

Public Education and Disability

Teaching Disability History Student Research Guide

A project of Keene State College and Emerging America

Overview

Access to public education has not always been open to persons with disabilities. Students and parents have been their own most important advocates, demanding equal access to education.

In the nineteenth century, most people with disabilities received vocational training, if any education. By 1900, persons with intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities across the U.S. were largely placed in institutions and excluded from America's public schools. Life in the asylums and state schools for students with intellectual disabilities was typically hard, sometimes brutal.

In the 1940s and 1950s, parent activists organized locally and nationally to fight for education and services for children. In 1972, two major cases, Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children ("P.A.R.C") v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and Mills v. Board of Education established the [right to](#)



[education](#) for children with developmental and other disabilities.

Educational opportunities for children with disabilities have dramatically

increased since 1975, when Congress passed The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), which guaranteed "free, appropriate public education" for all students with disabilities. In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) added measures to improve results for children and families. Today, over seven million students receive special education services. Most students learn in a [general classroom setting](#).

Image: [School for students with intellectual disabilities](#). [Early 1900s]. Bain News Service. Library of Congress.

Guiding Questions

How has public education changed across the centuries? • How has disability affected students' opportunities to learn? • What was education like for people with special education needs before the post-World War II disability rights movement? • How does the treatment of students with special education show society's changing understanding of disability? • How are students with special education needs supported today?

Topic Ideas

Investigate the story of advocates and court cases in your state or nationally. Focus on a particular group like The Arc. Or trace a change in the experiences of students with disabilities.

Selected Digital Collections of Primary Sources

- [Education Reporting on Public Television](#), American Archive of Public Broadcasting, a collaboration between the Library of Congress and GBH, offering 7,000 public radio and television programs.
- [Disability History Museum](#).
- [The Library of Congress](#).
- [The Arc New York's Online Collection](#), New York State, ARC.
- [Seeking Equity for Disabled Students](#), New York City Civil Rights History Project. Explore a timeline and primary sources from over 150 years of New York City history.
- The [StoryCorps Archive](#) contains over 444,000 conversations.
- [It's Our Story](#) on YouTube holds over 1,000 video interviews with disability leaders across the nation.
- [Visionary Voices Interviews](#), Temple University Institute on Disabilities. Explore voices on Pennsylvania's movement for the right to education.
- Local and State historical societies. Ask for help searching holdings related to disabled students.
- Students might interview current special education teachers or students from their community. Check out the interview guides from the [Smithsonian Institution](#) and [StoryCorps](#) at the Library of Congress.

Secondary Historical Resources

- [A History of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act](#). (2024), Department of Education.
- Dragoo, Kyrie E.; Graber, Abigail A. [The Rights of Students with Disabilities Under the IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA](#). (May 17, 2024). Congressional Report Services. Library of Congress.
- Meldon, Perri. [Disability History: Educational Reform](#). National Park Service.
- RetroReport. Video. (7:58 minutes). [Special Education: The 50-Year Fight for the Right to Learn](#).
- Treimanis, Anne I. [Important Special Education Cases](#). Browse a timeline of federal cases and follow links to Oyez case summaries and resources.

Search Terms

Special education, exceptional learners, learning disabilities, neurodiverse, autism, Asperger's, crippled, handicapped, disabled, retarded, (Many historical terms for disabled people are offensive today. Use them with great care and respect.)

Glossary

Accommodations = Changes that enable students to fully participate in academics; Modifications = Changes to what a student with disabilities is expected to learn; The Arc/ARC = Association for Retarded Citizens); BIP = behavior intervention plan; EHA = Education for All Handicapped Children Act; IDEA = The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; IDD = intellectual and developmental disabilities; IEP = individual education plan; FAPE = free and appropriate public education; special education stigma = wrong idea that students in special education are less capable.

Bibliography

- "The Struggle for Disability Rights," National History Day 2026 [Theme Book](#).
- Crockett, Jean B, and James M Kauffman. *The Least Restrictive Environment : Its Origins and Interpretations in Special Education*. Mahwah, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1999.
- Mayes, Keith A. *The Unteachables : Disability Rights and the Invention of Black Special Education*. First edition. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022.

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- Schwartzberg, Susan. [*Becoming Citizens Family Life and the Politics of Disability*](#). Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005.
- Winzer, Margret A. [*From Integration to Inclusion: A History of Special Education in the 20th Century*](#). Gallaudet University Press, 2009.