

# Leading the Change: Women Who Have Laid the Groundwork for Access in Education

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

BY LINDSAY MINER

In [1978](#), The Education Task Force of the Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women planned and celebrated the first Women's History Week during the week of March 8<sup>th</sup>. This celebration led to a movement across the United States. By February of 1980, thanks to the lobbying of what is now known as the National Women's History Alliance, President Carter issued the first presidential proclamation declaring the week of March 8<sup>th</sup> as National Women's History Week. Seven years later, Women's History week would become Women's History Month, celebrated annually throughout the month of March.

Each year, the [National Women's History Alliance](#) designates a theme for Women's History Month. The theme for 2026 is Leading the Change: Women Shaping a Sustainable Future. This article will explore several women who have made significant contributions to leading the change in access to education, and reflect on how deepening our understanding of the women who paved the way in this field can strengthen programs and create more sustainable community connections.

## UNSUNG HEROES IN THE FIGHT FOR EDUCATIONAL ACCESS

The weight of educating future generations has historically fallen on the shoulders of women, and that remains true in current times. According to a study from [Rutgers Graduate School of Education](#) in 2025, 77 percent of K-12 public school teachers are female and 89 percent of elementary grade teachers are female. These percentages are even higher in early childhood education, with [97.3 percent](#) of preschool teachers being female.

Despite being the backbone of early education, women remain unsung heroes, fighting for equality and access to education through turbulent socio-political climates, low rates of pay, and high levels of workplace stress. Women in early education programs throughout the world experience high rates of burnout and compassion fatigue that has only been exacerbated by the current political climate. Therefore, it is more important than ever for administrators and educators to look to their unsung predecessors for inspiration and empowerment in the face of trying times.

Below, we will explore the contributions of a couple of women who have led the change in access to quality education for underrepresented groups in turbulent socio-political environments. We will consider ways in which administrators and leaders can highlight the work of these women in ways that will strengthen program development and meet the [goals and objectives](#) of Women's History Month: honor, educate, inspire, connect, and envision.

## Margaret Bancroft

Margaret Bancroft is considered a pioneer of special education. As a public-school teacher, Margaret noticed that children who were struggling in the traditional classroom were often met with discipline as opposed to understanding. Margaret believed these children would thrive with specialized instruction, care, and compassion, leading her to found one of the first [private schools](#) in the United States for children with developmental and intellectual disabilities. This school, founded in 1883, would eventually become known as [The Bancroft School](#). At a time in history when children with disabilities were often institutionalized instead of educated, Margaret stepped forward as an advocate for children with disabilities. She firmly believed that every child had a [right to an education](#) that met their individualized needs. Therefore, The Bancroft School focused on providing individualized instruction, proper nutrition, and a structured and compassionate learning environment.

While Margaret appeared to have an innate understanding of what the children attending her school needed to thrive, she was intentional about recruiting other professionals to continue to develop the school's curriculum and program of care. For example, Margaret recruited and worked alongside Dr. Ernest Farrington, to introduce scientific approaches to education and psychology to their work within the school. The Bancroft School was quickly recognized for its success in providing equal access to education for children with disabilities. Within only ten years of opening, The Bancroft School expanded its property to accommodate more children, and the school continues to serve children with intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities, and autism spectrum disorders today.

Program administrators and leaders can honor Margaret Bancroft's legacy and create community connections in some of the following ways:

- Develop and implement a screening policy to ensure that all children enrolled in your program are screened, at least annually, for the purpose of identifying special needs.
- Include brochures and contact information for local services for children with disabilities (i.e. Early Intervention, mental health consultants, speech/physical/developmental therapists) on a family/staff bulletin board.
- Invite mental health consultants, early intervention consultants, and speech/physical/developmental therapists into your program for in-house professional development on how to best serve children with disabilities in your program.
- Provide access to children's books that highlight the strengths of diverse learners in classroom libraries and children/family book-lending libraries.

## Sylvia Mendez

While many are aware of the landmark, *Brown v. Board of Education* case that declared the end of legal segregation in the education system, another landmark case preceded this: [Mendez v. Westminster School District](#). At only eight years old, Sylvia Mendez became central to this case when her parents tried to enroll her in the Westminster School in California in 1944. Sylvia is of Mexican and Puerto Rican decent, and the Westminster School was a segregated, "whites only" school. Due to her racial and cultural

background, Sylvia was denied entry to the Westminster school, leading her parents to file a lawsuit on the basis that segregating children based on their ethnicity was a violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment. In 1946, Judge Paul McCormick ruled in favor of the Mendez family and in 1947, Governor Earl Warren signed a law ending school segregation in California. Many of the [arguments](#) used in *Mendez v. Westminster* were later used in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.

After spending her formative years at the center of such an influential case, Sylvia went on to educate future generations about the importance of equal access to education. Sylvia has spent many years traveling around the United States speaking to leaders, educators, and students about the value of quality education. Her work has been so influential that in 2011, Sylvia was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barack Obama.

Program administrators and leaders can educate their staff and students on the importance of equal access to education, encourage staff to confront their own biases and privileges when it comes to access to education, and honor Sylvia's legacy by incorporating these books into their resource libraries:

- For Students:
  - *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* by Duncan Tonatiuh
  - *The Untold Story of Sylvia Mendez: School Desegregation Pioneer* by Leticia Gonzalez
  - *Sylvia and Aki* by Winifred Conkling
- For Staff:
  - *Mendez v. Westminster: School Desegregation and Mexican American Rights* by Philippa Strum
  - *The Kindness of Color: The Story of Two Families and Mendez, et. al. v. Westminster, the 1947 Desegregation of California Public Schools* by Janice Munemitsu

In a time of division, administrators and leaders can inspire the staff, children, and families they serve to reflect on the value of equal access to education and what inspires them to continue leading the change in this field by posting some of Sylvia's wise [words](#) in a shared space: "What inspired me is that my parents fought for me when I was very young. They wanted me to know that I was an individual. That we're all individuals, that we're all human beings and that we're all connected together and that we all have the same rights; the same freedom."

### Savitribai Phule

Women across the globe have led the charge when it comes to access to education. In the 1840's, [Savitribai Phule](#) was fighting for access to education for women and girls in India. At this time in India, girls were not allowed to go to school, and it was not acceptable for different caste systems to associate. Savitribai saw these barriers to access and equality, and took action to challenge them.

Savitribai's husband was progressive and passionate about education, and he taught Savitribai to read and write. She went on to attend school formally and become one of India's first qualified female teachers. In

[1848](#), Savitribai opened India's first school for girls, enrolling six girls from the lower-caste system. The following year, Savitribai opened a school for adults and accepted students from all caste systems. Savitribai's determination to fight for equality for women and all castes was met with hostility and fear. After opening her school for girls, Savitribai and her husband were evicted from their family home because it was considered a sin that she was empowering lower castes. Additionally, Savitribai was frequently physically and verbally abused by members of the community on her way to teach. Community members yelled at her and threw rocks, dung, and mud at her as she walked to school.

Despite all of these challenges and opposition from community members and loved ones, Savitribai pushed forward. She went on to open 18 schools and a shelter for women who were facing hardship, such as widows and child brides. Savitribai also cofounded [Satyashodhak Samaj](#) with her husband in 1873. Satyashodhak Samaj was a reform society focused on promoting social equality between caste systems and emphasizing the importance of education. Savitribai dedicated her life to promoting equality and access to education for women and people of lower socio-economic status, and is now known as a pioneer of education and women's empowerment in India.

Program administrators and leaders can inspire the staff members, children, and families they work with to persevere by:

- Sharing Savitribai Phule's story in a newsletter to families, particularly on the week of March 8<sup>th</sup> in honor of International Women's Day.
- Creating a bulletin board sharing Savitribai Phule's story with staff, children, and families that is displayed in a shared space throughout Women's History Month.

Program administrators and leaders can encourage their staff to connect and envision the ways they can use Savitribai's legacy to continue to make positive changes in education by:

- Hosting a book club with your staff for, [Savitribai Phule: Her Life, Her Relationships, Her Legacy](#) by Reeta Ramamurthy Gupta. Consider reflecting on the following questions:
  - Reeta Ramamurthy Gupta notes that "No revolution can be carried out by a single person." How did Savitribai ensure her movement was collaborative?
  - What lessons can we as educators draw from Savitribai's life, particularly regarding the intersection of socio-economic status, gender, and education?
  - If Savitribai were alive today, what societal issues do you think she would be focusing on tackling? How can/are we addressing some of these issues in our roles as educators?
  - How can we take inspiration from Savitribai in our day-to-day work with children and families?

## LOOKING FORWARD

This list represents only a small fraction of the incredible women in history who have led the change in shaping education. In order to continue pushing forward in the direction of equal access to quality

education, it is important to understand the individuals and movements that have led us to where we are today. By educating staff, children, and families on Women's History Month and the women who fought for educational access for underrepresented groups, administrators and leaders can cultivate stronger advocacy efforts, community connections, and early childhood programs.

Click the following links for additional Women's History Month books to incorporate into your school libraries:

- PBS: <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/childrens-books-to-celebrate-womens-history-month>
- Start Early: <https://www.startearly.org/post/books-to-celebrate-womens-history-month/>

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