Since Oregon acquired statehood in 1859, the relationship between African Americans and public education in the city of Portland has been complex and closely correlated to the broader racial dynamics of the city, state, and nation. With three "Black exclusion laws" to its name, including one written into the original state constitution, Oregon was established in the late nineteenth century as the most formidable and dangerous place outside the South for an African-American person to call home. Oregon was never a slave state; however, historical records of lynchings, as well as institutionally denied or limited rights and access, effectively dispute the argument that it was a "free state" either. In the 140 years since the closing of the Colored School, Portland's African-American community has continued to struggle to attain quality education for its children, an effort that has been mirrored by the national fights for educational equity, including desegregation and multicultural education.

Between 1859 and 1941, there was minimal change in either the racial composition of Portland or the public school system's relationship with the small number of African Americans living in the city. Records indicate that African Americans first arrived in Oregon in 1788 and in Portland by 1850. City reports estimate that Portland's African-American population in 1860 was about 130. While a lack of economic possibilities may have contributed to the small population of non-European racial and cultural groups, it appears that racism played an equally if not more important role in contributing to the small minority population in Portland. Oregon was the only state to be admitted to the union with a Black exclusion clause in its constitution. In addition to the exclusionary clause, the state also passed limits on the Chinese and Japanese populations during this period, and the Black exclusion laws remained in the state's constitution until 1926. Further evidence of the unwelcoming attitude Oregon presented to African Americans is revealed in the Oregon legislature's 1869 rescission of its initial ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment; it did not re-ratify the amendment until 1973.

With the growth of European immigrants in Portland at the start of the twentieth century, African Americans faced more explicit forms of discrimination. Unions excluded African Americans, and hotels, restaurants, and theaters frequently refused to serve African Americans. According to urban studies professor Karen Gibson, "in 1919, the Portland Realty Board adopted a rule declaring it unethical for an agent to sell property to either Negro or Chinese people in a White neighborhood. The Realtors felt it was best to declare a section of the city for them so that the projected decrease in property values could be contained within limited special boundaries." This practice started the process of establishing the Albina district as an African-American neighborhood.

Many African Americans moved West during World War II because of economic opportunities, including shipbuilding and related industries associated with the war. As a result, the African-American population in Oregon increased tenfold, with most people
located in or near Portland. Restrictive housing covenants developed by the Portland Realty Board and Euro-American Portlanders' resistance to African Americans moving into other parts of the city directed many new African-American residents to the Albina district. A statement representing five hundred Euro-American Portland residents declared:

“If it is necessary to bring large numbers of Negro Workers, locate them on the edge of the city.... It would be much better for all concerned. If they are allowed to fan out through the city it soon will be necessary to station a policeman on every corner.”

During the 1950s, Albina lost one-third of its population and experienced significant racial turnover as White residents left en masse for the suburbs and Black residents moved into Albina from temporary war housing. By decade's end, there were 23,000 fewer White and 7,300 more Black residents.

By 1960, approximately 80 percent of the African Americans in Portland lived in the Albina district. Portland's residential segregation shaped school enrollment patterns, and the Albina district harbored the majority of schools with disproportionate percentages of African-American students. In 1945, for example, 38 percent of the students at Eliot Elementary were African American, but by 1957, they comprised 80 percent of the student body. This is especially striking because African Americans only made up 2 percent of Portland's total population.

Bolstered by recent political gains, such as the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court decision, African Americans across the nation began to challenge school segregation. School segregation became arguably one of the most contentious issues facing Portland throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

By 1968, the concentration of African-American students to a few schools was a serious concern for Portland. A 1968 report noted that: "Of the 4,800 Negro elementary pupils, 73 per cent (3,500) are enrolled in nine of the 94 elementary schools.... Four schools are over 90 per cent Negro (Boise, 93 per cent; Highland [now King], 94 per cent; Eliot, 92 per cent; Humboldt, 91 per cent." The pattern was repeated at the high school level, with the majority of African-American students attending Jefferson High School, where they made up 37.4 percent of the student population.

Racial conflict in the schools was also becoming harder to ignore during the 1960s. The first reports of racial strife at Jefferson High School appeared in 1964, and racial tension was common in 1966 and 1967, with reports indicating that teachers and students of all races were involved. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination on Thursday, April 4, 1968, brought these issues to the forefront. The school district considered closing Jefferson High School on April 5, but decided against it, only to have the school's principal call for its closure following student unrest. Over the weekend, the pressures built and the school district opted to defuse the situation by keeping schools closed on Monday April 8, and on Tuesday morning, April 9. Mayor Terry Schrunk sent extra police officers into Jefferson High School, and the racial tensions continued to simmer throughout the rest of the school year.
Economic marginalization, social alienation, and institutional racism continued to be present in Portland and contributed to the frustration that many of the city's African-American residents felt. A roving reporter for the Oregon Advance Times ran a regular series asking African-American residents what they thought Portland needed, and those interviewed frequently identified better schools, jobs, housing, and recreation centers for youth.

Richard G. Wilburn voiced a typical response: "Our children are the most important product of our community. We need more recreation for children and we certainly need better schools. We don't have enough teachers and sooner or later the city will wake up."

Portland started busing students to suburban schools in 1968 to desegregate the school, but the number of students participating in the suburban transfer program never reached much higher than one hundred. According to a staff report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, by 1975, approximately 22 percent (2,346) of Portland's total African-American student population was bused, compared to the 484 Euro-American students.

Reverend W.G. Hardy recently reflected on the impact of busing on both African-American students and the community as a whole:

“The African-American community was really divided and they talked about segregation and the powers that be thought it would be a great idea to take all the African-Americans, put them on a bus and bus them out to schools where they had superior books, superior equipment, better teachers.... When you take the children out of the community and take them somewhere it appears to be better and bring them back to the community it doesn't necessarily fix the problem. It kind of exacerbates it and lets you know someone else has a better lifestyle.... They thought it would have been more effective if you would have had an exchange and bused kids from both areas.

It's amazing because I have talked to both whites and blacks and it was devastating. The adults had no idea how traumatic it was for children to integrate into a culture to navigate through that, to develop relationships and then be torn apart.... Now when the black and white kids go amongst all black the black kid now has to act like they don't own the white friend. So the white kid has to figure out, well wait a minute, your black friends came around and now we are not friends. Why the change in behavior? And the black and the white can go amongst a lot of whites and the white person would then change their behavior to adapt to the dominant culture. And the black person is trying to figure out now wait a minute, we were friends just a minute ago and now you are laughing at a racist joke. So, you had this going on both sides. And the children knew that all of us were trying to navigate through all of that.

Parents voiced concern that the burden of desegregation, especially busing, was falling only on African-American students. One African American parent explained:

“Why should our children be expected to do all of the desegregating? Why doesn't the community participate? Their children don't have to ride busses and face strange new schools where they are unknown and many times not wanted. I want my child to get the best possible education and if that means busing her across town I don't mind. But I think white parents should meet us half way. All they have been expected to do so far is to let us go to their schools.”