacher** in a single room, at the **only school in town**.



@whyschooled

Who had access?

Many children were **excluded** from schools based on **income, race, ethnicity, geography, disability, gender**, and other factors.

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Some of the most typical practices in schools today did not exist:

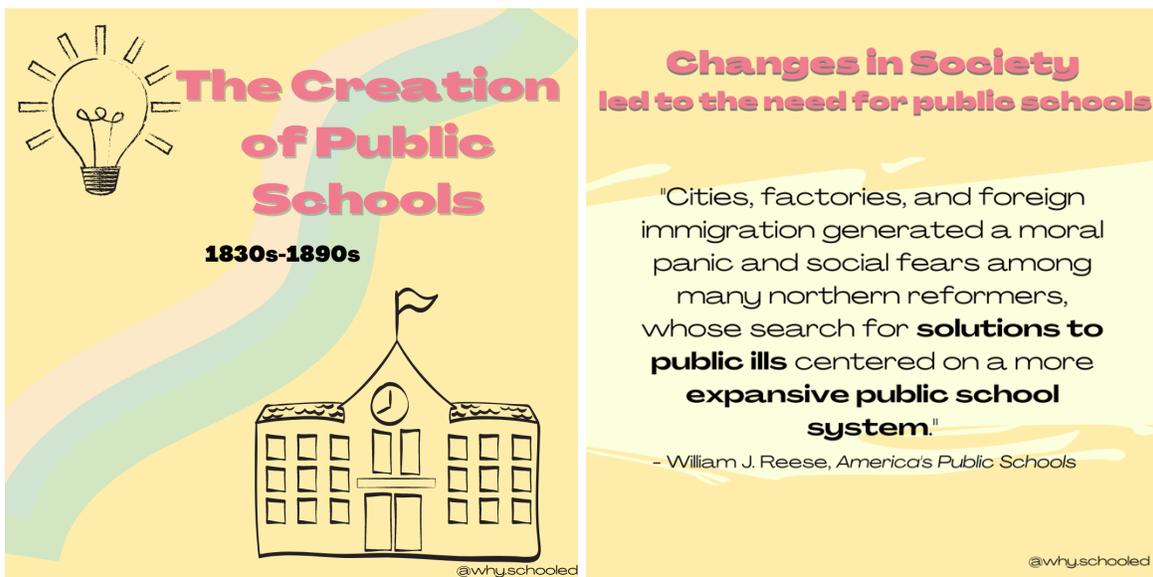
- ✗ A-F grading
- ✗ Written or multiple-choice exams
- ✗ Age-based classrooms

These would be created in upcoming years as changes in society created a need for mass schooling and standards



Figure 4- History of Schools Carousel, part 2: The Creation of Public Schools

Caption: Do you attend a public school? As common as they are today, they were quite a revolution back in the 19th century. Here is a quick history of the creation of public schools.



The Problem to Solve

"Social **class divisions had widened** in recent years. Riots and public disorder were especially common in the cities, reflecting **social tensions between rich and poor, native born and immigrant.**"³

(1830s-1840s)



Solution:

Create a common experience where members of different social classes could come together.

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The Common School Movement

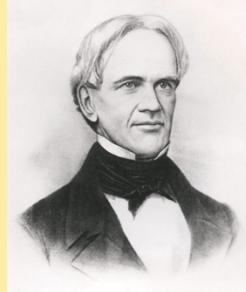
"...the common schools promised **social stability**, so visibly absent in times of labor strife, and **access to knowledge and values** essential to the rise of talent in America. As Thomas Jefferson and other theorists had so eloquently written, this would **prevent the hardening of social classes**, especially for the white citizenry."

- William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools*

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The Common School Movement

Horace Mann



The goal: to create "such an education as was **common in the highest sense**, as the air and light were common; because it was **not only the cheapest but the best, not only accessible to all, but, as a general rule, enjoyed by all.**"³

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Creating Public Schools

- Had to be **different than the charity schools**, not funded by private donors nor attached to the stigma of a school for the poor
- **Funded by the government** and with higher standards so that the quality of education would be **attractive to all**
- Was primarily focused on shaping **moral character**
- Was primarily **focused on elementary** -- high schools were not as popular at the time

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"Children go into the schools English, Scottish, Irish, German, Danish, Norwegian, Italian, French,—and all come out American!"

- William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools*, quoting a minister from 1890 on the assimilation purposes of schools

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Outcomes of the Common School Movement

Despite not living up to true universal education at first, public schools were revolutionary in that they **eliminated the cost barrier to education.**

In modern times, government control means public schools must follow anti-discrimination laws and **provide an education to everyone** — regardless of background.^{1 & 2}

Today, **90% of K-12 students** in the United States **attend public schools.**¹

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Who was left out?

While educational leaders touted public schools as providing **education "for all"** and being centers of assimilation — this was **only for white immigrants**

Children of color attended **segregated schools** with significantly fewer resources 2, 3, 5

Native American children were taken from their homes into **"boarding schools"** where they were stripped of their cultural identity 2, 3, 5

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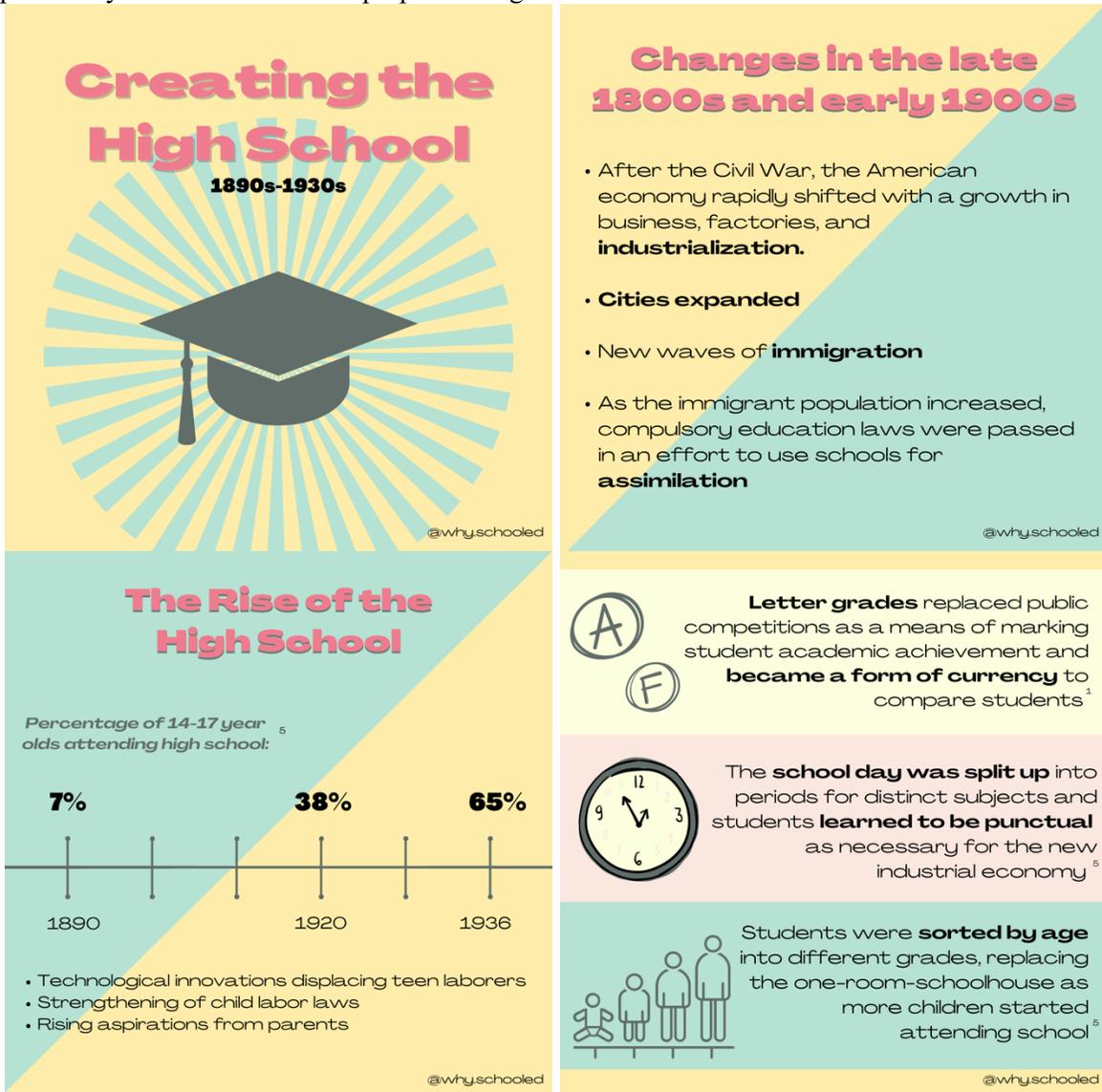
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4. Tinkering toward Utopia—David Tyack, Larry Cuban. (nd). Retrieved October 4, 2021, from <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674892835>
5. Watras, J. (2002). *The Foundations of Educational Curriculum and Diversity: 1565 to the Present.* Allyn & Bacon.

Interested in learning more?
Find recommendations at the link in my bio!

Figure 5 - History of Schools Carousel, part 3: Creating the High School

Caption: What do you think of the original purpose of high schools? Do you think they serve the same purpose today? What should be the purpose of high school?



Why do we learn English, Science, Math and Social Studies?



The subjects we learn in school today were established by many interest groups and refined through the years

Colleges had influence over high school subjects, reflecting what knowledge these universities considered valuable³

“The subjects of school instruction represent those who have power to give definition to reality.”

- Thomas Popkewitz,
The Formation of School Subjects

So did industry and labor groups, advocating for teaching skills that are valued in the workforce³

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The Purpose of the High School?

There has been constant debate about the purpose of high school

High schools were thought to be **college preparatory**, even though it was only a **small function**

Critics thought it was **elitist** to assume everyone should get a college-prep education. Instead, they **argued for practical courses** and vocational tracks **for the majority of students** who would not be going to college. ^{4, 5, 6}

“⁴At the very time **when the poor and people of color were beginning to gain access** to more equal schooling, social scientists were starting to question the value of education...

While some wondered, "Does schooling make a difference?" others wrote that Americans were becoming **'over- educated'** for their prospects in the job market.

It is perhaps no coincidence that such issues arose just when "nontraditional" students were gaining entry into colleges.”

- David Tyack, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*

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The Comprehensive High School

High Schools became "comprehensive," meaning **vocational courses and traditional academic courses co-existed** in the same building, **and students were sorted** into these different classes.^{4, 5, 6, 7}

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Different Purposes?

The process of sorting students, called **tracking**, utilized the new science of psychology to **justify placing minorities in vocational tracks.**²

Many **segregated schools** for Black, Hispanic, or Native students were **entirely vocational-focused.**⁷

Was the purpose of high school the same across demographic groups?

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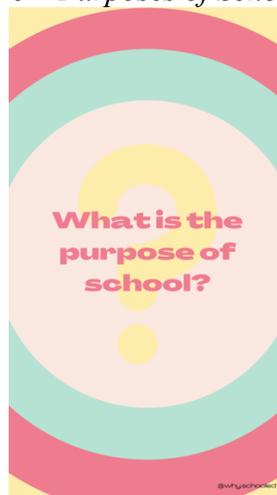
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- 7.Watras, J. (2002). The Foundations of Educational Curriculum and Diversity: 1565 to the Present. Allyn & Bacon.

Interested in learning more?
Find recommendations at the link in my bio!

@whyschooled

Figure 6 – Purposes of School Story



The following are some of the purposes for schools that have been proposed by various people throughout history:



Providing Universal Access Education

Public schools are meant to be available free of charge to all

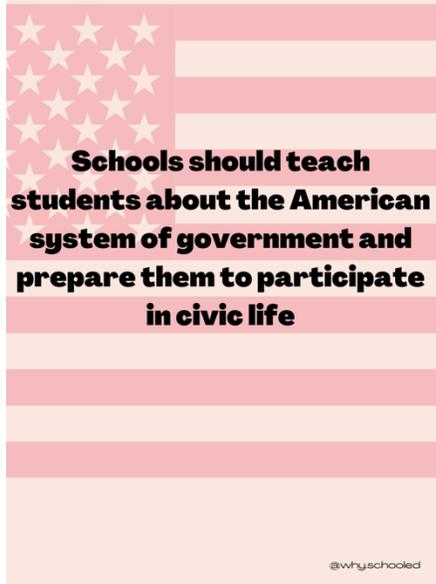


@whyschooled

@whyschooled

Civic Education

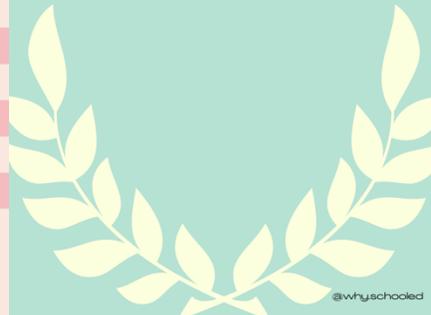
Schools should teach students about the American system of government and prepare them to participate in civic life



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Meritocracy

The idea that schools are a natural stage for displaying merit, and should give people a chance to work hard and be recognized and rewarded for their talents



@whyschooled

Assimilation



Schools should teach the English language, promote American values, and help foster a national identity for new immigrants

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Economic Efficiency

Schools should prepare students for different careers and occupations, promote innovation and skills that boost the economy



@whyschooled

College Preparation

Schools should provide the skills necessary to succeed in college



@whyschooled

Education for Liberation

Coming from the educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire:

Education should develop a critical consciousness that can be used to fight inequality



@whyschooled

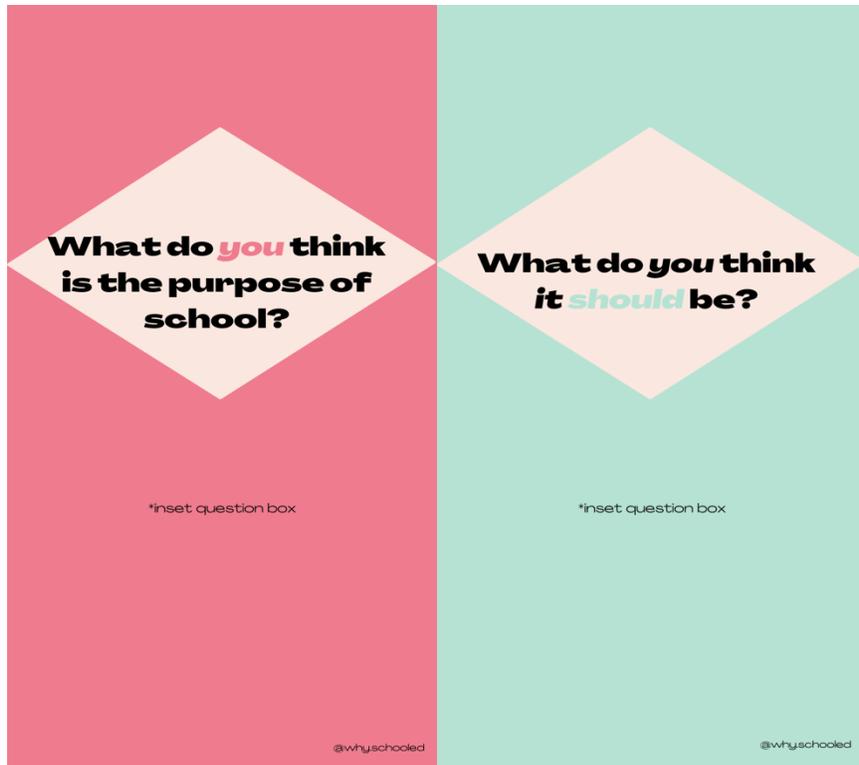
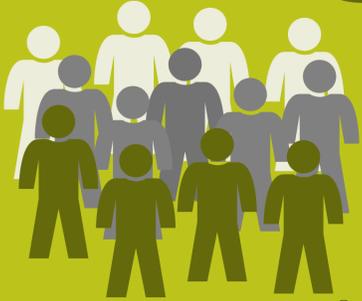


Figure 7 – Tracking Carousel

Caption: What has been your experience with tracking? Do you think schools should continue this practice? Why or why not? Comment down below!

Why do we have Tracking?



@whyschooled

The History of Tracking

- By the turn of the 20th century, **enrollment in high school was increasing** exponentially; aided in part by new waves of immigration.^{4,5}
- Educational leader G. Stanley Hall described this increase as a **'great army of incapables'** invading schools.⁴
- As the population attending high schools shifted from only the most affluent, educators began to question whether the original 'academic' and college preparatory nature of secondary education was appropriate for the more diverse student body.^{2,3,4 & 5}

@whyschooled

What is tracking?

Tracking is the process of assigning students into groups based on ability, IQ, or achievement to be taught separately; with different curriculum for each group

examples:
gifted, honors, AP, college-prep, career readiness, vocational

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The History of Tracking cont.

- Aided by racist theories of **Social Darwinism** which were common at the time, it was believed that some students required special treatment and should be trained for their future positions in society and therefore required separate classes.²
- At first, students were **openly sorted by race, ethnicity, and economic background**²
- After WWI, **IQ tests** began being used to appear more objective (despite these tests being extremely biased)²

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Tracking Today

While most schools no longer openly track, there still exists a system of placing students into varying levels of courses such as regular, honors, or AP.

A combination of factors like standardized test scores, teacher & counselor recommendations, grades, and student/parental choice affect placement into tracks but these measures continue to be subjective and biased.

The results of tracking is that students in higher tracks get access to more resources, better teachers, higher expectations, and learn more than students in lower tracks.²

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The largest influences over what track you are placed in are **social class & race**

- Higher parental education levels correspond with greater chances of being placed in higher tracks.¹
- Studies have also shown that when comparing students with the same test scores, White students are more likely to be placed in higher tracks than Black students.^{1&2}

Implications:

The consequences of lower track placements — fewer resources, lowered self-esteem, less learning — are compounding on pre-existing social inequities of these already marginalized groups.

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"These disparate expectations, access, and resources have a predictable effect on student learning: low-track students fall further behind."

- Jeannie Oakes, Keeping Track

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"By high school, track location has a far-reaching influence — with college-track students (relative to their others comparable non-college-track peers) enjoying better prospects for high school completion; college attendance, grades, and graduation; and, indirectly, high-status occupations."

- Jeannie Oakes, Keeping Track



Even if there were no bias in the process of placement, tracking inherently contributes to creating unequal educational outcomes¹

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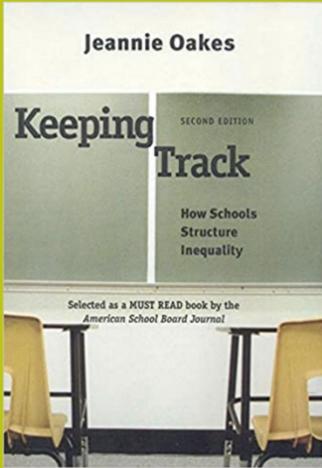
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Figure 8 – Tracking Source Spotlight Story

.....>

Source Spotlight:



Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track*

1

“First, students are identified in a rather public way as to their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments and separated into a hierarchical system of groups for instruction.”

2

Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track*

Second, these groups are labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type — high ability, low achieving, slow, average, and so on.”

3

Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track*

“Third, individual students in these groups come to be defined by others — both adults and their peers — in terms of these group types.”

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4

Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track*

“Fourth, on the bases of these sorting decisions, the groupings of students that result, and the way educators see the students in these groups, teenagers are treated by and experience schools very differently.”

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“Tracking reflects deep cultural and political tensions in American society. It manifests a web of cultural assumptions about what is true — what is “normal” — and cultural values about what constitutes appropriate action given particular ‘truths’.”

- Jeannie Oakes,
Keeping Track

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“Labels such as ‘**gifted,**’ ‘**honors,**’ ‘**accelerated,**’ ‘**regular,**’ and ‘**learning disabled**’ still convey or certify students’ overall ability and worth, and they cannot be seen as productive for any students.”

Jeannie Oakes,
Keeping Track



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“Tracking embodies the largely unquestioned assumption that students’ individual needs and capacities differ enormously and in ways over which schools have little influence.

It also reflects an extensive list of American biases around race, language, and poverty to cast doubt on the learning capacities of African Americans and of Latino immigrants.”

Jeannie Oakes,
Keeping Track

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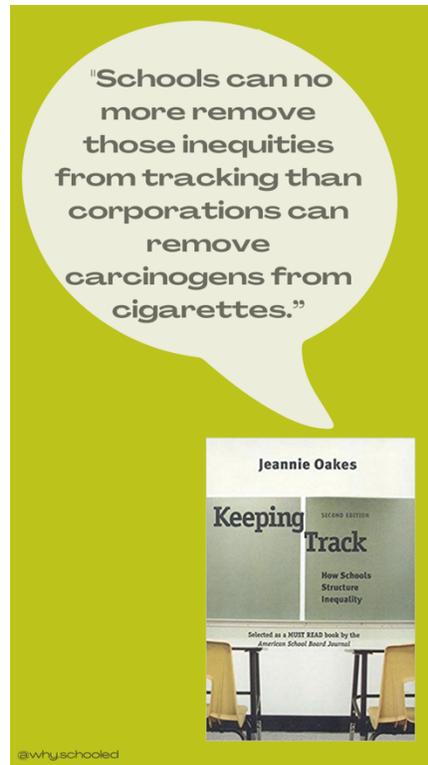


Figure 9: Tracking Reel



Reel Script:

“AP,” “Honors,” “Regular,” why do we have all these different levels of high school courses? Tracking — the process of sorting students based on ability into different curricular groups — is as old as the creation of the comprehensive high school back at the turn of the 20th century. The practice of giving groups of students different courses and instruction was rooted in the belief that children of different social classes, immigrant backgrounds, and races were inherently and fundamentally different. While the method sorting of students has shifted throughout the years to appear more objective and meritocratic, there is still bias.

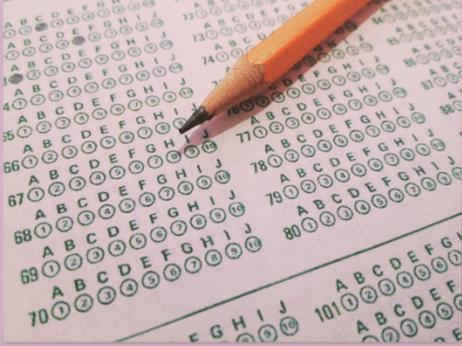
Proponents of tracking argue that students learn better when they are grouped with peers at similar levels, that “slower” students feel better about themselves when separated from more advanced peers, that placements into tracks accurately reflect past achievement and ability, and that it is easier for teachers to accommodate students in homogenous groups.

However, research shows that only students in higher tracks learn more, leaving students in low-track classes falling further behind. Regardless of prior achievement, track placement heavily impacts a student’s outcomes. Not only are learning outcomes affected, but so are students’ self-esteem. Students in lower tracks end up developing lower self-esteem than their peers in higher tracks. The placement of students in these tracks has also been shown to be subjective, with more Black and Latinx students end up being placed in lower tracks.

What has been your experience with tracking?

Figure 10 – Standardized Testing Carousel
Caption: What do you think of standardized tests?

Why do we have so many standardized tests?



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A Quick History of Testing:

- At the turn of the **20th century**, testing people was part of the new science of psychology.^{1,4}
- Many psychologists pioneering this field were part of the **eugenics** movement, and created tests to confirm their belief that intelligence is fixed, inherent, and genetic.^{1,4}



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Intelligence Testing



Tests created to try to identify intelligence as something fixed, genetic, and used to justify differential treatment. Results compare individuals to others.^{1,4}

vs. Achievement Testing



Tests that measure people to a fixed criteria. Measures the acquisition of knowledge on a particular topic.^{1,4}

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A Quick History of Testing:

- **Intelligence tests** were being used for army recruits during WWI, and at the end of the war test makers turned to public schools as **a new market** for their business.⁴
- These tests were used to **sort** the increasingly diverse student body into different educational paths.⁴



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The Need for Standards

- One of the reasons tests were brought into schools was the **need for standardization.** ^{2,3}

- U.S. **school are run locally**, meaning there was no set curriculum across the country -- **every school did things differently.**

- This made it **difficult** for officials to **assess schools** and for colleges to **compare students** from different schools.

- By having every student take the same test, we would now **have something to compare everyone by.** ^{2,3}

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Efficiency

- Multiple-Choice bubble tests were the most efficient format for grading large numbers of tests ^{1,4}

- The invention of test scoring machines in 1937 made grading bubble tests even more time and cost efficient ⁴

- Because there is not enough time to test for every subject, decisions had to be made regarding which subjects would be tested — creating the appearance that certain subjects are more important than others.

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Testing Gets Twisted

“When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.” ⁴

- Campbell's Law

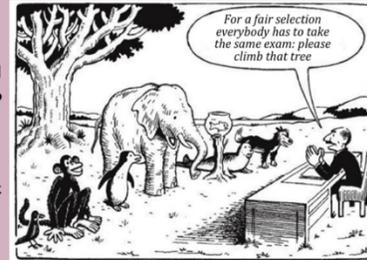
Because of the high-stakes placed on these tests, teachers are inclined to teach to the test and there is more incentive to cheat.

Is learning how to take a test really indicative of general knowledge acquisition?

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What are we even measuring?

- Tests are **human creations** and are **subject to error and biases**
- Do tests measure what they claim to measure?
- Are they consistent?
- Are we interpreting the results correctly?



Our Education System

“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

- Albert Einstein

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Testing for Equity

Today, standardized tests are used as accountability measures to try to ensure that students of different backgrounds are receiving a high quality education. ^{2,3}

In theory, these tests allow people to identify inequalities in our public school system.



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Figure 12 – School Uniforms Carousel

Caption: Did your school have a uniform requirement or strict dress code? What was your experience like? Are you for or against uniforms? Comment down below!

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What do a pair of sunglasses have to do with school uniform policies?



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First, let's define some terms:

Uniforms vs. Dress Code

Mandating what must be worn



Specifying what should not be worn



Where did school uniforms come from?

- In the **16th century**, **Christ's Hospital**, a charity school in England, created uniforms as a way to economically clothe the poor orphans at their school.⁶
- Originally seen as a **symbol of the lower class**, uniforms eventually became a **symbol of status** at elite private schools.²

Christ's Hospital, students in 2011 wearing the same uniforms as those in the 1550s





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History of Uniforms in the U.S.

- Uniforms were predominantly used in **private and parochial schools**, influenced by the British.²
- Prior to the 1980s, the only instance of uniforms in public schools were at 'Indian Boarding Schools' where uniforms were used to **strip Native children of their cultural identity** and force assimilation.⁴




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A pair of \$95 sunglasses

Cherry Hill Elementary School in Baltimore was the first school to implement a uniform policy in 1987



Other schools followed suit as part of the **School Uniform Project**, linked to a fight over a \$95 pair of sunglasses which led to a student being shot and wounded

In the next few years, schools implementing uniform policies multiplied -- primarily in **urban neighborhoods serving minority and poor populations**



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"Potential Benefits" of school uniforms outlined by the Manual of School Uniforms

- **decreasing violence and theft** - even life threatening situations - among students over designer clothing or expensive sneakers
- helping **prevent gang members from wearing gang colors** and insignia at school
- instilling students with **discipline**
- helping parents and students **resist peer pressure**
- helping students **concentrate on their school work**
- helping school officials **recognize intruders** who come to the school

1

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What Uniform Policies Actually Look Like...

- Uniform policies are more likely to be adopted in schools with increasing enrollment and poor school-level academic performance, as well as schools with higher proportions of minority and low-income students, in an effort to improve academic achievement.
- Studies show that uniforms actually have **no significant impact** on school safety, achievement, students' self-esteem, or school unity. ²

20% of public schools in the 2017-2018 year required uniforms

NCES

More prevalent in cities than suburbs or rural areas
Higher proportion of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch

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Clinton: Uniforms to fight Gang Violence



*"I challenge all our schools to teach character education, to teach good values and good citizenship. **And if it means that teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear school uniforms.**"*

- Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, 1996

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Uniforms were promoted as a safety issue and method of combating gang violence

Arguments Against School Uniforms

"There is no evidence from this set of analyses that dress codes or uniforms positively affect the school or its students in discernible ways, nor do they influence the very processes that do affect schools and students (i.e., climate, pro-school attitudes, etc.)."

"School uniform policies implemented in largely minority high schools are likely to further exacerbate the academic achievement problems witnessed in these schools."

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