

## EDUCATION IN THE COLONIES

**Prior to the American Revolution**, formal education in the colonies was based upon social class and limited to boys. This colonial class system resembled the class system of England. Boys whose parents were part of the upper class were tutored at home by paid tutors. Later they might be sent to England to attend a university.

Boys of the middle class, such as those whose fathers were merchants or tradesmen, might attend an elementary or grammar school but rarely would attend a college or university. These boys were often given an apprenticeship in a trade. For example, Alexander Hamilton and George Washington, both founding fathers, grew up without formal education and both entered trades as young boys. Hamilton was a clerk at age eleven. Washington became a surveyor at age fourteen. Hamilton later enrolled in an academy to further his education. George Washington was educated at home and later taught himself in various subjects. Colonial education was largely based upon one's parents' beliefs about educating children, the availability of tutors or schools, and social class.

Girls were usually educated at home by their mother or a servant. Girls were taught practical skills that were considered either domestic or for their "refinement" as gentlewomen. These skills might include sewing, spinning, cooking, music, poetry, French, and household management. Slaves rarely received any type of education.

In the New England colonies, where many Puritans settled, the prevailing belief was that learning to read was important primarily so that boys could read the teachings of the Bible. Education, therefore, was chiefly for instruction in religion. A few schools in Massachusetts allowed both girls and boys to attend. Students learned to read, write, add, and subtract and learned religion and moral discipline. In the Mid-Atlantic colonies, private or religious schools were more common and performed similar lessons.

**After the American Revolution**, Massachusetts began tax-funded schools in 1780. Many other colonies, especially in the north, also promoted tax-funded schooling. These public schools were in addition to the private schools already in operation. Children entered grammar school at age seven and had to be able to read before they could attend. Private education, too, flourished at academies for older students, and, much like with the tutor system, students chose to learn from certain schoolmasters whose academic reputation was well-known. Academies were both publicly and privately funded, and all students who could afford it could attend. Academies were comparable to today's high schools for secondary students. By 1821, Boston had established the first public high school and, slowly, public schools began to outnumber private ones. By 1862, the Moral Act provided federal assistance for establishment of public colleges of agriculture and mechanical or industrial arts.

## References

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