

Education



School Days, Boston, Circa 1900
Image: Boston Public Library

We've been hearing it for years: "The schools in (fill in the name of another country) are much better than ours."

In the late 1950s, after the launch of Sputnik, schools in the Soviet Union were said to be better than ours. In the 1980s, the Japanese economy was ascendant, and Japanese schools were thought to be better than ours. But today the Soviet Union exists only in history books, and the Japanese economy lost much of its steam in the 1990s, so now China and India are "filling in the blank."



College Students, Iowa State, 1942
Image: Jack Delano, Library of Congress

Time will tell. But universal public education still stands as one of America’s most successful government programs.

America’s public schools have taken their share of criticism, and some of it may be warranted. But given what we expect them to do—meet the needs of students who come from very different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds and often act as caregivers to those students—our public schools do a pretty good job.

Anyone who has attended a public college or university has also benefited from government involvement in education. When Congress passed the [Morrill Act of 1862](#), it gave each state at least 90,000 acres of public land. The states were then free to sell that land and use the funds for:

“the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the State may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”

The Morrill Act helped to establish more than 70 “land grant colleges,” some of which are now among the world’s most renowned institutions of higher learning. It also put a college education within the reach of many more students ... and brightened the lives of countless college football fans.

Eighty years later, the [Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944](#)—better known as the G.I. Bill of Rights—opened college campuses to an even broader student population. The G.I. Bill’s generous education benefits provided returning World War II veterans with an opportunity to improve their lives through higher education. As a result, college enrollment increased sharply and campuses expanded to meet the demand. Few measures, public or private, have done as much to reinforce the relationship between education and the prospects for a better life.