

The History of Inclusive Education

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Key developments, milestones, and concepts that have shaped the movement toward schooling that welcomes all learners.

1. Foundations (Pre-20th Century)

Period	Main Ideas & Practices	Notable Figures / Events
Ancient & Classical Civilizations	Education was largely exclusive—reserved for elite males; little to no provision for children with disabilities.	—
Middle Ages (5th-15th c.)	Monastic schools offered basic literacy; some charitable institutions (e.g., “hospitals” for the poor and disabled) provided rudimentary instruction.	—
Enlightenment (18th c.)	Philosophers argued that education is a natural right. Early calls for “education for all” emerged, though implementation remained limited.	John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Takeaway: Early education systems were selective; the notion that every child deserves schooling was only a philosophical seed.

2. Early 20th-Century Reforms

Decade	Milestones	Impact
1900s–1910s	Special schools for “defective” children appear in the U.S., U.K., and Europe.	Segregated provision—first systematic response to disability, but still exclusionary.
1920s–1930s	Progressive education (John Dewey) stresses “learning by doing” and the social function of schools.	Sets groundwork for viewing schools as community hubs, later leveraged by inclusion advocates.
1940s	World War II displaces millions; post-war reconstruction emphasizes social welfare.	Leads to broader social safety nets and the idea that education should serve all citizens.

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Key Concept: *Special education* emerges as a distinct field, but it reinforces separation rather than integration.

3. Post-World War II Era – Birth of the Rights-Based Approach

Year	Event / Legislation	Core Principle
1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26) – “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality.”	Education as a universal human right.
1950s–1960s	Special Education Acts (U.S. 1970, U.K. 1970) create public responsibility for children with disabilities.	Formal state obligation, still largely separate schools.
1965	U.S. Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – federal funding tied to “educational equality.”	Introduces equity language into funding formulas.
1975	UN International Year of the Disabled – global awareness campaign.	Highlights need for societal inclusion, not just medical care.

Takeaway: The post-war period reframes education as a civil right, laying the legal scaffolding for later inclusive policies.

4. The 1970s–1990s – Legal Mandates & Emerging Inclusive Practices

Country	Landmark Law	Main Requirement
United States	Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) ? IDEA (1990)	Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the <i>least restrictive environment</i> (LRE).
United Kingdom	Education Act (1970) & Special Educational Needs (SEN) Act (1991)	Schools must make “reasonable adjustments” for pupils with SEN.
**Sweden		