1647 The General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony decrees that every town of fifty families should have an elementary school and that every town of 100 families should have a Latin school. The goal is to ensure that Puritan children learn to read the Bible and receive basic information about their Calvinist religion.

1779 Thomas Jefferson proposes a two-track educational system, with different tracks in his words for “the laboring and the learned.” Scholarship would allow a very few of the laboring class to advance, Jefferson says, by “raking a few geniuses from the rubbish.”

1785 The Continental Congress (before the U.S. Constitution was ratified) passes a law calling for a survey of the “Northwest Territory” which included what was to become the state of Ohio. The law created “townships,” reserving a portion of each township for a local school. From these “land grants” eventually came the U.S. system of “land grant universities,” the state public universities that exist today. Of course in order to create these townships, the Continental Congress assumes it has the right to give away or sell land that is already occupied by Native people.

1790 Pennsylvania state constitution calls for free public education but only for poor children. It is expected that rich people will pay for their children’s schooling.

1805 New York Public School Society is formed by wealthy businessmen to provide education for poor children. Schools are run on the “Lancasterian” model, in which one “master” can teach hundreds of students in a single room. The master gives a rote lesson to the older students, who then pass it down to the younger students. These schools emphasize discipline and obedience qualities that factory owners want in their workers.

1817 A petition presented in the Boston Town Meeting calls for establishing of a system of free public primary schools. Main support comes from local merchants, businessmen and wealthier artisans. Many wage earners oppose it, because they don’t want to pay the taxes.

1820 First public high school in the U.S., Boston English, opens.

1827 Massachusetts passes a law making all grades of public school open to all pupils free of charge.

1830s By this time, most southern states have laws forbidding teaching people in slavery to read. Even so, around 5 percent become literate at great personal risk.
1820-1860 The percentage of people working in agriculture plummets as family farms are gobbled up by larger agricultural businesses and people are forced to look for work in towns and cities. At the same time, cities grow tremendously, fueled by new manufacturing industries, the influx of people from rural areas and many immigrants from Europe. During the 10 years from 1846 to 1856, 3.1 million immigrants arrive, a number equal to one eighth of the entire U.S. population. Owners of industry needed a docile, obedient workforce and look to public schools to provide it.

1837 Horace Mann becomes head of the newly formed Massachusetts State Board of Education. Edmund Dwight, a major industrialist, thinks a state board of education was so important to factory owners that he offered to supplement the state salary with extra money of his own.

1840s Over a million Irish immigrants arrive in the United States, driven out of their homes in Ireland by the potato famine. Irish Catholics in New York City struggle for local neighborhood control of schools as a way of preventing their children from being force-fed a Protestant curriculum.

1848 Massachusetts Reform School at Westboro opens, where children who have refused to attend public schools are sent. This begins a long tradition of “reform schools,” which combine the education and juvenile justice systems.

1848 The war against Mexico ends with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which gives the United States almost half of what was then Mexico. This includes all of what is now the U.S. Southwest, plus parts of Utah, Nevada and Wyoming and most of California. The treaty guarantees citizenship rights to everyone living in these areas mostly Mexicans and Native people. It also guarantees the continued use of the Spanish language, including in education. One hundred fifty years later, in 1998, California breaks that treaty, by passing Proposition 227, which would make it illegal for teachers to speak Spanish in public schools.

1851 State of Massachusetts passes first its compulsory education law. The goal is to make sure that the children of poor immigrants get “civilized” and learn obedience and restraint, so they make good workers and don’t contribute to social upheaval.

1852 Two years after California became a state; the legislature passed a bill barring African American children from schools. The First State Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of California met in 1854 and in a public pronouncement chafed against this discriminatory measure.

1864 Congress makes it illegal for Native Americans to be taught in their native languages. Native children as young as four years old are taken from their parents and sent to Bureau of Indian Affairs off-reservation boarding schools, whose goal, as one BIA official put it, is to “kill the Indian to save the man.”
1865-1877 African Americans mobilize to bring public education to the South for the first time. After the Civil War, and with the legal end of slavery, African Americans in the South make alliances with white Republicans to push for many political changes, including for the first time rewriting state constitutions to guarantee free public education. In practice, white children benefit more than Black children.

By 1870 California had devised a formula of ten. When African Americans, Asian Americans, or American Indians numbered ten students, a school district was empowered to create separate schools for whites and non-white children.

1872 Harriet Ward attempted to enroll her daughter Mary Frances in an all-white school in San Francisco. When the principal refused to admit her, Ward filed suit. Ward v. Flood (1873) was California’s first case challenging educational segregation. However, the California Supreme Court, in its ruling, foreshadowed the logic of the U.S. Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896); in using the principle of “separate but equal.”

1877-1900 Reconstruction ends in 1877 when federal troops, which had occupied the South since the end of the Civil War are withdrawn. Whites regain political control of the South and lay the foundations of legal segregation.

1881 California legislators passed Political Code 1662. After the phrase noting “infectious diseases,” came the passage “and also to establish separate schools for children of Mongolian or Chinese descent. When such separate schools are established Chinese or Mongolian children must not be admitted into any other schools.”

1885 The case of Tape v. Hurley would force local and state officials to address public education for Chinese youth. In 1884, Joseph and Mary Tape, both immigrants from China, attempted to enroll their U.S. born daughter Mamie into the neighborhood public school. Principal Jennie Hurley refused admittance and the Tapes filed suit. The state Superior Court confirmed the right of Mamie Tape to attend the neighborhood school.

1893-1913 Size of school boards in the country’s 28 biggest cities is cut in half. Most local district (or “ward”) based positions are eliminated, in favor of citywide elections. This means that local immigrant communities lose control of their local schools. Makeup of school boards changes from small local businessmen and some wage earners to professionals (like doctors and lawyers), big businessmen and other members of the richest classes.

1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision. The U.S. Supreme Court rules that the state of Louisiana has the right to require “separate but equal” railroad cars for Blacks and whites. This decision means that the federal government officially recognizes segregation as legal. One result is that southern states pass laws requiring racial segregation in public schools.

1905 The U.S. Supreme Court requires California to extend public education to the children of Chinese immigrants.
1917 Smith-Hughes Act passes, providing federal funding for vocational education. Big manufacturing corporations push this, because they want to remove job skill training from the apprenticeship programs of trade unions and bring it under their own control.

1921 The California school law (Political Code 1662) was amended once again to read as follows: “The governing body of a school district shall have power to exclude children of filthy or vicious habits, or children suffering from contagious or infectious diseases, and also to establish separate schools for Indian children and for children of Chinese, Japanese, or Mongolian parentage. When such schools are established, Indian children or children of Chinese, Japanese, or Mongolian parentage must not be admitted into any other school.”

1924 An act of Congress makes Native Americans U.S. citizens for the first time.

1930s The Lemon Grove, CA school board decided to build a separate school for children of Mexican heritage without giving notice to their parents. Principal Jerome Green turned away students at the schoolhouse door, directing them to the new school, known within the local Mexican American community as la caballeriza - “the stable”. The parents boycotted the new school. The landmark lawsuit Alvarez v. Lemon Grove became the first successful school desegregation court decision in the history of the United States.

1930-1950 The NAACP brings a series of suits over unequal teachers’ pay for Blacks and whites in southern states. At the same time, southern states realize they are losing African American labor to the northern cities. These two sources of pressure resulted in some increase of spending on Black schools in the South.

1932 A survey of 150 school districts reveals that three quarters of them are using so-called intelligence testing to place students in different academic tracks.

1945 At the end of World War 2, the G.I. Bill of Rights gives thousands of working class men college scholarships for the first time in U.S. history.

Early 1940's The NAACP began shaping a legal strategy to challenge the constitutionality of segregation per se, NAACP lawyers began experimenting with sociological arguments to demonstrate the inherent inequality of racial segregation.

1945 The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) lawyers implement such a strategy to challenge school segregation in California filed by Mexican-American parents in Orange County, California. NAACP lawyers followed the Mendez v. Westminster case closely and modeled the strategy in Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954.

1947 The Anderson Bill was passed which was the direct result of the Mendez case. This measure repealed all California school codes mandating segregation dating back to the 1850s and was signed into law by then Governor Earl Warren, who seven years later would preside over the Brown case.
1948 Educational Testing Service is formed, merging the College Entrance Examination Board, the Cooperative Test Service, the Graduate Records Office, the National Committee on Teachers Examinations and others, with huge grants from the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations. These testing services continued the work of eugenicists like Carl Brigham (originator of the SAT) who did research “proving” that immigrants were feeble-minded.

1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. The Supreme Court unanimously agrees that segregated schools are “inherently unequal” and must be abolished. Almost 45 years later in 1998, schools, especially in the north, are as segregated as ever.

1957 A federal court orders integration of Little Rock, Arkansas public schools. Governor Orval Faubus sends his National Guard to physically prevent nine African American students from enrolling at all-white Central High School. Reluctantly, President Eisenhower sends federal troops to enforce the court order not because he supports desegregation, but because he can’t let a state governor use military power to defy the U.S. federal government.

1968 African American parents and white teachers clash in the Ocean Hill Brownsville area of New York City, over the issue of community control of the schools. Teachers go on strike, and the community organizes freedom schools while the public schools are closed.

1974 Miliken v. Bradley. A Supreme Court made up of Richard Nixon’s appointees rules that schools may not be desegregated across school districts. This effectively legally segregates students of color in inner-city districts from white students in wealthier white suburban districts.

Late 1970s The so-called “taxpayers’ revolt” leads to the passage of Proposition 13 in California, and copy-cat measures like Proposition 2-1/2 in Massachusetts. These propositions freeze property taxes, which are a major source of funding for public schools. As a result, in twenty years California drops from first in the nation in per-student spending in 1978 to number 43 in 1998.

1974 Lau v. Nichols marks a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court ruling that established the judicial mandate for bilingual education for Chinese-speaking students. The case became a significant milestone within the legacy of Asian American activism and a remedy to inequality in education.

1976 The California Supreme Court holds that education is a fundamental right under the equal protection clause of the state constitution in Serrano v. Priest. The high courts in Connecticut and Wyoming followed suit in 1977 and 1980.

1980s The federal Tribal Colleges Act establishes a community college on every Indian reservation, which allows young people to go to college without leaving their families.

1996 California passes Proposition 209, which outlaws affirmative action in public employment, public contracting and public education. Other states jump on the bandwagon with their own initiatives and efforts are made to pass similar legislation on a federal level.

1998 Multi-millionaire Ron Unz manages to put a measure on the June 1998 ballot outlawing bilingual education in California. In 2000, he sponsors similar legislation in Arizona. California’s proposition 227 passes with 61% of the vote, 63% of Arizona’s voters passed their Proposition 203.

2008 State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell delivered his fifth annual State of Education Address and unveiled an ambitious, comprehensive plan aimed at closing California’s pernicious achievement gap that exists between students who are white and students of color, as well as with English learners, students in poverty, and students with disabilities.

2010 The Texas School Board adopts revisions to the Texas social studies curriculum. The revised curriculum plays down the role of Thomas Jefferson among the founding fathers, questions the separation of church and state, and claims that the U.S. government was infiltrated by Communists during the Cold War.

2011 The Arizona state-legislature passes bill (HB 2281) that effectively bans the Ethnic Studies program in Tucson’s largest school district. The new law prohibits any curricula that:
1. Promote the overthrow of the United States government.
2. Promote resentment toward a race or class of people.
3. Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.
4. Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.
Under this law, the state can withhold up to 10% of a district’s funding for a violation, about $15 million per year in the case of the Tucson’s schools.