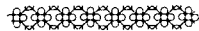


## The Public Schools

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-

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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

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*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-

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\* 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

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**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.*

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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*.

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\*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).

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**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*



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(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).<sup>\*</sup> In the absence of enough able teachers, the easiest way to serve the many seemed to be to demand little. It

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<sup>\*</sup>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.

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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

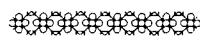
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that, in the nature of things, was destined to be followed by another period of consolidation.

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.



## A LOSS OF NERVE

*by Diane Divoky*

As the 1970s draw to a close, everyone has something to say about "the schools." Congressmen variously fret about why Johnny can't read, or why he must be bused 10 miles to school to achieve "racial balance," or why he is subjected to tests clearly biased in favor of those who can write "Standard English."

From the Washington bureaucracies and the tax-exempt education lobbies come studies documenting the vandalism, drug abuse, and violence in the schools, the impact of sharply falling enrollments, the need for ever more "funding." Parents are paying more in taxes to support their local schools; to hear them talk, they are getting less and less in return for their money. Educators counter with reports of a rising incidence of teacher "burn-out," the classroom equivalent of shell-shock; beset by administrative busywork, indiscipline, and a perceptible lack of esprit in the classroom, thousands of teachers are fleeing to greener pastures.

Dissatisfaction exists in many quarters. Like civilian employers, the armed services are now aware of a "new illiteracy"; this year, the Pentagon has been forced to launch remedial reading programs for thousands of its \$419-a-month recruits, many of whom hold public high school diplomas, just to make sure they can understand basic safety manuals. Virtually every major college, from Yale to Stanford, has remedial classes in mathematics and English.

Reflected in bleak TV documentaries, in *Time* cover stories, in *Redbook* essays, is the gnawing popular suspicion that, as educator and author Paul Copperman told a congressional committee earlier this year, "for the first time in our history, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach those of their parents."

This suspicion is not confined to journalists, reactionaries, or the relatively well-to-do. Even in the nation's less affluent precincts, private schools are doing a brisk business. In Washington, D.C., it is calculated that the average child's test scores drop further below the national median with every year he

spends in District schools; black and white parents of even modest means seek out Catholic and independent institutions. In Oakland, California, the parents of 40 percent of all schoolchildren, many of them low-income blacks, are scrimping to educate their offspring outside the municipal system. In all of California, once the nation's pace-setter in public education, the private schools' enrollment share has doubled in three years, to 12 percent.

On a more general level, the press, politicians, parents, and school administrators have revived an old American debate over "standards." There is plenty of evidence that, despite increased outlays for education, the *measurable* results, at least, are unsatisfactory. In the decade ending last year, average scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) taken by high school seniors, dropped 37 points on the verbal portion of the test, 24 points on the mathematics segment. A 1976 test administered to all Philadelphia high school seniors revealed that 13.5 percent of them could not fill out a job application; more than 8 percent did not know the meaning of "credit," "deposit," or "beware." And according to a 1979 report prepared for Senator George McGovern (D-S.D.), "functional illiteracy" among 17-year-olds may be as high as 13 percent for whites, 42 percent for blacks, and 56 percent for Hispanics.

### **Back to Basics?**

Admittedly, trying to define "functional illiteracy," as Theodore Roosevelt said in another context, is like "trying to nail currant jelly to the wall." Yet something is clearly amiss when even school children complain that the schools are too soft. According to a 1978 Gallup Poll, 57.5 percent of elementary-school students and 44 percent of those in high school felt that school and homework "weren't demanding enough."\*

The politician's impulse, under pressure, to "do something" may lead him into a briar patch. In 40 states, legislators have sought to prescribe complicated new recipes for "minimum competency" and "proficiency," attempting to satisfy both egalitarians and meritocrats. Almost invariably, they have ended up devising standards that really change nothing. When

\*For a dissenting view, see "No Homework: A Student's Right!" by Jerry F. Kotnour, in *Education Digest*, May 1978. Kotnour, learning coordinator at Orchard Ridge Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin, reports that many teachers have concluded that homework "not only deprived students of their 'free time' but added a great deal of unnecessary work for themselves. And, by not giving homework, teachers have found that student attitudes toward school work improve."

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most of a school district's children fail one set of competency tests, as they did recently in Baltimore, the solution is to name a new commission to replace it with another, more palatable test. If that doesn't happen, the courts may step in. Thus, Florida's minimum competency test was voided last July by a federal judge, who found the exam "valid and reliable" but also "racially biased."

In reaction to middle-class parents' complaints about a lack of rigor, school bureaucrats have here and there created "back-to-basics" programs or special "fundamental schools," both harking back to a simple, golden era (which never was). The back-to-basics "movement," which originated in the small town of Lagunitas, California, in 1972 and is promoted by numerous groups throughout the country, claims to have inspired fundamental schools in 21 states. "Basics" does not mean a return to a 19th-century classical education—there is no sudden resurgence of interest in logic, Latin, or versification—but instead heavy doses of discipline, patriotism, and the "three Rs." In essence, the basics movement springs from a nostalgic mood that periodically sweeps the nation; it incorporates no substantive educational philosophy.

### **Tracing Failure to Success**

Some critics of the basics approach, despairing of broader reform, have joined specialized lobbies—the Council for Exceptional Children, the Association for the Gifted—and so champion the neglected subgroup of their choice. Partly as a result, children are now screened and sorted by educators into categories for special attention under ever more exotic labels: "pre-delinquent," "pseudo-hyperkinetic," "dysgraphic," "agnosic."

Other educators care less about particular kinds of students than about particular kinds of "useful" or "relevant" courses. The curriculum groans under their demands: We have career education, sex education, health education, nutrition education, death education, leisure education, and courses in wilderness survival and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. All of them are

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competing for a place on the classroom menu. And the competition can be fierce. Howard D. Mehlinger, a professor at Indiana University, has described one (unidentified) school where the “teachers’ guide” to English and social studies begins:

In the 10th grade, study is concentrated on the growth of democracy, and especially on the form of government which developed. Such a study should be brief and to the point in order to allow time for the unit on driver education.

During the ups-and-downs of the last 20 years, school administrators have proved themselves to be adaptable, flexible, *au courant*, concerned. Implacable in their open-mindedness, willing to try all solutions to any problem, they now seem to puzzle over why they appear to have accomplished less as they have sought to do more and more.

A “crisis in the schools” is not a new phenomenon. Articles in education journals routinely begin with italicized citations bemoaning declining standards, lax discipline, and rotting skills. “Sound like 1979?” the author asks. “In fact, it’s from a study conducted in 1949.” Or 1929. Or 1900. Sometimes the problems have been overcome; sometimes they have not. Sometimes the solutions have created problems of their own. Some of today’s problems may stem from a “victory” two decades ago.

During the 1950s, when the “rising tide” of postwar Baby-Boom kids started entering school at the rate of 4 million a year, twice the wartime rate, split classroom sessions and crowded buildings became a fact of life. TV commentator Edward R. Murrow lamented that the United States had become a “have-not” nation (“We have not enough teachers. . . . We have not 340,000 classrooms . . .”). The problem was clear, the solution obvious.

We passed the bond issues, poured the foundations, put up the walls, pump-primed the technique-minded teachers colleges—in short, made the system bigger fast. The number of teachers grew from less than 1 million in 1950 to 2.3 million in 1970, as America’s per-pupil spending on schools doubled. In the midst of expansion, when the Russians boosted Sputnik I into orbit in 1957, many Americans echoed *U.S. News & World Report* (“What Went Wrong in U.S. Schools?”) and were eager to play catch-up in quality as well as quantity. The brain race of that era—which essentially meant teaching science, math, and foreign languages faster and better to more bright boys (there was no call for *women* engineers)—seemed just another expression of

### THE AMERICAN TEACHER: A PROFILE

There are 2.2 million teachers in U.S. public schools, half of them in small towns or rural areas, the other half divided about equally between suburb and city. Teacher salaries vary by region. While the average U.S. teacher earned \$14,244 in 1978 (less than the average policeman or fireman), the average salary in Mississippi was \$11,150, and teachers in New York City received \$18,600. (The differential reflects the higher formal credentials of New York teachers as well as their higher costs of living.)

Americans continue to rate teachers highly in public opinion polls—and in the voting booth: Of the 55,000 teachers who ran for local office last year, 80 percent were elected. State and local education officials, however, are burdened by incompetent teachers who occasionally attract considerable publicity—and are almost impossible to fire. (Of the 239 teachers New York State sought to dismiss in 1977–78, only 18 actually lost their jobs.) Some school districts, notably Dallas, are now giving standardized tests to candidates for teaching positions to weed out the incompetent *before* contracts are signed.

The loss of experienced teachers may be more serious than the presence of bad ones. Teachers' median age and number of "years in teaching" are declining, indicating a higher dropout rate. Classroom violence, red tape, and lack of support from administrators take their toll, especially in big city schools. When the National Education Association asked its members in 1976 if they would choose teaching as a career if they could do it all over again, only 37 percent said they "certainly would," down from 52 percent a decade earlier.

America's love of "bigger and better."\* In 1958, when Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, the U.S. Office of Education budget doubled. For the first time, the federal government was in the school business in a big way.

The speedy, effective response to both the Baby Boom and Sputnik left a lasting psychological impression on teachers and policymakers alike. By the early 1960s, confidence in the schools to accomplish any mission that society might assign it—be it helping win the Cold War or ending racial strife—was abnormally high. There was a bullish sense that if education could

\* Under the impact of Sputnik, the proportion of college-bound high-school students studying a modern foreign language rose from 20 percent (1957) to 24 percent (1965). But the all-time high—36 percent—was reached in 1915. A precise figure for 1978 is not available, but by all accounts it will not exceed 15 percent. Interestingly, it now appears that Russia's Sputnik "triumph" was largely illusory; Soviet technology lagged far behind that of the United States. See Leonid Vladimirov, *The Russian Space Bluff*, London: Stacey, 1971.



THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

	1961	1971	1976		1961	1971	1976
<b>Highest degree held</b>				<b>Median age (years)</b>			
<hr/>				<hr/>			
Percent of teachers holding:				All teachers			
Less than B.A.	14.6	2.9	0.9	40.9	35	33	
B.A.	61.9	69.6	61.6	<b>Race</b>			
M.A. or 6 yrs.	23.1	27.1	37.1	<hr/>			
Ph.D.	0.4	0.4	0.4	Percent of all teachers who are:			
<hr/>				Black			
Time per week spent on all duties (in hours)				White			
All teachers	47	47	46	—	8.1	8.0	
Elementary	49	46	44	<hr/>			
Secondary	46	48	48	Other			
<hr/>				—			
Median years of experience				3.6			
<hr/>				1.2			
All teachers (years)	11.0	8	8	<b>Sex and marital status</b>			
<hr/>				<hr/>			
First-year teachers				Men (%)			
% of all teachers	8.0	9.1	5.5	31.3	34.3	32.9	
<hr/>				Single			
				5.4			
				5.2			
				6.5			
				25.2			
				27.9			
				25.1			
				68.7			
				65.7			
				67.0			
				16.9			
				14.2			
				13.6			
				42.8			
				44.0			
				46.1			

Source: National Education Association, Status of the American Public School Teachers, 1975-76, 1977.

erase our perceived lag in science, it could erase our social ills as well. Never mind that serious books, such as Evan Hunter's harrowing *Blackboard Jungle* (1954), had already disputed that notion. When the civil rights movement appeared on the national scene, few educators doubted that providing equal opportunity and social uplift for blacks, Hispanics, and the poor was one of *their* responsibilities. And politicians fell over themselves to endorse that belief. "The answer for all our national problems," said President Lyndon Johnson, "comes to a single word. That word is education."

Education had always been a central concern in the United States, a path to economic opportunity for the poor, the crucible of assimilation for the vast waves of immigrants arriving in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But during the 1960s, the claims for education became excessive. If the federal government

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would only put up the money—as indeed it did during 1965–69, the peak years of Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society”—the schools would finish the job: integrate sparring social groups, compensate for past inequalities, boost the have-nots to a better life. “Upward Bound,” “Higher Horizons,” “Headstart,” and all the other pioneer “compensatory” education programs of the mid-1960s, with their upbeat names and their common assumption that a couple of years of educational tinkering and a couple of billion dollars from Washington would turn disadvantaged youngsters into middle-class achievers, seem incredibly naive in retrospect. But what must be remembered is how deeply educators believed—and were encouraged to believe—that they could cope with any social challenge rapidly and efficiently.

The first tremors of doubt—doubt that “more of the same” was enough—could be felt just as the 89th Congress set the Great Society programs into place, once again doubling the federal education budget. The assault came first from a group of writers—Paul Goodman (*Growing Up Absurd*), Edgar Z. Friedenberg (*Coming of Age in America*), John Holt (*How Children Fail*), Jonathan Kozol (*Death at an Early Age*)—most of them more or less radical teachers and social critics. As the United States drifted into the Vietnam War, as conditions for many blacks in the inner city failed to improve, these “New Romantics” called America’s values into question—and especially the role of the schools in forming and perpetuating those values. They did not doubt that the schools could change society; but they insisted that the schools must be changed first.

These writers and others attacked the schools as deadening institutions that taught a mindless subservience to authority, encouraged competition that pitted child against child, and stuffed students full of useless facts instead of nurturing their abilities to think and, above all, feel. “Children are subject peoples,” wrote John Holt in *How Children Fail* (1964), adding:

School for them is a kind of jail. . . . We encourage children to act stupidly, not only by scaring and confusing them, but by boring them, by filling up their days with dull, repetitive tasks that make little or no claim on their attention or demands on their intelligence. Our hearts leap for joy at the sight of a roomful of children all slogging away at some imposed task. . . .

Teachers were stung by such criticism and, perhaps, attracted by the Rousseauian simplicity of the proposed remedies. If rigid instruction was a barrier to curiosity, then loosen the

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reins. Before long, the rhetoric, if not the reality, of open classrooms, free schools (with no fixed curriculum), “self-paced” instruction, and “affective” education was visited on the schools—first in the suburbs, where people were more trendy and prosperity reigned; then in the cities, nourished with “seed money” from such philanthropic foundations as Ford and Carnegie. As time went on, superintendents of schools in rural Indiana or North Dakota boasted of their innovations and alternatives, even gave tours of the rooms where pillows and rugs and hamster cages had replaced the rigid rows of maple desks.

### Day Care Extended

Administrators may have known that many of the changes were merely cosmetic, but many teachers took the complaints to heart and tried earnestly to keep abreast of the (latest) new wave. As sociologist Christopher Jencks has pointed out in *Working Papers* (July–August 1978), teachers, in their role as colonial administrators, have always made accommodations to keep the natives happy, have used “bread and circuses” to ease tensions. But in the past, such concessions were generally coupled with the inner conviction that there were nevertheless bodies of knowledge—history, Latin, math, English—worth teaching and worth learning, whether or not a teacher had any *real* enthusiasm for the subject he taught. Amid the turbulence of the late 1960s, Jencks contends, all that changed:

There seemed to be so many competing interpretations of reality that it was hard to defend one to the exclusion of others. This led not only students but many teachers into the kind of spongy cultural relativism that treats all ideas as equally defensible. But if all ideas are equally defensible, none is worth bothering with.

For the many teachers who had long taught a certain set of novels or social studies “units” only because that was what the local school board decreed—teachers who did not in fact believe that Shakespeare or the U.S. Constitution could be exciting or relevant—the challenges of the 1960s were particularly unnerving. When students asked for “relevance” or “honesty” or “excitement,” educators found it easier to throw out the staples in favor of what might amuse or appease, rather than defend the traditional curriculum. Milton and Wordsworth were often replaced by the lyrics of Bob Dylan, essay writing by film criticism, history by courses with names like “Social Concerns

### THE "TOP TEN" SCHOOLS— IN NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIPS

Schools	Location	Enrollment	Student/ Teacher Ratio	1978 Semi- Finalists
Phillips Exeter*	Exeter, N.H.	965	8:1	53
Stuyvesant	New York, N.Y.	2,762	N.A.	53
Bronx Science	New York, N.Y.	3,320	22:1	36
Evanston Township	Evanston, Ill.	4,200	14:1	34
R. J. Reynolds	Winston-Salem, N.C.	1,500	22:1	34
Walt Whitman	Bethesda, Md.	1,950	30:1	31
Ben Franklin	New Orleans, La.	698	24:1	30
Scarsdale	Scarsdale, N.Y.	1,709	14.4:1	29
Phillips Academy*	Andover, Mass.	1,166	14:1	27
Shaker Heights	Shaker Hts., Ohio	1,677	15:1	26

\*Private School

Source: National Merit Scholarship Corporation and staff interviews.

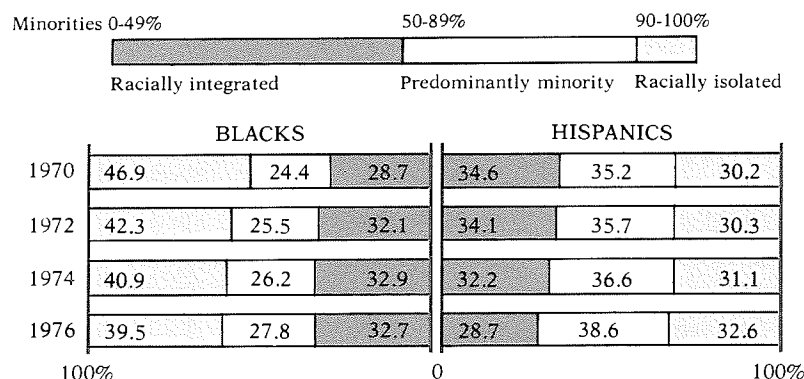
What makes a good school good? The 10 high schools with the most semifinalists in the 1978 National Merit Scholarship test—a nationwide exam given to high-school juniors—differ greatly in size, ethnic composition, and median SAT scores.

But the similarities are even more striking. All assign "heavy" amounts of homework, and all have little faculty turnover and low student-teacher ratios. All kept their basic curricula more or less intact during the 1960s. Half the schools choose their students by means of tough exams and/or admissions procedures. The other half are selective by accident: They are located in prosperous suburbs where many parents are college graduates and most care deeply about their children's education. "Our community regards success as an ordinary activity," explains C. A. Zimmerman, the principal of Shaker Heights High School.

At each of the top 10, students and teachers share a distinctive *esprit*. "Traditionally, R. J. Reynolds has been a super high school," says its principal, Robert D. Deaton. Money can't buy that feeling. A recent study—*Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children*, by Michael Rutter et al. (Harvard, 1979)—suggests that the "spirit" of a school, fostered by a strong principal and strong teachers, can make the difference between success and failure, even in slum areas.

Does Exeter's "timeless vision" (as its catalog puts it) account for its No. 1 ranking? An admissions dean at rival Andover thought not. Students taking the National Merit Test, he sniffed, compete only against other students in their state, and New Hampshire has a notoriously poor public school system.

**CHANGING PATTERN OF INTEGRATION IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS**



Source: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office for Civil Rights.

*Hispanic students are increasingly attending "racially isolated" schools (above); the situation for blacks is slowly improving, except in the Northeast. Parents' worries a decade ago over poor facilities and teachers have given way to different concerns (below).*

**SCHOOL PROBLEMS MOST CITED BY PARENTS**

("What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools in this community must deal?")

	Public school parents		Parochial school parents		No children in school		National total	
	1979	1969	1979	1969	1979	1969	1979	1969
Discipline	26%	24%	32%	39%	24%	27%	24%	26%
Drugs	14	—	7	—	13	—	13	—
Finances	12	15	4	7	12	15	12	14
Poor curriculum	11	5	17	9	10	3	11	4
Poor teachers	12	20	12	24	9	14	10	17
Integration	7	12	15	8	9	15	9	13
Lack of facilities	2	27	—	26	2	17	2	22

Source: *The Gallup Polls of Attitudes Toward Education, 1969-1973*; "Tenth Annual Gallup Poll of Attitudes Toward Education," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1978 and 1979

**U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 1879-1979: A HISTORICAL SUMMARY**

	1879/80	1929/30	1939/40	1959/60	1969/70	1977/78
Total public school enrollment (1,000s)*	9,867	25,678	25,434	36,087	45,619	43,731
Nursery, K-8 (1,000s)	9,757	21,279	18,833	27,602	32,597	24,810
Percent of population aged 5-17 in public schools	65.5	81.7	84.4	82.2	86.9	89.2
Total nonpublic school enrollment (1,000s)*	N.A.	2,651	2,611	5,675	5,700	5,025
Total Catholic school enrollment (1,000s)*	N.A.	2,464	2,396	5,253	4,658	3,289
Public high school graduates (1,000s)*	N.A.	592	1,143	1,627	2,589	2,837
Percent of all 17-year olds graduated from all high schools	2.5	29.0	50.8	65.1	75.7	75.1
Pupils per teacher† in public schools*	34.4	30.5	29.1	26.0	21.4	18.7
Average length of school term (days)	130.3	172.7	175.0	178.0	178.9	N.A.

\* elementary and secondary day schools

† includes librarians and other nonsupervisory personnel

Source: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, National Center for Education Statistics.

*The average pupil-teacher ratio in public schools has declined by almost one-half over the last century. The school year has grown by two months. The proportion of students graduating from high school crested at 75.7 percent in 1969. As the data make clear, demographic declines are nothing new; the birth rate dropped sharply during the 1930s' Great Depression, with a predictable effect on enrollments.*

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for Today." If one didn't really know what was important to learn, then it didn't matter what one taught.

Besides, a glossy, packaged kit called "Focus on Self-Development" made the hour between 10:00 A.M. and 11:00 A.M. go faster for teacher and pupils than grammar or spelling ever had. In wealthier school districts, technology provided new toys: computers, "audio-visual" machines, closed-circuit TV. The school library became a "multi-media resource center."

By the early 1970s, unquestioning acceptance of the old curriculum had given way to mindless New Approaches under which often the only criterion was what might entertain both student and teacher. In the process, whatever academic rigor and discipline the schools had been held to in the past faded. To avoid complaints, students were automatically promoted from one grade to the next, ready or not. The longer-term effects were somebody else's worry. Many schools' purposes were, in fact, no longer so much educational as custodial—a kind of extended day care system, even in middle-class suburbs.

The kids were the first to smell the difference, to sense that the game had changed. At education conferences, perceptive teachers began to talk about the "faintly hostile boredom" they were encountering in the classroom—the new, easy defiance and facile cynicism of those who would once have been enthusiastic, model students. What the teachers seldom understood was that these new attitudes were a direct response to the shakiness at the center, among the teachers and administrators.

The loss of nerve at the front of the classroom, and in the depths of the educational bureaucracy, got few headlines until the mid-1970s when it was evidenced in lower student SAT scores, and even in a few (unsuccessful) lawsuits brought on behalf of children against their schools for "educational malpractice." By then, the schools were beleaguered on all fronts.

First, bit by bit, researchers began to confirm what some already suspected: The Great Society school programs designed to remedy the effects of poverty were not working, at least not at the fast clip at which Americans had come to believe they could solve their problems. For example, it turned out that the significant gains achieved with preschool children in Headstart, the darling of the compensatory movement, were washed out by second or third grade.\*

A second blow came when faith in integration, as both an

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\*The most comprehensive survey of the plusses and minuses of compensatory education programs is the \$15 million *National Institute of Education Compensatory Education Study* (1978), available from the National Institute of Education.

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educational and social tool, lost ground. Putting white and black children together in the same classroom—hailed in the 1966 “Coleman Report” as having an almost magically positive educational effect on minority children, as well as social benefits for whites—proved to be costly, complicated, and, at any rate, no panacea for educational problems. Sociologist James Coleman himself recanted last year: “What once appeared to be fact,” he conceded, “is now known to be fiction.” With the decline of many liberals’ high hopes for integration has come a dimming of the time-honored ideal of the “common school,” that place where children of *all* backgrounds could come together to earn their place in American society.

Meanwhile, the numbers began to diminish. Educators employ a variety of wooden euphemisms—“retrenchment,” “decline”—to refer to a trend that began in 1971 with the abrupt loss of 500,000 children from U.S. schools. With the end of America’s Baby Boom, the school-age population began to shrink fast. At first, administrators viewed the situation as a simple problem that a few adjustments—such as reducing the number of prospective teachers in the pipeline—would fix. Some optimists predicted more money for fewer children. Others saw an eventual decrease in the tax burden.

### **Burdens and Blessings**

Of course, with the rise in average teacher salaries (from \$8,840 in 1969 to \$14,244 last year) and an inflation rate that halves the value of a dollar every decade, the end of the Baby Boom has meant none of these things. As total enrollment in public schools has dropped by 2 million since 1971—with the prospect of a net 4 million loss by 1985—the cost of running the schools has risen dramatically, some 56 percent between 1971 and 1976.\*

Retrenchment means laying off teachers, closing neighborhood schools, and creating bad blood among all parties. A “reduction in force” (or RIF, as teacher layoffs are called) has become an annual rite in many communities. Districts are gen-

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\*What happens to the school age population after 1985 is anyone’s guess, since children who will begin school that year have yet to be born. The Baby-Boom bulge passed through elementary school in 1971, through high school in 1975. A new upturn in the number of births began in 1976, as the huge postwar generation began bearing children of its own. It is impossible to predict the size of this demographic “echo.” Because the effects of birth-rate decline are compounded (or negated) by migration—families are moving away from the industrialized “frostbelt” states—it is likely that local enrollment patterns will vary widely for the remainder of this century. See “The Ups and Downs of Education” by Hazel H. Reinhardt, in *American Demographics*, June 1979.



### COMPETING WITH THE SCHOOLS

*Defenders of the public schools often cite "outside" factors as the source of current classroom difficulties—parental neglect, a general disrespect for authority, and, above all, television. In a recent speech, author-critic Clifton Fadiman suggested that TV is only part of a broader problem. Excerpts:*

The idea of education was never before opposed by a competitor. It was taken for granted because no alternative appeared on the horizon. But today there is a complete "alternate life" to which children submit themselves.

The alternate life is the consequence of the communication revolution. It is a highly competitive educational system, opposed in almost every essential way to traditional schooling. This system is the linked structure of which television is the heart and which numbers among its constituents film, radio, comic books, pop music, sports.

This alternate life *is* a life; it is not a diversion. It takes up as much of a child's time as school does, and it works on him with far greater effectiveness. It offers its own [contrasting] disciplines, its own curriculum, its own ethical and cultural values, its own style and language.

And this competition, [teachers] are not trained to meet. The alternate life has one special psychological effect [on children] which handicaps the teacher: a decline in the faculty of attention, and therefore a decline in the capacity to learn. Television's great attraction is that it does the work for you, skillfully and systematically. . . .

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erally required to send "pink slips" to teachers the spring before the ax will fall. Because districts can't see that far ahead, they often overestimate the losses and RIF too many teachers. Last spring, for example, San Francisco school officials RIF'd every teacher hired since 1968. Teachers are invariably hit harder than administrators. In Springfield, Illinois, during the last two years, the number of teachers in all public schools declined by 7.5 percent; the number of administrators actually grew by 6.7 percent.

School closings, a new phenomenon in American education, can be divisive and traumatic. Since 1970, more than 2,800 public schools have been closed nationwide, with the rate of shut-downs increasing. Maryland's Prince George's County has closed 25 schools; San Francisco has lost 32. Particularly for suburban systems, school closings seem to set off a kind of mid-life crisis. People in the cities have by now become accustomed,

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perhaps inured, to decay; their schools have been in turmoil for two decades and longer. The newer suburbs, however, were built in the 1950s expressly as places to raise and educate children; the realization that a community has aged, that its social mix has changed (more singles, more elderly people), and that it has, on average, 10 percent fewer of the young families with children for which it was designed, comes hard.

As a larger and larger proportion of the citizenry, by virtue of age or decisions not to have children, does not have offspring in school, the support that the schools can expect from the public grows more and more tenuous. The success of Proposition 13, the 1978 "ballot initiative" that cut California property taxes in half, was an angry vote against soaring levies and fat bureaucracy; but it was also a vote against expensive services, mainly schools, that primarily benefit young families and children. Somewhere down the line, there are embarrassing questions to ask about the values of a community that does not see children as its chief burden and blessing, about whether such a place is a community at all.

No one any longer expects our schools to revamp society, but selfishness is not the way to help the schools rise to meet our lowered expectations. We may need a collective largeness of spirit. For all their rhetorical excesses, the radical reformers of the mid-1960s had a point: Schools in America reinforce the values of the society at large. And the values of that larger society currently suffer from a certain confusion. By putting the entire burden of reform on the schools, as Frances Fitzgerald has pointed out in *America Revised*, we are saying in effect: "Let us be saved by the next generation." The real question today is whether the current generation of adults can save the next one.



## THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION

*by Joel S. Berke*

The main hearing room of the House Education and Labor Committee in Washington—Rayburn 2175—has a 30-foot ceiling, a two-tiered mahogany rostrum seating 36 committee members, and gold carpet covering its auditorium-sized floor. But it is not so big that proceedings there cannot be dominated by Representative Carl Perkins (D-Ky.), with his quiet, slow voice, his whispered asides to his experienced staff, and his wisdom in the ways of Congress. When the committee convenes to deliberate on the fate of such laws as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, school administrators, teachers, and politicians around the country pay close attention.

Title I, which is worth \$3 billion every year, is the largest single federal subsidy to education. The money is targeted at below-average pupils in high-poverty areas, and it is distributed among school districts via the states according to a complicated formula that purports to identify just where those disadvantaged children are. The formula is based primarily on “poverty counts” culled from 1970 Census data, and, as a result, “poor” Southern states get a relatively large piece of the Title I pie, while “rich” Northern and Midwestern states get less.

The formula is the key. Even modest tinkering with it can shift millions of dollars from one state to another. Thus, when the formula expired last year, Congressmen from the Midwest and North, regions slighted by the out-of-date figures, pinned their hopes on a new \$10 million report from the Census Bureau and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The study updated the 1970 census numbers and underlined the growing prosperity of the “New South” and Sunbelt regions, the declining economies of the industrial Northeast and Frostbelt. At the first opportunity, a group of committee members, led by Representative William Ford (D-Mich.), the second highest ranking member, successfully amended the formula in committee to utilize the updated figures. But Chairman Perkins, a firm friend of Title I, is an even firmer friend of his home district. With the

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quiet support of the Carter administration, the chairman, backed by a coalition of like-minded Congressmen, reversed the initial vote, and retained the 10-year-old 1970 census as the principal basis for allocating Title I funds, thus keeping the old beneficiaries, including Kentucky, happy.

Leavening good educational intentions with hard-ball politics is not peculiar to Capitol Hill. Public education is big business everywhere and the stakes are high—for rural building contractors bidding on a new central school, for city school boards hoping to avoid teacher strikes, for entire states facing court orders to change the ways they have customarily paid for education. Local, state, and federal governments spent \$86 billion last year on public elementary and secondary schools. Only the armed forces consume more tax dollars; yet, with 3.9 million full-time employees on their payrolls—teachers, janitors, librarians, guidance counselors, administrators, secretaries—the public schools top even the military in manpower.

#### Who Calls the Shots?

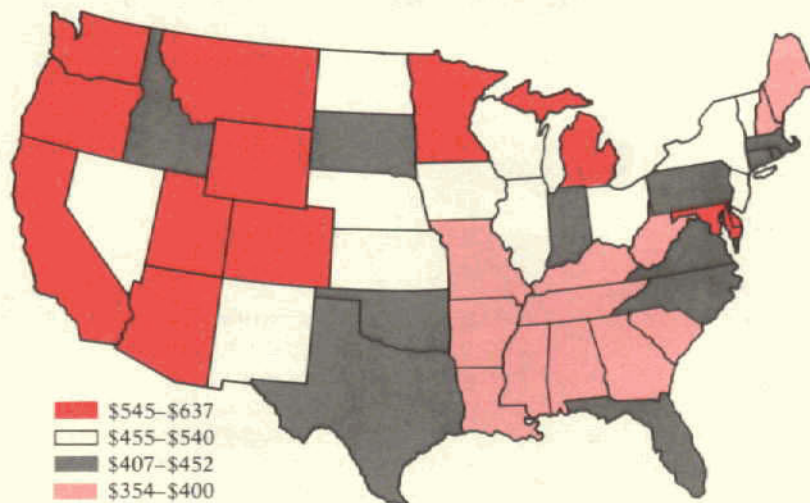
If public education is big, it is not monolithic. No single group in American society pays for it, benefits from it, or controls it. No one unit of government has complete responsibility for it. The buck, so to speak, doesn't stop anywhere. As Rufus Miles, a Princeton professor and a former assistant secretary of HEW, has put it: "Where you stand depends on where you sit."

If you are one of the 100,000 Americans sitting on local boards of education, you probably feel put upon by outsiders of every stripe: Washington bureaucrats, state legislators, unhappy teachers, aggrieved parents, the courts. School boards, though no longer as powerful as they were in the late 19th century, are generally still responsible for hiring and firing of personnel, for putting a budget together, and—to the extent that they can avoid violating a variety of state or federal mandates—

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## 48 STATES' PER CAPITA SPENDING ON EDUCATION, 1976-77



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

*Spending, per capita, on each state's public schools varies significantly (not shown: Alaska, \$1,072; Hawaii, \$534). On average, these outlays represent about 5.5 percent of all total personal income in each state.*

for setting the curriculum. The nation's 15,000 school boards and their jurisdictions come in all sizes. Chicago's 11-member board presides over the business of 500 schools, while South Dakota, until the late 1960s, had more school board members than teachers. (Hawaii is the only state that eschews local school boards and runs its entire educational system from a central office.)

Given the rate of turnover and the part-time nature of school-board membership, local school *administrators* usually turn out to be the powers behind the throne. School board meetings typically amount to approval of a set of proposals put together by the superintendent of schools and his professional staff. Moreover, by law, school boards exist entirely at the pleasure of the state.

Until recently, state education agencies were the lightweights of school politics, and with few exceptions simply comprised a confused assortment of "information-gathering" bureaus. Recently, however, state agencies have found them-

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selves in the thick of controversy: notably over busing, graduation requirements, and school finances. The states serve as conduits of federal aid. And, in a dozen states, a new breed of vigorous state school chief has taken the helm—people like Gregory Anrig in Massachusetts and Wilson Riles in California. Reflecting these developments, and the growth of federal aid programs, between 1964 and 1976 the total personnel of education agencies in all 50 states grew from 11,000 to 22,000. (One-third, of them, however, are paid from the U.S. Treasury.)

### Education Grab Bag

State education agencies do not have the field to themselves. Former U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest Boyer has observed that education is increasingly perceived as “too important to be left to the educators.” Under pressure from parents and various “public-interest” lobbies, state legislators are increasingly taking certain educational matters into their own hands, imposing high school graduation requirements and statewide competency tests. Since the mid-1970s, they have generally taken a “What are we getting for our money?” attitude toward the schools.

And then there are the federal and state courts—the most publicized entrants in the educational policy game. Contending with 100-year-old state constitutions, mountains of statistical evidence, and the often conflicting testimony of dozens of expert witnesses, judges have had to hand down rulings on everything from school finance to desegregation. They have, in effect, taken on the “hot” issues that legislators prefer to avoid. They are not universally applauded.

Generally speaking, the federal government steps into the public education scene with programs to enforce civil rights and improve the education of minorities or the underprivileged. Except for “Impact Aid”—which was primarily designed to compensate local districts for the presence of children whose parents live on federal property (and hence may not pay local property taxes)—federal education money is targeted at carefully defined groups and purposes: handicapped, bilingual, or migrant children, for example.\*

There are well over 100 aid programs administered by the

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\*Bilingual education is one of the fastest growing, and most controversial, federal programs. Launched by Congress in 1968 with a modest \$7.5 million, the effort to teach children in their “native” language instead of primarily or exclusively in English, now claims \$157 million from Washington alone; 20 states have set up their own bilingual programs. About 80 percent of the 320,000 children enrolled are of Hispanic origin.

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U.S. Office of Education, and these represent less than half of all federal funds for education. The Department of Agriculture runs the school lunch and breakfast programs (for 29 million children). "Headstart" is administered by the Office of Human Development, which is part of HEW but not of the Office of Education (which is also part of HEW). Schools on Indian reservations are run by the Department of Interior. This grab bag is mirrored in Congress, where 28 committees and subcommittees, ranging from the Senate Committee on Alcohol and Drug Abuse to the House Judiciary Committee, have "oversight" over various educational activities.

Not surprisingly, then, education politics in Washington involves quiet alliances among bureaucrats (who want to expand their programs), their client constituencies (who want to keep their congressional funding), and interested politicians (who want to do both). As in the politics of agriculture, defense, or welfare, such "iron triangles" are often impervious to the influence of Presidents, cabinet secretaries, and congressional leaders—as Jimmy Carter recently found out.

### **Serrano and Beyond**

Carter's campaign promise—winning him the support of the powerful teachers union, the National Education Association—was to bring all of the federal education programs together into a single, cabinet-level Department of Education. It was a noble scheme. Headstart, a program for poor children that the President had personally penciled into the proposed department, was the first to wriggle free after a well-organized campaign spearheaded by the Children's Defense Fund. The Fund argued that the program's autonomy was essential to its effectiveness. The school lunch program was the next to go. This time the campaign was led by the Senate Agriculture Committee, which indicated that it wanted the program left right where it was, thank you. By the time the dust had settled, the proposed Education Department looked just like the old Office of Education, which it was supposed to replace.

For an overall view of just how this complicated system of "governance" manages to function, it is best to look at a single issue that cuts across every level of education politics. One such issue is financing.

Currently, all levels of government help foot the U.S. education bill. On average, local governments shoulder about 44 percent of the burden, state governments 48 percent. The federal government covers the remaining 8 percent. Life does not oper-

## THE FINANCES OF THREE SCHOOL DISTRICTS, 1977-78:

	Macon County, Ala.	Oakland, Calif.	Lower Merion, Pa.	
Per capita income	\$2,775	\$5,491	\$10,411	
School enrollment	4,800	53,221	8,472	
<b>REVENUES (per pupil)</b>				
All local taxes	\$51	\$1,243	\$2,280	
State government	610	726	153	
<i>Total federal aid</i>	(270)	(200)	(31)	
Impact aid	30	18	0	For areas with numerous federal employees; Macon has a large VA hospital
Elementary and Secondary Education Act	113	91	18	Primarily aid for low-income families
School lunch/milk	114	76	13	
Other federal aid	13	15	0	Includes "Headstart"
Miscellaneous	71	182	186	Interest, sale of school lunches, fees
<b>Total (per pupil)</b>	<b>\$1,002</b>	<b>\$2,351</b>	<b>\$2,650</b>	

*Where a school's money comes from—and where it goes—is a matter of circumstance. Alabama's Macon County is a depressed rural area with no industry and little good farming. Industrial Oakland's system is steadily losing pupils to private schools; like Macon, it relies heavily on federal and state funds. Suburban Lower Merion, outside Philadelphia, foots most of*

ate on averages, however, and neither do the states. In New Hampshire, local communities pay 85 percent of their school costs; the state provides less than 10 percent. In Hawaii, the proportions are reversed. Similarly, the federal bounty is unevenly distributed under more than 100 programs, with Sunbelt states generally doing better than the Frostbelt states.\*

\*Mississippi, New Mexico, Louisiana, Hawaii, and Arkansas all count on the federal government for more than 15 percent of their education budgets; New Jersey, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, New York, and Nevada, less than 5 percent. Most federal aid to education (in 1979) falls under the following programs: Title I, \$3.078 billion; handicapped, \$977 million; school assistance to federally affected areas (Impact Aid), \$816 million; Vocational and Adult Education, \$774 million; Emergency School Aid Act (desegregation), \$332 million.



## FEDERAL, STATE, LOCAL CONTRIBUTIONS—AND OUTLAYS

EXPENSES (per pupil)	Macon County, Ala.	Oakland, Calif.	Lower Merion, Pa.	
Administration	\$71	\$137	\$83	Includes salaries, contractual services
Instruction	615	1,433	1,456	Salaries, textbooks, library
Attendance and health services	13	79	73	Includes salaries for nurses, social workers
Operation and maintenance	58	220	379	
Fixed charges	35	47	287	Pensions, insurance, rent
Pupil transportation	46	14	52	To and from school; also excursions
Construction	44	272	99	Oakland figure for 1977-78 abnormally high
Equipment (new)	15	18	117	
Miscellaneous	105	131	104	Debt interest, extra-curricular activities
<b>Total (per pupil)</b>	<b>\$1,002</b>	<b>\$2,351</b>	<b>\$2,650</b>	

Source: Bureau of the Census and National Center for Education Statistics, *Survey of Local Government Finances, Education*, F-33 (unpublished data).

*the bill for its schools, spending about 15 percent more than Oakland. Partly because Oakland's system is so large (91 schools), much money goes for administration. Lower Merion students score above the national average on standardized tests; Oakland students score far below.*

Despite such diversity, one basic trend is apparent: While the average federal share since 1967 has remained about constant at 8 percent, the average state share has grown by almost 8 percent, and the average local share has shrunk by the same amount.

Why? The primary reason is really one of equity. Ever since Elwood P. Cubberley's historic analysis, *School Funds and Their Apportionment* (1905), school administrators and politicians have known that heavy reliance on property taxes to pay for schools leads to gross disparities in school quality from one district to the next. When Cubberley looked at Connecticut's seven

poorest and seven wealthiest towns in 1905, he found that the rich communities taxed themselves at a rate of about \$2.75 per every \$1,000 of assessed property value; the rate in poorer communities was \$4.37. Yet, while poor districts taxed themselves more, they still generated 20 percent less revenue per pupil than the wealthy districts. The situation in that regard had not changed a whit by 1977. The poorest Connecticut towns had a tax rate twice as high as the richest towns, but they ended up generating \$500 less per pupil.

Similarly, in California, the difference between schools in Beverly Hills and Baldwin Park was more than just a half-hour ride on the freeway. In 1970, the parents of John Serrano, a pupil in one of California's poorer school districts, filed a class-action suit challenging the state's school financing system. A year later, the state supreme court, in *Serrano v. Priest*, ruled that the system, with its heavy reliance on local property taxes, had denied Johnny Serrano the equal protection of the laws. "Affluent districts," wrote Justice Raymond L. Sullivan for the court in a 6 to 1 decision, "can have their cake and eat it too: They can provide a high quality education . . . while paying lower taxes. Poor districts, by contrast, have no cake at all." Facing court orders, or hoping to forestall judicial intervention, nearly half of the 50 states have changed their school financing since *Serrano*.\*

Do dollars really make a difference? The 1966 "Coleman Report" (*Equality of Educational Opportunity*) suggested that such "variables" as school facilities, type of curriculum, classroom size, and so on had far less relationship to how pupils performed than did students' socioeconomic characteristics—family background, poverty, race, parents' educational level. However, more recent studies suggest that school services do in fact have a strong positive relationship to learning, and that many of these services directly reflect a school district's spending.† Because exurban Princeton, New Jersey, has a two-to-one advantage in revenues over nearby Paterson, for example, it can hire 50 percent more teachers for the same number of students.

\*Minnesota, Kansas, New Jersey, Connecticut, New York, Washington, West Virginia, and Colorado were ordered by courts to change their financing systems. Florida, Illinois, Texas, Arizona, Michigan, North Dakota, New Mexico, Iowa, Ohio, Maine, Wisconsin, Indiana, Utah, Montana, and South Carolina acted in the absence of legal decisions. The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Rodriguez v. San Antonio* (1973) declined by a vote of 5 to 4 to impose a nationwide ruling similar to *Serrano*.

† See for example: A. A. Sommers, and B. L. Wolfe, *Disaggregation and Analyzing Education Equity Issues: Methods and Results*, Philadelphia: Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 1975; and "Explosion of a Myth: Quantity of Schooling and Exposure to Instruction, Major Educational Vehicle" by D. E. Wiley and A. Harnischfeger, in *Education Researcher* (vol. 3, no. 4, 1974).

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It wasn't only *Serrano* that nibbled away at California's reliance on property taxes to support the schools; it was also Proposition 13, the 1978 rollback of the state's property taxes to 1 percent of assessed value. In the spirit of Proposition 13, some states—Colorado, New Jersey, and Tennessee—have adopted "fiscal limitation" bills aimed not so much at curbing local property taxes as at putting a ceiling on state spending. Even as states shoulder more of the school burden, the growth in spending on schools is slowing down. In the 1960s, total expenditures on schools grew by an annual average rate of 10.6 percent across the nation; in the last three years, it has averaged only 7.4 percent. As the effects of fiscal limitations are felt, the growth may slow even more. And even as the size of the pot shrinks, the stakes get higher, the contending pressures become fiercer.

### The Fight of the Century

Among the key forces here are the teachers—organized into the 1.8-million-member National Education Association and the smaller (520,000) but faster growing American Federation of Teachers. Trying to keep up with inflation, the two unions have stoutly resisted school boards' proposals to reduce teachers' perquisites or curb pay increases. The unions often can muster superior expertise. When a strike threatens, the union local can call in a negotiating team from headquarters as well as a public relations agent, a budget analyst, and contract specialists. All told, there were 176 teacher strikes in 1978–79, compared to 9 in 1964—a fair measure of the increase in teacher militancy.

The federal government also pushes up costs. In order to qualify for any federal subsidies, school districts have to meet accompanying requirements, such as those of the 1975 Aid to Handicapped Children Act. This act required that all states provide handicapped children with a "free and appropriate public education"—which meant not only ramps for wheelchairs but also special counseling and therapy. Full compliance will cost at least \$8 billion annually, with the federal government contributing only about 12 percent of that amount.

Nor does each dollar from Washington mean one dollar less that the states themselves will have to find. Virtually all of the 100 or so federal education programs contain "maintenance of effort" provisions. That means that if states start cutting back on their education budgets in anticipation of a windfall from Washington, they will lose a proportionate share of their federal aid.

A third force that could push up education costs even fur-

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ther is the private schools, whose spokesmen have long been arguing for a share of public education money. About 10 percent (or 5 million) of all U.S. school children are in private, mostly religious schools, and during the last several years, private school administrators have been pressing for direct public support either through tax credits or "pick-your-own-school" voucher plans. Tax credit legislation nearly passed Congress last year and is on the agenda again. A voucher initiative will probably be on the ballot in California next spring. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, has predicted that stopping such measures will become "the fight of the century" for public-school teachers.

Public school lobbyists fear that letting private schools tap into state and local treasuries, even indirectly, will diminish funds for the public schools. There is also the thorny constitutional issue of the separation of church and state. Lastly, many educators argue, vouchers and similar measures would encourage divisiveness—religious, racial, economic—and undercut the "unifying" aspects of public education. And well they might.

But the fact is that on this issue as on so many others, there is room for honest disagreement. Cooperation and consensus come hard in education because school issues touch both the deepest feelings and highest aspirations of our society. And its financing and governance involve the most basic questions in democratic politics: Who pays? Who benefits? Who controls?

American federalism, it has been written, is a marble cake, not a layer cake—a swirl of contending influences, not a neatly stacked hierarchy of federal, state, and local powers. The politics of education is the ultimate example.



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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Apart from the Civil War, perhaps no topic has generated more books about America by Americans than education. The two subjects have at least one thing in common—enduring controversy among the specialists.

In **Schooled to Order: A Social History of Public Schooling in the United States** (Oxford, 1979), David Nasaw sums up the current “radical” critique of education: “Public schools are social institutions dedicated *not* to meeting the self-perceived needs of their students but to preserving social peace and prosperity within the context of private property and the governmental structures that safeguard it.”

School administrators, Nasaw charges, stress vocational education for poor and minority students, while offering academic programs to white middle-class youths.

A sharp counterargument comes from Diane Ravitch in **The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attacks on the Schools** (Basic Books, 1978). Ravitch contends that lower-income Americans have *rightly* trusted the schools to improve their children’s prospects for higher economic status. She cites studies (by Stephan Thernstrom and others) indicating that upward mobility has characterized life in America during the last 100 years.

Schools may provide the ticket to a better life, but do they prepare students for the journey? In her thoughtful analysis of changing themes in American history textbooks, **America Revised** (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1979), Frances

FitzGerald faults most narratives for depicting the world as a place “without malice or stupidity.” Pupils who learn bland versions of the past, she suggests, risk feeling “that their own experience of conflict or suffering is unique . . . and perhaps un-American.”

Controversy over the purposes of education in a democratic society is not new, as Lawrence A. Cremin’s general histories make clear. **The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1879–1957** (Knopf, 1961, cloth; Vintage, 1964, paper) traces the debate over academic rigor versus the “use of the schools to improve the lives of individuals,” from the common schools to the launching of Sputnik.

Two giants who helped shape U.S. schools were Horace Mann (1796–1859) and John Dewey (1859–1952).

Known as “the father of the American public school,” Horace Mann was a tireless, ever-optimistic reformer. In **Horace Mann: A Biography** (Knopf, 1972), Jonathan Messerli recounts his broad interests in politics and social uplift. In addition to serving in the Massachusetts legislature and as a U.S. Representative, Mann bitterly opposed slavery and helped establish America’s first state hospital for the insane at Worcester, Mass., in 1833.

In **The Life and Mind of John Dewey** (Southern Ill., 1973, cloth; 1978, paper), George Dykhuizen demonstrates that Dewey, like Mann, was something of an overachiever. Co-founder, with Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, of the philosophical school of Pragmatism,

his writings had a lasting effect on the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy.

There are books that describe education and books that attempt to *change* it. During the 1950s, James Bryant Conant took "academic inventories" of American high schools. Many of the Harvard president's recommendations, recorded in **The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens** (McGraw-Hill, 1959), have been widely adopted, particularly in the suburbs: third- and fourth-year language courses, tuition-free summer schools, the grouping of students in each subject according to ability.

In 1964, Congress ordered a survey of educational opportunity. Two years later, sociologist James S. Coleman and six fellow researchers issued **Equality of Educational Opportunity** (Government Printing Office, 1966). They reported on the relationship between students' achievement and the kinds of schools (segregated, integrated, rich, poor) attended. Among their findings: Minority students from poor homes do better in affluent white schools. Their research helped convince the courts to adopt plans for "immediate integration" (i.e., busing).

Two contrary studies followed, headed by Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks. **Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America** (Basic Books, 1972, cloth; Harper, 1973, paper) shows that an adult's income is determined primarily by employers' biases and "luck," rather than by family background and the number of years spent in school. "The evidence suggests," the authors contend, "that equalizing educational opportunity would do very little to make adults more equal."

Jencks' second analysis devotes only a few chapters to education's impact on adult Americans' paychecks. **Who Gets Ahead? The Determinants of Economic Success in America** (Basic Books, 1979), is rigorous, technical, and difficult to read. It reveals, among other things, that the earnings of white- and blue-collar workers are not affected by the quality of primary and secondary education they received.

Various groups in the United States have distrusted the public schools and have attempted to do the job themselves. In **Catholic Education in a Changing World** (Holt, 1967, cloth; Univ. of Notre Dame, 1969, paper), George N. Shuster notes that in 1840 America's 200 Catholic schools served a missionary function. Later, their role changed. Catholic immigrants saw them as bulwarks of the faith and as guardians of traditional values.

Meanwhile, the sons of both ministers and millionaires went to austere Protestant boarding schools in New England. In **The Headmaster: Frank L. Boyden of Deerfield** (Farrar, 1966, cloth; 1979, paper), John McPhee superbly describes a man "at the near end of a skein of magnanimous despots." Boyden came to Massachusetts' Deerfield Academy in 1902 and was headmaster for 66 years. McPhee ranks him with other famed Yankee autocrats—Groton's Endicott Peabody, Andover's Alfred Stearns, and Exeter's Lewis Perry.

The poor had to settle for less. According to Henry Allen Bullock in **A History of Negro Education in the South: From 1619 to the Present** (Harvard, 1967), as late as 1910 there were no black public institutions in the South's segregated school systems that offered even two years of high school. Oddly, neither Bullock

nor any other historian has examined in depth black successes in education below the university level. Black prep schools in the South evolved into colleges. Washington, D.C.'s Dunbar High School, America's first black public high school, was founded in 1870; over an 85-year period, 75 percent of its graduates went on to college.

Unlike the United States, where education is left to the individual states, Britain loosely controls its school system through four separate ministries that answer to Parliament. In **Education in England and Wales** (Shoe String, 1978), H. C. Dent notes that school principals decide what subjects to teach and which teaching methods to use. Religious instruction is mandatory in primary and secondary schools. Secondary "grammar" schools provide the brightest 20 percent with an academic curriculum leading to final exams, a General Certificate of Education, and, often, a university. The remainder attend technical schools or secondary "modern" or "comprehensive" schools, offering tracks from academic to vocational.

A Common Entrance Examination taken by boys 12 and 14 years old sorts out candidates for entry into the famous "public" (private boarding) schools—e.g., Eton, Harrow, Winchester. In a colorful history, **The Old School Tie: The Phenomenon of the English Public School** (Viking, 1978), Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy examines these schools' reputations for snobbery, homosexuality, brutality, and solid academic performance.

In **Education in Japan: A Century of Modern Development** (Govern-

ment Printing Office, 1975), Ronald S. Anderson notes that students must attend classes from one to two months a year more than their American counterparts; thus by the end of the ninth grade, many have logged nearly two additional years in the classroom. Students go into either academic or vocational programs in high school. "A graduate of the vocational track," writes Anderson, "cannot go on to the university, no matter how promising he may be."

W. D. Halls notes that central control of French schooling predates the 1789 Revolution, in **Education, Culture and Politics in Modern France** (Pergamon, 1976, paper): "The school is the instrument of the State to promote national feeling . . . to induce a sense of civic responsibility . . . to foster loyalty to the regime." The Ministry of National Education in Paris still directs teacher training and dictates all curricula. Thus, for example, at a given hour, all French children at the same grade level will be studying Descartes.

The closest thing America ever had to a national curriculum was **McGuffey's Eclectic Readers** (7 vols., Van Nostrand reprint, 1978), 100 million copies of which were sold between 1836 and 1900. The *Primers* were concerned with morals, God, and elocution, as well as with the alphabet, words, and simple sentences. The *Fifth* and *Sixth Readers* exposed very young children to Defoe, Shakespeare, Dickens, Emerson, Thoreau, Jefferson. The current faddish nostalgia for the *Readers* should not be held against them; they were successful in getting generations of American children to read.