
BACKGROUND BOOKS

TEACHING IN AMERICA

In 1776, a ship from Belfast docked in Baltimore and offered for sale "various Irish commodities, among which are schoolmasters, beef, pork, and potatoes." Such was the ignoble status of teachers in colonial America, notes Willard S. Elsbree, in **The American Teacher** (American, 1939; Greenwood, 1970), an account of the profession's slow climb to respectability.

The Puritans, and later the Founding Fathers, held the *idea* of education in high regard. Nonetheless, in **The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education** (Harvard, 1974, cloth & paper), David Tyack observes that salaries for teachers in many colonial villages were "below the earnings of scrubwomen and day laborers."

Teaching was often a last resort for misfits and outcasts, and the typical one-room schoolhouse was cramped and ill-equipped. But at least the teaching process was uncomplicated, as Carl F. Kaestle notes in **Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860** (Hill & Wang, 1983). Teaching consisted largely of "repetition, drilling . . . with here and there a little of the birch."

Even as the new Republic prospered, teachers did not. In **Anti-Intellectualism in American Life** (Knopf, 1979, cloth; Random, 1966, paper), Richard Hofstadter argues that Americans never really respected schoolteachers as a group. Paradoxically, Americans stubbornly retained a "touching faith in the efficacy of popular education."

This faith inspired reformers, among them Horace Mann (1796-1859). His glowing reports on the school system in Prussia, where the

teaching profession was so highly esteemed that only the best and the brightest entered its ranks, are included in the **Life and Works of Horace Mann** (Walker, Fuller, & Co., 1865; Norwood, 1979), edited by Mary Tyler Peabody Mann. With Prussia's vigor in mind, Mann in 1830 founded the Massachusetts Normal School, the nation's first teacher training institution. He later served as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, the first such state board in America.

The movement to provide free common schools soon spread beyond Massachusetts. By 1860, most states could boast a (fledgling) public school system. One result: increased demand for trained instructors. Twelve new normal schools opened before the onset of the Civil War.

To be sure, many towns, particularly outside New England, ignored new state requirements for mandatory elementary education. And towns offering schooling beyond the sixth grade were almost unheard of. Public high schools nationwide numbered only 200 in 1870. But the trend toward universal public education and the resulting "professionalization" of teaching were both well underway by 1900.

Some of the most persistent ideas in American teaching have stemmed from the turn-of-the-century Progressive movement, partly a reaction against traditional learning by rote. Lawrence A. Cremin, in his definitive history, **The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957** (Knopf, 1961, cloth, out of print; Vintage, 1964, paper), describes the movement as "a many-sided effort to use the schools

to improve the lives of individuals."

John Dewey (1859–1952) was its chief architect. In **The School and Society** (Univ. of Chicago, 1899; rev. ed., 1956, cloth & paper), he advocates the teaching of mathematics and other subjects "not as isolated things . . . but in their reference to [the student's] social environment." The schools, Dewey and his followers asserted, should foster not just "book learning," but moral, emotional, and vocational development. The teacher should be the student's guide rather than his taskmaster.

Variouly interpreted, Progressive ideas blossomed for several decades, faded during the 1950s, and bloomed again during the 1960s, when many writers decried what they saw as a stultifying atmosphere in the classroom. One of the most prominent was John Holt, who in **How Children Fail** (Pitman, 1964, cloth, out of print; Dell, 1970, paper) laments the lack of "joy" in the schools. In **Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools** (Houghton, 1967, cloth, out of print; Bantam, 1970, paper), Jonathan Kozol, a young teacher at an inner-city elementary school, asserts that the Boston school system was designed to "pulverize any sparks of humanity or independence or originality in teachers."

A new blueprint, calling for "open classrooms" with teachers acting as "learning facilitators" rather than as transmitters of knowledge, was provided by Charles E. Silberman in **Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education** (Random, 1970, cloth, out of print; Vintage, 1971, paper). The prestigious Carnegie Foundation had commissioned the book, an endorsement that contributed to its widespread, if

short-lived, acclaim among teachers and administrators.

The "facilitators" of the future would be computers, George Leonard predicted in 1968. Dismissing the "simplistic prescription that, to improve education, teachers merely needed to know their subjects and 'get tough,'" he contended that students could (with a little help from technology) rediscover the "ecstatic moment" that had been stripped from the learning process by autocratic educators. Looking ahead to the year 2001 in **Education and Ecstasy** (Delacorte, 1968, cloth, out of print; Dell, 1969, paper), Leonard saw six-year-olds in geodesic domes entranced by machines that converted calculus lessons into psychedelic displays of "spinning wheels . . . slender and glistening like the spokes of a bicycle wheel."

Other critics of education, beginning after World War II, were worried not so much about the loss of ecstasy as about steady declines in student performance.

One of these "traditionalists" was Mortimer Smith, author of **The Diminished Mind: A Study of Planned Mediocrity in Our Public Schools** (Regnery, 1954; Greenwood, 1969). Though Progressives claimed success in teaching students to adjust to "real life problems," Smith notes that a 1951 survey of Los Angeles high school juniors revealed that 18 percent did not know there were 12 months in a year. Smith blames their ignorance on the Progressives' deliberate de-emphasis of "learning, in the traditional sense of disciplined knowledge."

In **The Restoration of Learning: A Program for Redeeming the Unfulfilled Promise of American Education** (Knopf, 1955, out of print), Arthur Bestor argues that the "fun-

damentals"—reading, writing, and arithmetic—constitute a pillar of democracy; Orwell's *Big Brother* in 1984 enslaves men's minds by undermining the disciplines of language and mathematics to the point where two plus two equals five.

Quite plainly, teaching the "basics" soon took a back seat to other concerns despite all the early warnings. In her highly readable **The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945–1980** (Basic, 1983), Columbia's Diane Ravitch points out that the postwar "crusade against ignorance was understood to mean a crusade for equal educational opportunity." Especially since 1960, the emphasis on worthy social goals, in Ravitch's view, has often bewildered teachers and distorted the fundamental task of the schools, that is,

the transmission of knowledge.

The overall effect has been devastating, according to much data and many critics. Paul Cooperman in **The Literacy Hoax: The Decline of Reading, Writing, and Learning in the Public Schools and What We Can Do About It** (Morrow, 1978, cloth & paper) notes that in college admissions tests, only one-fourth of current high school graduates attain the score that would have been considered average in the early 1960s. Ten to 15 percent of all graduates are functionally illiterate, unequipped to hold skilled jobs or to complete basic training in the military. Even Ivy League colleges have been forced to create remedial courses in writing and math for bright but ill-prepared freshmen.

Not surprisingly, the "traditionalist" view has gained ground since the

TEN BLUE-RIBBON STUDIES, 1982–84

1. **Academic Preparation for College**, Educational Equality Project; The College Board, New York, N.Y., May 1983. Free. Urges high schools to focus more on "adequate" college preparation, which it defines in detail.
2. **America's Competitive Challenge: The Need for a National Response**; The Business-Higher Education Forum, Washington, D.C., April 1983. \$17.50. Calls for presidential advisers on education and industrial policy, private-sector financial support for teacher training in high school science and math, development of skills for "high-tech" economy.
3. **Educating Americans for the 21st Century**, Commission on Pre-Collegiate Education in Math, Science, and Technology; National Science Board, Washington, D.C., Sept. 1983. Free. Recommends tighter teacher certification and high school graduation requirements, higher salaries for science and math teachers.
4. **High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America**, Ernest L. Boyer; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Harper and Row, New York, N.Y., 1983. \$15. Contends that public schools are improving, but recommends reforms: gradual 25 percent teacher pay hike, tighter curriculum, mandatory community service for students.
5. **Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School**, Theodore R.Sizer; National Association of Secondary School Principals and National Association of Independent Schools, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, Mass.,

mid-1970s, even among those writers who, like the Progressives, prize a "nurturing and caring environment" in the schools.

One of them is Sara Lawrence Lightfoot. In **The Good High School** (Basic, 1983), she profiles six successful schools, ranging from Atlanta's all-black George Washington Carver High School to the elite St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire.

In all these institutions, Lightfoot finds that "ideology, authority, and order combine to produce a coherent institution that supports human interaction and growth." Students at Carver sometimes chafe under their

school's rigid rules, Lightfoot observes, but more often they are comforted by the assurance "that they will be protected, that people care."

The effects of the law-and-order regime at Carver, imposed three years ago by a new principal, have so far been cleaner halls and better attendance records, not vastly improved test scores. But "institutional invigoration and restoration is a slow, cumbersome process," Lightfoot says. She concludes: "These . . . minimal standards . . . [constitute] a first stage of movement towards higher goals"—notably, a solid education for all.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers may wish to consult previous WQ Background Books essays on *The Changing American Campus* (Autumn 1978), *The Public Schools* (Autumn 1979), *The Changing Family* (Summer 1980), and *Children in America* (Autumn 1982).

March 1984. \$16.95. Three-volume study (of which this book is the first) finds local school systems' bureaucracy stifling, urges greater control by teachers and principals over curriculum and teaching methods.

6. **Making the Grade**, Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy; Twentieth Century Fund, New York, N.Y., 1983. \$6. Advocates "master teacher" programs, federal leadership in making literacy in English and science chief goals, more federally funded education research.

7. **A Nation at Risk**, National Commission on Excellence in Education; U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., April 1983. \$4.50. Documents "rising tide of mediocrity" in schools, urges lengthening school year or day, re-emphasizing "basics," imparting computer literacy.

8. **The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto**, Mortimer Adler; The Paideia Group, New York, N.Y., Sept. 1982. \$2.95. Recommends rigorous uniform nationwide curriculum as means to an educationally classless society.

9. **A Place Called School**, John I. Goodlad; Institute for the Development of Educational Activities, McGraw-Hill, New York, N.Y., 1983. \$18.95. A first-hand study of more than 1,000 classrooms; recommends schooling from age four to 16, elimination of tracking, creation of a "head teacher" program.

10. **Successful Schools for Young Adolescents**, Joan Lipsitz; National Institute of Education, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, N.J., Nov. 1983. Cloth, \$24.95; paper, \$9.95. Analyzes four exemplary intermediate schools; isolates ingredients of success.