

One of the most important social developments that helped to make possible a shift in thinking about the role of public education was the effect of the baby boom of the 1950's and 1960's on the schools.

In the 1920's, but especially in the Depression conditions of the 1930's, the United States experienced a declining birth rate -every thousand women aged fifteen to forty-four gave birth to about 118 live children in 1920, 89.2 in 1930, 75.8 in 1936, and 80 in 1940.

With the growing prosperity brought on by the Second World War and the economic boom that followed it, young people married and established households earlier and began to raise larger families than had their predecessors during the Depression.

Birth rates rose to 102 per thousand in 1946, 106.2 in 1950, and 118 in 1955.

Although economics was probably the most important determinant, it is not the only explanation for the baby boom.

The increased value placed on the idea of the family also helps to explain this rise in birth rates.

The baby boomers began streaming into the first grade by the mid-1940's and became a flood by 1950.

The public school system suddenly found itself overtaxed.

While the number of schoolchildren rose because of wartime and postwar conditions, these same conditions made the schools even less prepared to cope with the flood.

The wartime economy meant that few new schools were built between 1940 and 1945.

Moreover, during the war and in the boom times that followed, large numbers of teachers left their profession for better-paying jobs elsewhere in the economy.

Therefore, in the 1950's and 1960's, the baby boom hit an antiquated and inadequate school system.

Consequently, the "custodial rhetoric" of the 1930's and early 1940's no longer made sense; that is, keeping youths aged sixteen and older out of the labor market by keeping them in school could

no longer be a high priority for an institution unable to find space and staff to teach younger children aged five to sixteen.

With the baby boom, the focus of educators and of laymen interested in education inevitably turned toward the lower grades and back to basic academic skills and discipline.

The system no longer had much interest in offering nontraditional, new, and extra services to older youths.