

Schools: Comparing Long Ago, Today and Other Cultures

Are all schools the same?

From its earliest days, the United States committed itself to education. Early leaders recognized that democracy requires an electorate that can read and evaluate issues. One of the earliest acts of the federal government was to designate that money received from the sale of one square mile out of each township (36 square miles) of western lands should be earmarked to support local schools.

Iowa Schools

From its earliest territorial days, Iowa settlers began to create a remarkable system of schools to teach pioneer children. Laws were passed to establish a system of one-room schoolhouses across the state so that most children had a school within a mile or two of their home. All property owners were taxed to pay for the teacher and maintain the building, whether they had children or not. Children of all ages were put in the same class, and one teacher taught all subjects. Families provided wood or coal to heat the building and sent their children off with lunches of foods raised at home. The curriculum stressed basic subjects like reading, geography, penmanship, spelling and arithmetic. The length of the school year varied, but many children stayed at home to help with seasonal farm work like planting and corn harvest.

Most Iowa children in the early days had no education opportunities beyond the one-room school. Not for a couple decades after the Civil War did Iowa towns take much of an interest in establishing public high schools. There were some private schools, often called academies, that prepared students for college work. They might teach foreign languages, history, literature or advanced mathematics, particularly for boys interested in pursuing careers as lawyers or doctors. Girls often studied languages, music or art to prepare them to create good homes and to be good mothers. With the introduction of the automobile, farm children could attend high schools in town more easily, and high school attendance grew rapidly after 1900.

Iowa Colleges and Universities

Higher education in Iowa was a combination of public and private institutions. The state created the University of Iowa with its emphasis on the professions. With support from the federal government through grants of public lands, Iowa State University (first known as Iowa State College) was dedicated to teaching more practical subjects, such as agriculture, engineering and home economics. The University of Northern Iowa was first the Iowa Normal College and was created to train teachers. In addition to the state schools, many church denominations established private colleges to train ministers or provide general education classes. The Methodists, Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ, Reformed and Reorganized Latter Day Saints created a web of liberal arts colleges that offer degree programs today.

Today's Challenges

With the growth of schools at every level, new programs and opportunities developed. Sports, music, and special interest clubs cater to students' interest. Teachers must meet much more vigorous standards for employment, and classrooms enjoy vastly enhanced technological support through the Internet and computer-aided instruction. What schools teach can be divisive issues in a community when they involve religious issues or controversial subjects, and every era has its own challenges.

From earliest pioneer days, Iowa has been justly proud of its schools. For many years, Iowa led the nation in the percentage of its adult citizens who can read and write. Iowa children always rank at or near the top on standardized tests. Changing population trends, especially the decline of school-age children in rural areas, and budget issues challenge schools to maintain Iowa's pre-eminent position as an education leader, but schools remain a primary commitment of the Hawkeye State.

Supporting Questions

What were schools like long ago?

- [“My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” Audio, 1898, and Song Sheet, 1874 \(Audio, Document\)](#)
- [Williams School in Brush, Colorado, October 27, 1915 \(Image\)](#)
- [Schoolchildren on Circular Swing in San Augustine, Texas, April 1939 \(Image\)](#)
- [Lunch Hour at a Country School in Grundy Center, Iowa, October 1939 \(Image\)](#)
- [Students Recite “Pledge of Allegiance” in New York, January 1943, and Song Sheet, November 20, 1917 \(Document, Image\)](#)
- [Iowa Public Television’s “McGuffey’s Readers,” 1979 \(Video\)](#)
- [Iowa Public Television’s “One-Room Schoolhouse,” 1979 \(Video\)](#)

How have schools changed?

- [Children Going to School on a Horse-Drawn Bus in Keokuk County, Iowa, 1928 \(Image\)](#)
- [Classroom in West Virginia School, between 1935 and 1942 \(Image\)](#)
- [An Integrated School in Washington, D.C., May 27, 1955 \(Image\)](#)
- [Third-Grade Class at Abraham Lincoln School #14 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, 1983 \(Image\)](#)
- [Prairie Ridge Elementary School Cafeteria in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, February 2018 \(Image\)](#)
- [Prairie Ridge Elementary Computer Lab in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, February 2018 \(Image\)](#)

What are schools like in other countries?

- [Lachung School in India, between 1965 and 1979 \(Image\)](#)
- [School Children at the Paljor Namgyal Girls School in Sikkim, India, January 1969 \(Image\)](#)
- [Children in Art Class at a “Commune School” in China, 1979 \(Image\)](#)
- [South Korean Students Completing an Assignment in Class, December 2017 \(Image\)](#)
- [First Graders Perform at Bongun Elementary in South Korea, 2018 \(Image\)](#)
- [A School Playground in South Korea, 2018 \(Image\)](#)
- [A First-Grade Classroom at Bongun Elementary in South Korea, 2018 \(Image\)](#)
- [First-Grade Students with Their Teacher at Bongun Elementary in South Korea, 2018 \(Image\)](#)

*Printable Image and Document Guide

Additional Resources

“One-Room Schoolhouses” ReadWorks Curriculum: This website provides non-fiction passages at a first-grade level with audio about one-room schoolhouses. You have to create a free account to view content.

“School: How Has it Changed” ReadWorks Curriculum: This website provides non-fiction passages at a first-grade level with audio about how schools have changed. You have to create a free account to view content.

This Is How We Do It: One Day In the Lives of Seven Kids Around the World by Matt Lamothe: This picture book follows one day in the real lives of seven kids from around the world — Italy, Japan, Iran, India, Peru, Uganda and Russia.

At School: Long Ago and Today by Lynette R. Brent: This book is an introduction to how education has changed in the past one hundred years, discussing how buildings and classrooms, books and lessons, recess and after school activities and ways of getting to school are different.

Exploring Cultures: South Korea by Derek Zobel: This book discusses South Korea’s landscapes, the everyday life of its people and the country’s history with North Korea.

“My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” Audio, 1898, and Song Sheet, 1874

88 AMERICAN SCHOOL MUSIC READER.

MY COUNTRY, 'TIS OF THEE. HENRY CAREY.

1. My coun - try, 'tis of thee, Sweet land of lib - er - ty,
Of thee I sing: Land where my fa - thers died, Land of the
pilgrims' pride, From o - ver - y mountain side Let freedom ring!

2. My native country, thee—
Land of the noble free—
Thy name I love!
I love thy rocks and rills,
Thy woods and templed hills,
My heart with rapture thrills
Like that above.

3. Let music swell the breeze,
And ring from all the trees
Sweet freedom's song!
Let mortal tongues awake;
Let all that breathe partake;
Let rocks their silence break,—
The sound prolong!

4. Our fathers' God! to thee,
Author of liberty,
To thee we sing;
Long may our land be bright
With freedom's holy light;
Protect us by thy might,
Great God, our King!

Courtesy of Library of Congress, Smith, Samuel Francis, 1874 and 1898

Description

“My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” was written by Samuel Francis Smith, an American Baptist minister and writer. Also known as “America,” the sheet music was written in 1874 and the audio recording was created in 1898.

[“My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” Song Sheet](#)

[Full Transcript of “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” Song Sheet/Audio](#)

[Transcribed Excerpt from “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” Song Sheet/Audio](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

“My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” Song Sheet

- What words in the text describe our country?
- What does “let freedom ring” mean?

“My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” Audio

- When you listen to the song, “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” what do the words “liberty, pilgrim’s pride, from every mountainside” mean?
- Why might this song be sung at school?

Citation Information

Audio: Smith, Samuel Francis, “America,” 1898. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Song Sheet: Smith, Samuel Francis, “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” Ditson & Co., 1874. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Williams School in Brush, Colorado, October 27, 1915



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Hine, Lewis Wickes, "Williams School - Brush, Colo.," 27 October 1915

Description

This photograph of a one-room schoolhouse in Brush, Colorado, shows seven children and a teacher outside. Named the Williams School, the image shows a small portion of the expected 30 to 40 students expected when beet work in the fields was over. This photo was taken seven weeks after school opened.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What do you observe in the image with the one-room schoolhouse?
- What is the building in the back of the school?

Citation Information

Hine, Lewis Wickes, "Williams School - Brush, Colo.," 27 October 1915. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Schoolchildren on Circular Swing in San Augustine, Texas, April 1939



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lee, Russell, "Schoolchildren on circular swing, San Augustine, Texas," April 1939

Description

This photograph shows schoolchildren on a circular swing in San Augustine, Texas. The image was taken by Russell Lee in 1939.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What evidence from the picture tells us that it is long ago?
- How is this swing similar to the swing on your playground? How are they different?

Citation Information

Lee, Russell, "Schoolchildren on circular swing, San Augustine, Texas," April 1939. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Lunch Hour at a Country School in Grundy Center, Iowa, October 1939



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rothstein, Arthur, "Lunch hour at country school. Grundy County, Iowa," October 1939

Description

The image shows a group of young students having their lunch outside at a country school in Grundy County. The photo was taken by Arthur Rothstein in 1939.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Where do the students eat their lunch?
- What do you notice about their lunch boxes?

Citation Information

Rothstein, Arthur, "Lunch hour at country school. Grundy County, Iowa," October 1939. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Students Recite “Pledge of Allegiance” in New York, January 1943, and Song Sheet, November 20, 1917



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Collins, Marjory, “New York, New York students pledging allegiance to the flag in public school eight in an Italian-American section,” January 1943

Description

The photograph, taken by Marjory Collins, is of New York City students reciting the “Pledge of Allegiance.” The image was taken in January 1943 at New York Public School 8, which was in a predominantly Italian-American section of the city.

[“Pledge of Allegiance to My Flag” Song Sheet](#)

[Full Transcript of “Pledge of Allegiance to My Flag” Song Sheet](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- How are the students showing their respect of their country?
- Why is the “Pledge of Allegiance” recited at school?

Citation Information

Photograph: Collins, Marjory, “New York, New York students pledging allegiance to the flag in public school eight in an Italian-American section,” January 1943. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Song Sheet: Fowler, M.K., “Pledge of Allegiance to My Flag,” 20 November 1917. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Iowa Public Television's "McGuffey's Readers," 1979



Courtesy of Iowa Public Television, "McGuffey's Readers," Iowa Country Schools - Iowa Public Television, 1979

Description

McGuffey's Readers were the primary text used in schools to teach spelling, history, poetry, religion, morals and etiquette. It was from the pages of McGuffey's Readers that such meaningful prose sprang forth. Eventually, six readers were published under the McGuffey name and it became the standard textbook. Many pioneer children brought their McGuffey's to Iowa by covered wagon in the 1830s.

Text-Dependent Question

- How does the McGuffey Reader compare to your textbook?

Citation Information

"McGuffey's Readers," Iowa Country Schools - Iowa Public Television, 1979. [Courtesy of Iowa Public Television](#)

Iowa Public Television's "One-Room Schoolhouse," 1979



"One-Room Schoolhouse," Iowa Country Schools - Iowa Public Television, 1979

Description

This video shows the function of a one-room schoolhouse in Iowa. There were no grade levels in Iowa country schools, and one teacher taught up to 15 students of varying ages. But some had as few as two. When a student passed one lesson, he or she moved on to the next. Such a setup kept the teacher busy finding a different activity for each child. While one group of children read from their books, another practiced penmanship.

Text-Dependent Question

- What does one-room schoolhouse mean?
- How is a one-room schoolhouse similar to your school? How are they different?

Citation Information

"One-Room Schoolhouse," Iowa Country Schools - Iowa Public Television, 1979. [Courtesy of Iowa Public Television](#)

Children Going to School on a Horse-Drawn Bus in Keokuk County, Iowa, 1928



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1928

Description

The photograph shows children from Webster Consolidated School standing beside a horse-drawn bus. The image was taken in 1928 in Keokuk County, Iowa.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What was it like to go on the school bus in the past?
- How is going to school on a school bus today different than it was in the past?

Classroom in West Virginia School, between 1935 and 1942



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Johnson, Elmer, "School. Red House, West Virginia," between 1935 and 1942

Description

This photograph is of a schoolhouse in West Virginia. The image was taken by Elmer Johnson sometime between 1935 and 1942.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What do you know about this class by observing the picture?
- How is this class similar to the [third-grade class at Abraham Lincoln School](#) in 1983? How is it different?
- How is this classroom similar to your classroom? How is it different?

Citation Information

Johnson, Elmer, "School. Red House, West Virginia," between 1935 and 1942. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

An Integrated School in Washington, D.C., May 27, 1955



Courtesy of Library of Congress, O'Halloran, Thomas J., "School integration. Barnard School, Washington, D.C.," 27 May 1955

Description

This photograph by Thomas O'Halloran shows a line of African-American and white school girls standing in a classroom while the boys sit behind them. All are students at Barnard Elementary School in Washington, D.C., and they are in an integrated classroom in 1955.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe what you see in this photo. How are the students similar to your classmates? How are they different?
- How is this classroom similar to your classroom? How is it different?

Citation Information

O'Halloran, Thomas J., "School integration. Barnard School, Washington, D.C.," 27 May 1955. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Third-Grade Class at Abraham Lincoln School #14 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, 1983



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Abraham Lincoln School #14, Elizabeth, New Jersey, third grade class of Jettie V. Spears Randolph," 1983

Description

This image, taken by an unknown photographer, shows the third-grade class of Jettie V. Spears Randolph. The photograph was taken at Abraham Lincoln Elementary School #14 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1983. The back of the photo includes the following description: "Dear Rosa, This is my class room. We presented a program about Martin Luther King in the auditorium, 1-28-83. My class was very impressed with you and loved doing the program. A special program was given, 1-13-83 also. Jettie."

Text-Dependent Questions

- What do you know about this class by observing the picture?
- How is this class different than the [West Virginia schoolhouse](#)? How is it similar?
- How is this classroom similar to your classroom? How is it different?

Citation Information

"Abraham Lincoln School #14, Elizabeth, New Jersey, third grade class of Jettie V. Spears Randolph," 1983. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Prairie Ridge Elementary School Cafeteria in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, February 2018



Courtesy of Prairie Ridge Elementary School, Heckart, Kim, February 2018

Description

The photograph shows the Prairie Ridge Elementary School cafeteria, where students are being served breakfast in February 2018. Meals are served to students from grades preschool through 4th grade. Take a look at how this lunch hour compares to the students at a [country school in Grundy Center, Iowa, in 1939](#).

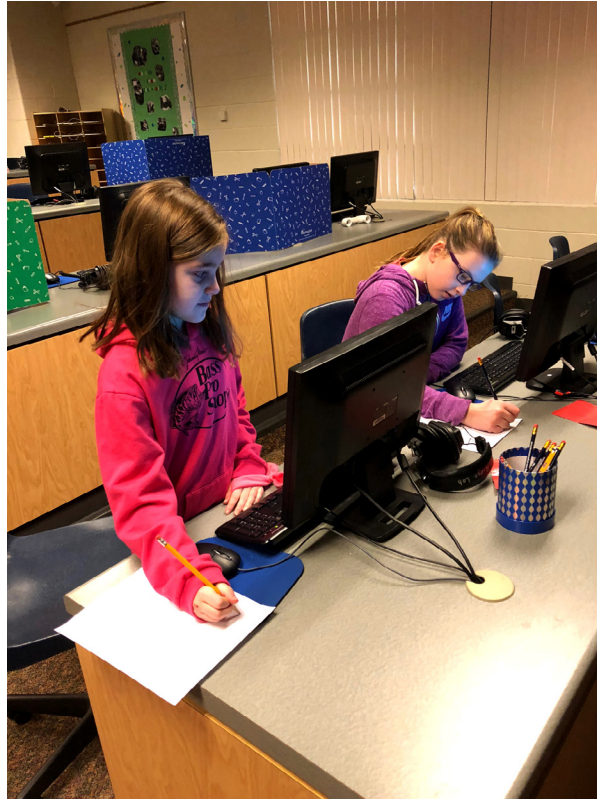
Text-Dependent Questions

- What happens when kids go through the lunch line?
- Who serves school lunches?

Citation Information

Heckart, Kim, February 2018. Courtesy of Prairie Ridge Elementary School

Prairie Ridge Elementary Computer Lab in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, February 2018



Courtesy of Prairie Ridge Elementary School, Heckart, Kim, February 2018

Description

The photograph shows two students from Prairie Ridge Elementary School in Cedar Rapids in their school's computer lab.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What do you observe about this computer lab? How is it similar to the computer lab at your school? How is it different?
- How do computers help students?

Citation Information

Heckart, Kim, February 2018. Courtesy of Prairie Ridge Elementary School

Lachung School in India, between 1965 and 1979



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Kandell, Alice S., "Laching school," between 1965 and 1979

Description

The photograph shows young boys reading and writing in school. The image, which was taken by Alice Kandell, was based in Lachung, Sikkim - a state in northeast India.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What can you tell about the conditions of the boys' school in comparison to your own school?
- What are the boys doing?

Citation Information

Kandell, Alice S., "Lachung school," between 1965 and 1979. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

School Children at the Paljor Namgyal Girls School in Sikkim, India, January 1969



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Kandell, Alice S., "School children at the Paljor Namgyal Girls School, Sikkim," January 1969

Description

This photograph, taken by Alice Kandell, shows school children at the Paljor Namgyal Girls School. This school, which was photographed in 1969, is in Sikkim, a state in northeast India.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the students you see in the picture. What might you infer about the school based on what you see?
- What do you notice about what they are wearing?

Citation Information

Kandell, Alice S., "School children at the Paljor Namgyal Girls School, Sikkim," January 1969. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Children in Art Class at a “Commune School” in China, 1979



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Norwood, Jean E., “Children learning to draw in an art class at a “commune school” in China,” 1979

Description

The children photographed are learning to draw in an art class at a “commune school” in China in 1979. Communes in China were the largest collective units in rural areas of China from 1958 to 1983, when they were replaced by townships.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How can you tell this is an art class?
- How is this art class similar to your art class? How are they different?

Citation Information

Norwood, Jean E., “Children learning to draw in an art class at a “commune school” in China,” 1979. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

South Korean Students Completing an Assignment in Class, December 2017



Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School, Kim, Jungsun, December 2017

Description

South Korean students are shown using books in this photograph to complete an assignment in December 2017. The image was taken at Bongeun Elementary School.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What is similar to your classroom and the South Korean classroom?
- What is different from your classroom to the South Korean classroom?

Citation Information

Kim, Jungsun, December 2017. Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School

First Graders Perform at Bongeun Elementary in South Korea, 2018



Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School, Kim, Jungsun, 2018

Description

The photograph by Jungsun Kim shows first grader students practicing a performance at Bongeun Elementary School. The image was taken in South Korea in 2018.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What are the students wearing? How are the clothes you wear similar to clothes they wear?
- How are the signs similar to signs in your schools? How are they different?

Citation Information

Kim, Jungsun, 2018. Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School

A School Playground in South Korea, 2018



Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School, Kim, Jungsun, 2018

Description

The image shows students on a playground at Bongeun Elementary School in South Korea.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe what you see in the photo. How is the South Korean playground similar to your playground? How is it different?
- Notice the weather in the photo. How does weather impact what you can do at recess both in Iowa and South Korea?

Citation Information

Kim, Jungsun, 2018. Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School

A First-Grade Classroom at Bongeun Elementary in South Korea, 2018



Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School, Kim, Jungsun, 2018

Description

The photograph shows a first-grade classroom at Bongeun Elementary School. The image was taken by Jungsun Kim in 2018.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How is this Korean classroom similar to your own classroom? How are they different?
- How are the students similar to first graders at your school? How are they different?

Citation Information

Kim, Jungsun, 2018. Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School

First-Grade Students with Their Teacher at Bongeun Elementary in South Korea, 2018



Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School, Kim, Jungsun, 2018

Description

First-grade students in South Korea are shown posing with their teacher at Bongeun Elementary School. The photograph was taken by Jungsun Kim in 2018.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What are the students from South Korea doing?
- What hand gestures are common in South Korea and the United States?

Citation Information

Kim, Jungsun, 2018. Courtesy of Bongeun Elementary School