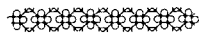


The Public Schools

H. G. Wells once called history a “race between education and catastrophe.” In America, the public schools always seem to be cast in the role of the tortoise. Despite the Founding Fathers’ belief in popular education, it took more than a century to establish a serious U.S. public school system. Along the way, educators and politicians have quarreled over shifting notions of what school teachers are supposed to do: “Americanize” immigrants? Train future factory workers? Provide equal opportunity? Today, the debate is over “quality,” and disarray in the classroom. The troubles are unmistakable—functional illiteracy, apathy, indiscipline. They are not unprecedented. Here, education writers Fred and Grace Hechinger look at the past; journalist Diane Divoky analyzes the rise and fall of Americans’ faith in the schools since the 1950s; and political scientist Joel Berke examines the political and financial outlook for public education.



A LONG TUG-OF-WAR

by Fred M. and Grace Hechinger

The history of American public school education is the repeated triumph of hope over experience. Reform billed as new and revolutionary has often turned out to be an unconscious reprise of earlier innovations. Time and again after the early 1800s, novel ideas about teaching turned sour as their champions insisted they had found “the one best way.” We have aimed high and missed, adjusted our sights and missed again. We have never accepted the fact that there are limits to what education can accomplish; in the process, we have accomplished a great deal.

America’s faith in education, noted by Tocqueville in 1835 and by many another European visitor before and since, did not bloom early in the wilderness. Struggling for survival, the early settlers spent little time on the diffusion of knowledge. Self-

paced learning and open classrooms were not envisioned in the early American philosophy of education.

Indeed, in the South, there were hardly any classrooms at all; the children of the well-to-do received their book-learning at the knees of private tutors. Other children often went without.

New England was always a different story. By 1700, the literacy rate for white adult males was 95 percent in New England, 60 percent in the Southern colonies. The Puritans, who pioneered the idea of public education, saw children as miniature adults, contaminated by original sin and in need of being purged, often harshly, of evil. The *New England Primer*, the most popular textbook in the 18th century, began its lesson with a no-nonsense reminder:

In Adam's fall,
We sinned all.
Thy life to mend,
God's book attend.

As early as 1647, Massachusetts required every town of 50 families or more to support an elementary school, with tax monies if necessary, in order that "learning may not be buried in the graves of our fathers." By 1763, most New England villages operated "free schools," and some even boasted "grammar" (or high) schools. The school day often ran from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M., and the ill-paid teachers were generally young—and between other jobs.

Poor roads and a dispersed population made New England's educational system, if such it can be called, highly decentralized. It was authoritarian and exceedingly religious. Birch-wielding masters did not hesitate to beat their more unruly charges into submission. But America was changing. While most of the colonists undoubtedly hoped that their children,

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Horace Mann (1796–1859) believed that the purpose of education was not to “freeze” the status quo but to serve as an engine of social mobility. “If education be equably diffused,” he wrote, “it will draw property after it.” Mann’s opposition to corporal punishment angered Boston schoolmasters.

From Horace Mann: A Biography by Jonathan Messerli. © 1971 by the author. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

with the help of God and an occasional whipping, would grow up in the true religion, they also believed in new worlds to conquer. The frontier, with its apparently unlimited abundance of land and resources, was not an environment congenial to submissive spirits. Freedom and opportunity—these were cherished values; and, slowly at first, they made their mark on the way society viewed children. The writers of the *New England Primer*, ever quick to adapt, put it this way in a new 1790 edition:

He who ne'er learns his ABC,
Forever will a blockhead be.
But he who learns his letters fair,
Shall have a coach to take the air.

The Founding Fathers had education much on their minds. Thomas Jefferson cautioned that “if a nation expects to be ignorant and free . . . it expects what never was and what never will be.” John Jay called knowledge “the soul of a republic.” Tentatively, at first, they sought to put their principles into practice.

Thus, the Land Ordinance of 1785, drafted largely by Jefferson and passed by Congress under the Articles of Confederation, earmarked the proceeds from certain public lands for the support of schools in the vast Northwest Territory (the present states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin). The

schools themselves were rather miserable places. Outside New England, public education grew at a sluggish pace, in part because the U.S. Constitution made no reference to the subject and so left it as one of the implied powers of the states. Thomas Jefferson tried to create an elaborate statewide system for Virginia but found so little support that he turned his energies to founding the University of Virginia. Yet there were some gains—on paper. The 13 former colonies' newly adopted constitutions all affirmed state responsibility for education, and most states, beginning with New York in 1812, hired state superintendents of schools. The foundations, at least, were in place.

One reason for the lag in public education was the stigma of "charity" that attached to the public schools. And well into the 20th century, many rural folk regarded extensive schooling as a luxury for youths whose labor was needed on the family farm. ("Books cost a heap and take a power of time," lamented one Illinois pioneer in the early 1800s.)

Branded on the Tongue

More to the point, the wealthier adversaries of free education sensed, accurately, that it posed a threat to the old social order, promising to replace an aristocracy of inherited privilege, however modest, with an aristocracy of talent. And the old social order would have to foot the bill. Daniel Webster stated the "egalitarian" case concisely in 1821: "For the purpose of public instruction, we hold every man subject to taxation *in proportion to his property* . . . whether he have or have not children." The "elitist" view was expressed in 1830 by Philadelphia's *National Gazette*, which termed a proposed education tax "evil" because it would make affluent citizens feel that "they toiled for the benefit of families other than their own."

Just as important as the establishment of schools in these early days was the question of what their function was to be. In contrast to its counterparts in France or England, the American public school has never been an institution run by a single-minded national elite. Local, heterogeneous in curriculum and standards, this non-system has reflected at every turn the nation's larger social and political turbulence.

Noah Webster (1758–1843), a self-promoting lawyer and lexicographer, created the tools for the schools' post-independence task of "Americanization"—one of the few purposes on which succeeding generations of liberals and conservatives would agree. The American language, as presented in Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller* (1783), his *Reader* (1785), and his

American Dictionary of the English Language (1828)—was the banner under which “Americanization” marched. If Americans had yet no common heritage, they would have a common speech, just as every Englishman (as George Orwell later noted) was branded on the tongue at birth. In public schools across the continent, no matter how inadequate, Webster’s *Speller* gave Americans what historian Henry Steele Commager has called “shared baggage.”

“The One Best Way”

If the schools played a critical role when most of the U.S. population was of “Anglo” descent, the hopes invested in education increased as the ethnic balance began to shift. Indeed, more than anything else, immigration transformed America’s view of public schools. By the 1840s and ’50s, the steady trickle of foreigners into the United States had become a torrent—and, as the *Massachusetts Teacher* put it in 1850, a “cause of serious alarm to the most intelligent of our people.”* Even those elitists who had balked at educating poor, native-born Americans realized that something had to be done.

But the schools needed an overhaul. So far they had evolved here and there in a haphazard way. There were no “standards,” few teachers were seriously committed to their profession, and public spending lagged. A new breed of educators—men like Horace Mann (1796–1859)—rose to lead the way to a new sense of professionalism.

Born in Franklin, Massachusetts, the son of a farmer, Mann had a harsh upbringing and little formal schooling. But he was a bright youth, and, with the help of a tutor, was accepted at Brown University. Later, he became a lawyer and entered Massachusetts politics. Following a distinguished career in the state legislature, he was named in 1837 the first secretary of Massachusetts’ new board of education—the first state board of education in the United States. Two years later, he founded America’s first state teachers college in Lexington.

As secretary of the board of education, Mann had little statutory authority. But he used his position as a pulpit. He organized conventions of teachers and the public across the state to educate them about education. He founded the *Common School Journal* and every year published an annual report—essentially a statement of his educational philosophy—that was widely cir-

* Some 370,000 immigrants entered the United States in 1850, most of them Irish (164,000), German (79,000), or English (51,000), but including 5 Poles, 4 Indians, and 3 Chinese.

culated around the country. At his urging, the Massachusetts legislature raised teacher salaries by 62 percent, built 50 high schools, spent \$2 million on repairs to existing schools, and established a mandatory six-month school year.

Not to be outdone, other state legislatures set up boards of education and began in earnest to reform their educational systems—along Mann's lines.

Mann realized that the growing diversity of the American people, with all their ethnic differences, might shatter the young nation's precarious sense of unity. Only a new institution could create a sense of community and joint purpose: the "common school." As Mann used the term, it was a school not merely for the poor or the common people—which is how public schools were widely perceived at the time—but for *all* the people. "Education," he wrote, "beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the condition of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery." In Horace Mann's hopes, among others, one finds the egalitarian antecedents of the War on Poverty and the Great Society programs of the mid-1960s.

Americans were quicker to acknowledge a public responsibility for education than they were to set up a comprehensive system. To be sure, the reforms of Mann and others had strengthened and expanded the public schools. Teachers were becoming increasingly "professionalized." Yet in 1870, barely half of those Americans aged 5–17 were in public schools, and there were only 200 public high schools.

As American cities began to grow, nourished by expanding industrialization and by a second, larger wave of immigration during the last half of the 19th century, urban public school systems inevitably grew too. Then, as later, the new schools meant jobs, contracts, patronage. Partly because the schools

There were 7 farmers, 3 of whom drank rum and whisky, and became miserable; the rest drank water, and were healthy and happy. How many drank water?



From Emerson's The North American Arithmetic, Part First.

were highly decentralized, public education became the plaything of ward politicians and bosses. The inauguration of a new mayor often meant the departure of the school superintendent—and the teachers.

Admittedly, the big city bosses were often the only people interested in responding to the immigrants' everyday social and economic needs. Yet the situation was ripe for reform, and urban school superintendents, with much to gain, led the way, moving toward uniformity, and, above all, toward city-wide control, with a vengeance. Their slogan came to be "the one best way," the professionally approved solution, the "scientific" approach to the schools. John Philbrick, Boston's superintendent from 1856 to 1878, put it bluntly: "The best is the best everywhere. If America devised the best school desk, it must go to the ends of the civilized world."*

Punctuality, Regularity, Silence

Since the efficiency of the country's new factories seemed to provide the best and most economically designed product, why not apply the same industrial principles to the school? A statement on "The Theory of Education in the United States," signed by leading public schoolmen in 1874, and written by William Harris, St. Louis superintendent of schools and later a U.S. Commissioner of Education, placed major stress on "(1) punctuality, (2) regularity, (3) attention, and (4) silence, as habits that are necessary in an industrial and commercial civilization." At least the schools ran on time.

Also pressing for greater effectiveness were captains of industry and university giants like Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard for 40 years, and Columbia's Nicholas Murray Butler (who ran his university with despotic efficiency). They enlisted the well-to-do in the cause. Of the 104 members of the "Committee of One Hundred"—the citizen-activists for school centralization in New York City—92 were listed in the *Social Register*.

*As Philbrick's remarks suggest, American education since the mid-19th century has been marked by strong homogenizing influences, even as its diversity has endured. Among these influences are the schools of education—particularly Columbia University's Teachers College (founded in 1887) and, to a lesser extent, the University of Chicago's Laboratory School (1896). The number of these institutions, heavily oriented toward classroom techniques and "philosophy," has grown. Textbook publishers, who sell their wares nationally, are another force and have been since the days of McGuffey's *Reader*. And then there are the powerful teachers' unions, primarily the National Education Association (founded in 1857) and the smaller American Federation of Teachers (1916). In the 1950s, the federal government entered the picture with major special-purpose subsidies to the schools under the National Defense Education Act (1958) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965).

VERBS.



Active. Passive. Neuter.

From *The Little Grammarian*, published in 1819.

Far from radical, this new elite was nevertheless committed to the expansion of public education. Eliot in particular called for more schools, while insisting on “common and higher standards.” With Eliot as chairman, the National Education Association (NEA) in 1892 established a committee to map out the subjects to be studied as well as “the best method of testing” the results—an American preoccupation that has yet to subside. In the view of the Eliot committee, the high school curriculum should consist of English, foreign languages, natural history, physical science, geography, history, civil government, and political economy, as well as Latin, Greek, and mathematics. The committee concluded that every subject should be taught in the same fashion to all students.

The Classroom as Society

In time, Eliot was appalled by the excesses of the reforms he had helped to initiate. When one school administrator told him that there was no need to treat students as individuals, urging instead that pupils “move together like soldiers on parade,” he was shaken. So were many others, and none more so than the leader of the “Progressive” counter-movement, John Dewey (1859–1952).

Dewey, a philosopher and psychologist, was the son of a Vermont grocer. He spent most of his teaching career—47 years—at Columbia University, and his interests gradually broadened to include social and educational issues.

Dewey’s views on education, expressed in such books as *The School and Society* (1899) and *The Child and the Curriculum*

(1902), were to revolutionize pedagogical tinkering around the world. He rejected the idea of the classroom as simply a training ground for the skilled manpower demanded by the Industrial Age. He wanted school to be far more than it had ever been—"a genuine form of active community life," an "embryonic society." Not unlike Benjamin Franklin, who had repeatedly urged learning to be "delightful," Dewey hoped schools might create a new society, "more worthy, lovely, harmonious." Instead of recitation and drill, he wanted children to learn through experience and exploration, "by doing."

Anything Goes

Seen against the rigidity of those who had "reformed" the system by regimenting it, Dewey was indeed a liberator. But, like Eliot, Dewey found it impossible to protect his ideas from his disciples. An intensely shy man for much of his life, he often expressed himself ambiguously. (For example, he once called himself a "Socialist," but meant only that he was concerned about social questions.) It should not be surprising that some of his notions were misunderstood. Yet Dewey was shocked to hear a Los Angeles school superintendent say in 1913: "The principal business of the child is to play and to grow—not to read, write, spell, and cipher."

Indeed, most of those who thought they were following in the master's footsteps overlooked Dewey's basic assumption that scholarship and order were the bedrock from which educational liberation must proceed. In 1918, the NEA's "Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education" stressed "social efficiency" above intellectual rigor. History, which Dewey had considered crucial, was replaced by "social studies," defined as an investigation of the "social efforts to improve mankind"; in a first draft of the document, the "three Rs" were not mentioned at all. Mathematics and foreign languages were all but discarded.

To be fair to the Progressives, who seemed hell-bent on abandoning all academic standards, their influence coincided with an enormous expansion of the high schools (51 percent of those aged 14–17 were attending high school in 1930 versus 11 percent in 1900).^{*} In the absence of enough able teachers, the easiest way to serve the many seemed to be to demand little. It

^{*}Throughout the 19th century, secondary education was primarily a private affair, designed for students planning to attend university. Thus, in 1900, 75 percent of all high school graduates went on to college, compared with 25 percent in the early 1950s, when high school was universal. The figure today is 45 percent, reflecting the enormous expansion of higher education.

may well be that a populist, expansive, open-door approach to education—essential to the maintenance of a fluid society—inevitably leads to periods when quality is temporarily subordinated to quantity.

The reaction to the post-Dewey Progressives came after World War II. On one front, suspicious politicians attacked as subversive the Progressives' challenge to teachers to "dare" to change society. (Had not Dewey called himself a Socialist?) On a second front, college professors and university administrators charged that the Progressive "anything goes" approach to education had sapped public schools of intellectual stamina. As Paul Woodring wrote in *Let's Talk Sense About Our Schools* (1953), "The best thing about contemporary education is that a great many teachers ignore the gobbledygook and pedagogues and go right ahead and do a sensible job of teaching." With a powerful psychological boost from the Soviet launching of Sputnik I in 1957, a new movement picked up strength, calling for a return to academic rigor without any retreat from the idea of a "common school."

Organizers Versus Romantics

Again, a Harvard president took the lead. James Bryant Conant, a devoted advocate of universal public education, rallied support for his reform plan, outlined in *The American High School Today* (1959). The time had come for a return to the "hard" subjects—English, history, science, mathematics, foreign languages—which, Conant insisted, should be studied at least by the upper 20 percent of the academically talented. A firm believer in the "comprehensive" high school, he urged intellectual and vocational training to live side by side under the same roof. (In many European countries, children are sorted out and sent to different schools after age 11.)

From coast to coast, Conant addressed school boards, businessmen, community leaders, concerned citizens, conventions of teachers and school administrators. With incredible stamina, he endured the lukewarm chicken dinners and watery fruit cocktails—to no other end than to save American public education from the academic decline that he felt was eroding it from within.

Conant's was not to be the last battle of the education wars. As early as 1959, he warned that the growing number of badly educated, out-of-school black youths in the urban ghettos was "social dynamite." For that there would be crash programs and radical critiques aplenty in the 1960s—a period of reformist zeal

that, in the nature of things, was destined to be followed by another period of consolidation.

Thus, over the years, the progress of American education has zigzagged between two opposites, led by two contending groups that one might call the Organizers and the Romantics. The Romantics—people like Mann and Dewey—have dreamed the dreams, welcomed the future. The Organizers—the Eliots and Conants—are perhaps a little more down to earth, skeptical of visionaries, politically astute, pragmatists, not averse to reform but ever on the lookout for the “administrative solution.”

It is easy to ridicule the excesses of both groups, or to condemn the periodic swings between both extremes as an irrational state of affairs. But, as we see it, the long-term historical effect seems quite different: The pattern is not so much one of mutual nullification as one of balance. Whenever one or the other faction gains too much power, the natural American mistrust of any one “orthodoxy” tends to deny its proponents’ appeal for further support.

Amid all the hubbub, the American public school has chalked up some remarkable achievements. According to a 19-nation study conducted in 1973 by Sweden’s Institute for the International Evaluation of Educational Achievement, the “academic elite” (the top 9 percent) in America’s high schools contains the largest percentage of children from lower-income homes (14 percent) of any of the nations surveyed. (The figure in West Germany, for example, is 1 percent.) Three-quarters of all those who start high school in the United States finish it—not Utopia, but a better record than any other Western nation can boast. There are still serious problems and gross inequalities and, to put it mildly, room for intellectual improvement. But U.S. public schools remain the gateway to opportunity that they were meant to be.