

American Traditions of Education

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Attached to the cornerstone of a large New York University building at the intersection of Waverley Place and University Place is a plaque, erected in 1909, that reads as follows:

In honor of the seven public-school teachers who taught under Dutch rule on Manhattan Island:

Adam Roelandsen
Jan Cornelissen
Jan Stevenson
William Vestens
Jan de la Montagne
Harmanus Van Hoboken
Evert Pietersen

This is a touching tribute, but there is one problem with it: the men it honors actually taught in the parochial schools of the Reformed Dutch Church of New Amsterdam, as New York was called before the English took control in 1664. There were no public schools in the Dutch colony of New Netherland. The teachers in the Dutch parochial schools were licensed to teach by Dutch church authorities; their pupils, except for children of the poor, paid fees to the schoolmaster. The teachers taught children to read and write Dutch and to recite their catechism and prayers.

The university's error is understandable, however, because the

history of American education is so little known or understood. Few, aside from historians, seem to know that there are many different traditions of education in the United States. Few seem to realize that the line between public and private schools was not especially sharp until the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

In public debates, it is clear that many people think that the public school, as we know it today, represents the one and only American tradition. That this view is so widespread can be credited not only to the unquestioned success of the common school movement of the mid-nineteenth century, which made the idea of state control of education appear to be synonymous with patriotism, nationalism, and progress, but also to a well-established tradition of boosterism in the field of educational history.

Historians of schooling, writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, chronicled the triumph of the common school movement over its benighted competitors. This narrative was earnestly disseminated to generations of administrators and teachers. The historians, located in newly created schools of education, saw American education history as a morality tale that went like this: in the colonial era and for about half a century into its young nationhood, America had diverse forms of education, some of them organized by churches, others by local groups of parents. Then, in the mid-nineteenth century, selfless and public-spirited reformers realized that the only democratic form of education was one that was entirely controlled by the state. These reformers fought valiant campaigns against special interests and selfish, narrow-minded people in state after state. Eventually, when the public agreed with them, every state created a public school system to advance the public interest. And, on this rock of state control of public education, our democracy rests.

As Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn showed in his seminal work *Education in the Forming of American Society*, this morality tale appealed to the education profession's amour propre. Leading educators in the 1890s enjoyed debating whether the earliest public school could be traced to the Puritans in Massachusetts or to the Dutch in New York. Both sides, Bailyn pointed out, were wrong: public education "had not grown from seventeenth-

century seeds; it was a new and unexpected genus whose ultimate character could not have been predicted and whose emergence had troubled well-disposed, high-minded people.” The school historians of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, said Bailyn, were professional educators who wanted to give the student of education “an everlasting faith in his profession.” These “educational missionaries” believed passionately in their profession, and they “drew up what became the patristic literature of a powerful academic ecclesia.”¹

The most prominent of the early twentieth-century school historians was Ellwood P. Cubberley. Before he taught at Stanford (and became dean of its school of education), he had been superintendent of schools in San Francisco. His history of American education and his history of Western education asserted confidently that a nation’s educational progress could be measured by whether control of education passed from church to state, from private to public, and from laypeople to professionals. The highest form of educational development, he proposed, was “state control of the whole range of education, to enable the State to promote intellectual and moral and social progress along lines useful to the State.” Cubberley divided supporters and opponents of state control of schooling into two camps. Supporting state control were “Citizens of the Republic,” philanthropists and humanitarians, “public men of large vision,” city residents, urban workingmen, nontaxpayers, Calvinists, and “New England men.” On the other side, the opponents of state control included aristocrats; conservatives; “politicians of small vision”; rural residents; “the ignorant, narrow-minded, and penurious”; taxpayers; Lutherans, Reformed Church, Mennonites, and Quakers; Southerners; private school proprietors; and “the non-English-speaking classes.”²

In Cubberley’s view, a democratic school system was one in which the state exercised complete control; everything else—including schools operated by private individuals, churches, school

1. Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), p. 8–11.

2. Ellwood P. Cubberley, *The History of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), pp. 578, 673; also, Ellwood P. Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), pp. 120–21.

societies, academies relying on private initiative, or even the district system of local school boards—were no more than way stations preceding the “rising” of a “democratic consciousness.” He saw the nineteenth century as a series of battles against “apathy, religious jealousies, and private interests,” culminating in the creation of “the American State School, free and equally open to all . . . the most important institution in our national life working for the perpetuation of our free democracy and the advancement of the public welfare.”³

The “good guys” in his telling were “the New England men,” who struggled first to provide some form of state aid or taxation to benefit schools, then to use that leverage to impose state supervision and control of local school systems. Opposition to state control, he acknowledged, came not only from private and sectarian interests but from local school districts as well, which were not eager to submit to state authority. In 1812, New York became the first state to create a superintendent of schools; however, the position was abolished by the legislature in 1821, not to be created again until 1854. Maryland created the post in 1826, only to abolish it in 1828 and reestablish it in 1864. By 1850, there were regular state school officers in only seven of the thirty-one states, and by 1861, there were nineteen in thirty-four states.⁴ The primary goal of these officials, which Cubberley lauded, was imposing state control over local school districts.

Cubberley described the expansion of state power as the foundation of democratic education. Similarly, the secularization of education, and the withdrawal of state aid from sectarian schools, he said, was “an unavoidable incident connected with the coming to self-consciousness and self-government of a great people.”⁵ The evolution of democratic institutions of schooling inevitably led to state control of schooling, he maintained. He presented resistance to this idea as backsliding or reaction. He noted, for example, that the city of Lowell, Massachusetts, had treated two parochial schools as public schools in 1835 but that the experiment was

3. Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States*, pp. 78, 123.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 157–59.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

soon abandoned, thus allowing the continuing growth of the democratic idea.

Using history as his vehicle, Cubberley campaigned for professional supervision and control of schools, as far removed as possible from parents and other private and allegedly selfish interests. In the best of all possible worlds, he suggested, local districts would submit to state-level administrators; those administrators would cede their powers to the national government; and expert professionals would run the schools, free of political interference by elected officials. Thus would the schools be securely lodged “in the hands of those whose business it is to guard the rights and advance the educational welfare of our children.”⁶

Cubberley’s version of the rise and triumph of public education was, as Bailyn showed, anachronistic and just plain wrong. The story of American educational development was far more complex and interesting than Cubberley and the other boosters of his era ever suggested.

SCHOOLING IN EARLY AMERICA

The Founding Fathers prized education but the words “education” and “schooling” do not appear in the Constitution. In colonial days and in the first half-century of the new nation’s existence, there were many different kinds of schooling available (except for enslaved African Americans in the South). The only accurate way to describe American schooling in the years before 1850 would be in terms of variety and pluralism, for there was no single pattern of schooling in the nation’s rural areas, towns, and cities.

In towns and cities, parents had many choices about how and where to educate their children; most took advantage of them. In addition to whatever instruction they were able to provide at home, they could choose among dame schools (that is, instruction offered by individual female teachers, usually in their homes), schools managed by private benevolent associations, private-ven-

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 480–82. See also Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1965).

ture schools, Latin grammar schools, religious schools, boarding schools, and private academies. Some of these received public funding, others did not. The Latin grammar schools, usually found in New England, were town schools, governed by an elected board and funded by local and often state aid. Churches sponsored schools for their members' children and charity schools for the children of the urban poor. Itinerant schoolmasters offered their services for a winter term or two and were paid by parents. Some towns set up schools for local children, funded by a combination of tuition and taxes. Sometimes schooling was left to families, who organized subscription schools or hired a schoolmaster. Entrepreneurial teachers established schools and advertised for students. In larger cities, philanthropic societies organized free schools for poor children.

Also broadly available were academies that provided secondary education and offered a broader curriculum than Latin grammar schools. Many private or quasi-public schools were often chartered by the state, the same as colleges. Controlled by an independent board of trustees, the academies relied on tuition but received significant public funding from their localities and states. In his historical essay on the academy, TheodoreSizer pointed out that the age of the academy extended from the Revolution to the Civil War. Henry Barnard reported more than six thousand academies in 1850, spread across the land, in every state and territory (Sizer believes that this figure was conservative); even Texas, still largely unsettled at that time, had ninety-seven academies. The academies provided secondary schooling before the creation of public high schools. Not only were they open to all children in the community, but most "implored all comers to enroll, bearing their life-giving tuition." Much like charter schools in the 1990s, academies were founded by "optimistic entrepreneurs" and were closely tied to their local communities. In some cases, groups of civic leaders pooled their resources, got a state charter, and obtained public funding; others, wrote Sizer, "set up a stock company, gathered small amounts of money for each share of stock, and permitted the shareholders to vote for the trustees." Academies were sup-

ported by tuition, state grants, contributions of student labor, endowments, state lotteries, and even goods bartered for schooling.⁷

Rural areas developed district schools with local boards composed mainly of parents. Until the mid-nineteenth century, it was common for parents to pay tuition, even for their local public school. In exchange, parents had a large voice in controlling the schools. As historian Carl Kaestle observed, the parents in rural communities controlled “what textbooks their children would use . . . what subjects would be taught, who the teacher would be, and how long school would be in session.”⁸ In these areas, where most Americans lived, teachers usually “boarded around,” taking food and lodging from parents in the area, which gave parents ample opportunity to monitor the teachers’ personal lives and put in their two cents about how the school should be run.

Family, church, and workplace were important elements in education in this era. With few exceptions, there were no state departments of education, and those few had no power over local school boards. In many cities, public schools would not accept children unless they already knew how to read and assumed that they learned to do so either at home or a dame school. Churches played a large role in education; in some states, religious schools received a pro rata share of public funds for education. In communities with public schools, ministers usually were members of the local school committee and interviewed teachers before they were hired, making sure that their ideas, their religious views, and their morals were sound. Youngsters who became apprentices learned a trade and often literacy as well from their masters.

In his history of the common schools, Carl Kaestle made two important observations about the origins of American public education. First, in the early nineteenth century, the only free schools in the cities of New England, the Middle Atlantic states, and the South were charity schools for poor children or public schools attended generally by children from low-income families and

7. Theodore R.Sizer, *The Age of the Academies* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1964), pp. 1–22.

8. Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), p. 22.

shunned by the affluent; these schools began to monopolize public funds in the 1820s and eventually became the foundation for the public school system in those cities. As he described it, “In many cities, the charity schools literally became the public common schools.” Unlike district schools or pay schools, where parents had a large role, the charity schools had never been accountable to parents but tended instead to see them as a problem. Second, he observed that the expansion of charity schooling into public schools did not increase the percentage of urban children who went to school. Kaestle emphasized “the stability of combined public and private enrollment rates over the first half of the nineteenth century.” The growth of public school enrollments, he suggested, reflected a shift of children from private schools to free schools rather than increased participation by unschooled children.⁹

THE COMMON SCHOOL MOVEMENT

In the 1830s and 1840s, the growth of the economy—fueled by the expansion of manufacturing and transportation and increased immigration from Europe, especially from Ireland and Germany—brought many changes to the nation, especially in the Northeast. The population of cities increased, as did the proportion of immigrants who were neither English nor Protestant. Along with these changes went a rise in social tensions as cities began to experience poverty, slums, crime, intemperance, and related ills. Prominent citizens in big cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore worried about the morals of poor children and especially about the likelihood that they were influenced by the vices of their parents. Protestant ministers, who played a large role in social reform movements of the nineteenth century, looked askance at the growth of the Catholic population. Reformers expressed concern about the nation’s social fabric and about its future unity. They looked to the schools to teach the rising generation the values, morals, and outlook that seemed necessary for the future well-being of the nation.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 60–61.

The schools appeared to offer a perfect mechanism with which to address these concerns. In the case of the urban poor, reformers expected the schools to combat the bad examples of parents. As they contemplated the possibility of using the schools to uplift the poor and spread republican values, reformers agreed on the necessity of centralizing the control of public schools under state authorities; this assured that state authorities, not immigrant parents, would make important decisions about the nature of schooling. These reformers launched a campaign known as the common school movement from about 1830 to 1860. Its leaders were mainly allied with the Whig Party and with organized Protestant religions. Neither Catholics nor Jacksonian Democrats liked the centralizing aspects of this movement.

The leading figure in this campaign was Horace Mann, a Massachusetts state legislator who led the battle to create a state board of education, then resigned his political office to become secretary of the new board in 1839. In this position, he became the most eloquent spokesman for public education in the nation. The goal of this movement was to promote the development of tax-supported public schools, to train teachers, and to establish state support and direction of these activities. The Founding Fathers had written often about the importance of an educated electorate; the leaders of the common school movement sought universal education not only for this reason but to teach common values and to secure social stability.

But there was more to the common school movement than just a love of education and a desire for a harmonious, moral, prosperous society. The common school movement was one of a variety of social and moral reform movements inspired by the “Second Great Awakening,” a religious revival of evangelical Protestantism that swept the northern United States in the late 1820s and 1830s. The common school movement shared the rhetoric and fervor of evangelical Protestantism; many of its leaders were ordained Protestant ministers who saw themselves as men with a mission. According to historian Lloyd P. Jorgensen, the most fundamental assumption of the common school movement was that the public school would be “an agent of moral and social redemption” and

that this redemption would be the result of “non-sectarian” religious instruction.¹⁰

The common school movement is customarily described without qualification as a heroic crusade, but Jorgenson noted that its “dark underside” was the “spirit of nativism.”¹¹ Even Cubberley observed, without disapproval, that the arrival of large numbers of Irish Catholics and German Lutherans in the 1840s was followed by intense controversy, including anti-Catholic riots in several cities, the formation of the anti-Catholic Native American Party, and the rise of the Know-Nothing Party. Nativists in these political parties believed that foreigners and especially Catholics in the United States were a threat to the American tradition of liberty. They were especially eager to prevent Catholics from obtaining any public funding for their schools and to require the use of the Protestant Bible in the public schools. In the 1850s, the Know-Nothing Party elected six governors and took control of several state legislatures, including those in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maryland, and Kentucky.

In his important study *The State and the Non-Public School*, Jorgensen has shown that many of the common school leaders were “among the most vitriolic anti-Romanists of their time.” The leadership of the common school movement included a large number of Protestant ministers, including the state superintendents in Ohio, Indiana, North Carolina, Virginia, and Kentucky. They were “educational evangelists,” seeking to advance the cause of public education and to make sure that Catholic schools and other private schools were excluded from any public funding. From 1838 to 1879, all but one of Kentucky’s eleven state superintendents were clergymen. One of them, Robert J. Breckinridge, was known as the “father of public education in Kentucky” because of his work as state superintendent from 1847 to 1852; Breckinridge was also well known as a zealous anti-Catholic who published diatribes against “papism” and inspired anti-Catholic riots when he was a minister in Baltimore from 1832 to 1845.¹²

10. Lloyd P. Jorgensen, *The State and the Non-Public School, 1825–1925* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1987), p. 23.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 31–54.

According to Jorgenson, “the long tradition of voluntary/public cooperation in education came to a dramatic end in the 1850s” because evangelical Protestants prevailed in their efforts to exclude Catholic schools from any participation in public funding. “In state after state during the fifties,” he writes, “with Know-Nothing leaders in the forefront of the battles, state school officers and Protestant denominational bodies were able to obtain legislation denying public funds to nonpublic schools and requiring Bible reading in the public schools. There was no mistaking the motivation behind these campaigns; the leaders openly and boastfully made anti-Catholicism the dominant theme of their attacks.” By the late 1850s, the principle of limiting public aid to public schools was well established in the states. “Much later,” Jorgenson comments, “the disinheritance of the church-related schools, a doctrine largely born of bigotry at the state level, was transmuted by the U.S. Supreme Court into high constitutional principle.”¹³

The common school movement was successful in its crusade; it established free, tax-supported public schools in every state and persuaded sympathetic state legislatures to pass laws barring any public funding of sectarian schools. The catch in this formulation, however, was that the common schools were nonsectarian but not necessarily nonreligious. Throughout the nineteenth century and in the first six decades of the twentieth century (and in rural districts, even longer), the public schools regularly engaged in practices that were nonsectarian but pan-Protestant: Bible reading, hymn singing, prayers, and recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. Many parents, educators, and legislators believed that the schools were responsible for children’s moral development and could not separate faith-based practices from moral aims. The matter was resolved, however, in 1963, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the laws in thirty-seven states that required or permitted school prayers or Bible reading in the public schools. Henceforth, the public schools would be nonreligious as well as nonsectarian.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 69. A useful summary of state laws, constitutional amendments, and court decisions is contained in Samuel Windsor Brown, *The Secularization of American Education* (New York: Teachers College, 1912).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, several campaigns were launched to outlaw nonpublic schools altogether (in Washington, Ohio, California, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan).¹⁴ The most notable example of this activity occurred in 1922 in Oregon, where voters approved an initiative that required all children between eight and sixteen (with minor exceptions) to attend public schools. The measure was supported by Masons, the Ku Klux Klan, and patriotic societies and vociferously opposed by Roman Catholic groups, Lutherans, and Seventh-Day Adventists, as well as much of the state's press. The purpose of the measure was to destroy nonpublic schools, which enrolled only 7 percent of the children in the state. The law was challenged by a Roman Catholic order that ran several schools and by a private military academy; the U.S. Supreme Court held it unconstitutional in 1925. In *Pierce v. Society of Sisters of Holy Names of Jesus and Mary*, the Court held that the state had the power "reasonably to regulate all schools, to inspect, supervise, and examine their teachers and pupils; to require that all children of proper age attend some school, that teachers shall be of good moral character and patriotic disposition, that certain studies plainly essential to good citizenship must be taught, and that nothing be taught which is manifestly inimical to the public welfare." But the Court recognized that the state's law intended not to regulate the nonpublic schools but to destroy them. The Court declared that "the fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right coupled with the high duty to recognize and prepare him for higher obligations."¹⁵ The *Pierce* decision was critically important in preserving the right of nonpublic schools to exist, as well as the freedom of parents to send their children to such schools.

14. Jorgensen, *The State and the Non-Public School*, p. 206.

15. *Pierce v. Society of Sisters of Holy Names of Jesus and Mary*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925). For further discussion, see Jorgensen, *The State and the Non-Public School*, pp. 205–15.

AMERICAN TRADITIONS OF SCHOOLING

As this brief overview of the history of schooling suggests, there are many traditions of schooling in the United States.

The first and most important tradition is that the family is primarily responsible for its children's education. In the colonial era as well as in most of the nineteenth century, families played a large role in teaching their children to read, reading poetry from the schoolbooks at the dinner table or at the fireside, and deciding where to send their children to school.

The second important tradition is pluralism. Until well into the nineteenth century, there was no single pattern of schooling. Children and adults learned in a variety of settings, including dame schools, public schools, academies, private schools, church schools, Sunday schools, libraries, and lyceums.

The third important tradition is the American common school, or public school. Since the mid-nineteenth century, public schools have been broadly available to American children in almost every community; by 1900, elementary school enrollment was nearly universal, thanks to the widespread availability of free public schooling. Secondary enrollments grew far more slowly, in large part because young people did not need a high school education to get a good job. In 1900, only about 10 percent of teenagers were enrolled in high school; this figure did not reach 70 percent until 1940 and now is about 95 percent. About 90 percent of American students are enrolled in public schools.

The fourth important tradition is one of cooperation between public and private sectors to achieve valuable social goals. Public schools often find it necessary and useful to reach out to the private sector for assistance. Nonpublic organizations run preschool centers, Head Start centers, after-school programs, tutoring programs, and many other educational services. Since the early 1990s, the public/private nexus has produced a hybrid agency called charter schools. These may be the lineal descendant of the nineteenth-century academy (although the original academy was a secondary school, and today's charter schools may offer any grade configuration). The modern charter school, like the academy, has an independent board of trustees, survives only because its students

choose to enroll, and receives public funding on a per-pupil basis (unlike charter schools, academies were partially subsidized by tuition).

It is not altogether clear how Americans in the twenty-first century will draw on these historic traditions. What does seem likely is that the public will not indefinitely support schools in which children do not learn the skills and knowledge that they require for participation in our society. What has changed, and changed dramatically over the past two hundred years, is the importance of education. Globalization has changed our economy and made education a civic, social, and economic imperative. Young people who do not acquire the skills of literacy and numeracy and a solid education will find themselves locked out of all sorts of future opportunities. This is not tolerable for our society, and our pragmatic bent will prod us toward finding additional ways to spread the promise of education throughout the population.