

Chapter 1

The Early Years

The idea that there should be free, locally tax-supported schools did not begin with Horace Mann. Just a few years after it was established, the Massachusetts Bay Colony General Court passed in 1647, a decree that required that towns with over fifty residents appoint a master to teach all children to read and write and that communities with more than one hundred residents establish a grammar school to prepare youth for the university.¹ Although Massachusetts took the first step toward the establishment of public education, various types of schooling evolved, at least for some children, in each of the colonies. Significant differences emerged in various sections of the country during the colonial period.

In the South, which was politically dominated by the owners of large plantations, tutors were hired for the children of plantation owners. Young men were taught basic academic skills along with proper social graces and how to manage slaves. In addition, the daughters of these families were instructed on how to be a successful hostess. Self-taught poor white farmers who were literate often taught their own children, but formal schools were not readily available for most children in the South until the 19th century. Teaching slaves to read and write was actually illegal in many of the Southern states.²

The middle colonies, which would include New York, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, saw the development of numerous church-sponsored schools. These schools were established to accomplish several goals. Often students were taught in the native language of the dominant group in the community in an attempt to preserve the original language of the family. There also was heavy emphasis on the religious beliefs of the

denomination that sponsored the school. Thus, in the Hudson Valley in New York State, the Dutch Reformed Church was active in setting up their own schools, while in Pennsylvania, it was the Society of the Friends or Quakers who offered opportunities for children in a number of communities.³ Interestingly enough, the schools established in Pennsylvania rejected corporal punishment, which was prevalent in most other schools and also opened their doors to Native Americans and the children of slaves. All of these parochial schools focused on reading, writing, and mathematics, along with religion.⁴

The most important steps toward a truly public school system were made in the New England colonies. In 1789, after the American Revolution, the Massachusetts legislature passed a law which expanded on the legislation enacted during the colonial period. Although the previous bill mandated a community-sponsored school, under the new amendment, the responsibility was lodged with the local towns and not the church. Elected local officials were given the duties that had formally belonged to ministers, to inspect schools as well as to supervise the curriculum and urge student attendance.⁵ This did not take religion out of the schools in Massachusetts as students were still taught using the Bible and they also were required to learn the tenets of the Puritan religion.

Until almost the mid-19th century, support for local schools remained very limited. Even the Massachusetts initiatives did not require a free education for all children and most families were charged tuition. It is true that many towns contributed funds to pay for the education of poor children. Along with what we would now call elementary schools, grammar schools were established for older boys. The purpose of such schools was clearly to prepare them for the ministry, as the clergy in New England towns were both the spiritual and political leaders of the community. During the 18th

century in Massachusetts, the commitment of the town governments to provide schools gradually declined. Even though all of the New England colonies except Rhode Island enacted legislation similar to that of Massachusetts by 1671, by the middle of the 18th century, it was the private schools in the largest towns that provided the best educational opportunities. None of the colonies outside of New England “attempted systemic” legislation mandating public education.

Even as late as 1837 when Horace Mann accepted the newly created position of Secretary of Education in Massachusetts, the goal of providing a quality, publicly-supported school for all children in the state was not even close to being accomplished. When Mann began to visit the existing schools, he found poorly constructed one-room structures lacking even the most necessary supplies. Most schools were being taught primarily by unqualified and uncommitted young men, many of whom stayed in the job for only a brief period. School sessions were short with the older children attending most often during the winter months when they were not needed on the farms. Younger children frequently went to school during the summer. It was also true that there was little communication between teachers and those who were responsible for the community schools. As Horace Mann observed in a lecture shortly after accepting his new responsibility:

In this Commonwealth, there are 3,000 public schools, in all of which the rudiments of knowledge are taught. These schools, at the present time, are so many distinct independent communities; each being governed by its own habits, traditions, and local customs. There is no common, superintending power over them; there is no bond of brotherhood or family between them. They are strangers and aliens to each other. As the system is now administered, if any improvement in principles or modes of teaching is discovered by talent or accident, in one school, instead of being published to the world, it dies with the discoverer. No means exist for multiplying new truths, or preserving old ones.⁵

During his tenure as Secretary of Education in Massachusetts, Mann visited approximately 1,000 schools. He found deplorable facilities which lacked adequate heating, lighting, and ventilation. There were no blackboards, no standardized textbooks, and the only teaching method was having students memorize their textbook and recite what they had memorized back to the teacher. Most of all, he was appalled by the inequality of the system that had evolved in his state. Wealthy children were in school for longer periods, and the poorest often failed to attend because they lacked even the minimal tuition fees. At one point, Mann suggested that the state of Massachusetts took better care of its livestock than its children. He was also vehemently opposed to the means of punishment being used by school masters, noting that they “crowd from forty to sixty children into that ill-constructed shell of a building, there to sit in the most uncomfortable seats that could be contrived, expecting that with the occasional application of the birch they will then come out educated for manhood or womanhood.”⁶

Despite the fact that schools were far from excellent even in the middle of the 19th century, the importance of providing a quality education for all children was at least discussed by some of the leaders during and after we gained our independence. Following the American Revolution, one of the most outspoken champions of state-supported schools was Philadelphia physician, Benjamin Rush. One of the founding fathers, he spoke out and wrote frequently about the need for publicly-supported schools. He believed that our newly established democratic government “created a new class of duties for every American.” For his home state of Pennsylvania, this meant creating “free district or township schools that would teach reading, writing, arithmetic and the English and German languages.”⁷ These schools would provide a common education which

would “render the mass of people more homogeneous, and thereby fit them more easily for a uniform and peaceful government.”⁸ The thoughts expressed by Benjamin Rush would be echoed fifty years later by Horace Mann as he was promoting the need for common schools.

Even President Washington articulated his support for education. In his first message to Congress he included the words that “there is nothing which can better deserve your patronage than the promotion of science and literature. Knowledge is in every country the surest basis for public happiness.”⁹ The members of both houses of Congress agreed in their responses to the President.¹⁰

Perhaps the most eloquent of the proponents of education for the masses was Thomas Jefferson. While agreeing with Rush on the importance of education in a democracy, Jefferson did not support the idea that schools should “impose political values or mold the virtuous republican citizen.” He instead believed that the function of education was to make the common man literate enough to exercise reason and to develop political beliefs. For Jefferson, public schools would also help to identify an elite which would then be sent on to college to prepare for leadership. This group would become a natural aristocracy.¹¹

Ever the optimist, Jefferson was also convinced that education and knowledge would improve the human condition. This too would be one of the underlying assumptions in the thinking of Horace Mann. In 1818, while in retirement at his home at Monticello, an aging Jefferson wrote that:

Schools should be established to provide tuition-free education for three years for all male and female children. In these schools, children were to be taught ‘reading, writing, and common arithmetick’ [sic], and the books shall be used therein for instructing the children to read shall be such as

will at the same time make them acquainted with Grecian, Roman, English, and American history.¹²

Despite Jefferson's lifelong support of public education, he was not successful either as a leader in Virginia or as President of the United States in establishing a system of tax-supported elementary schools. In fact, despite their belief in the importance of education, the generation of the founding fathers accomplished little in providing educational opportunities for the new nation's children. The Constitution which they wrote and ratified did not mention the word education and did not delegate the responsibility for establishing schools to the federal government. Instead, it has been an accepted fact for most of our history that education was a power that was reserved for the states. Even so, during the first three decades of the 19th century, state governments did little in the field of education. The probable reason for their reluctance to interfere with the pattern of local control was that schools had been established and governed by local communities for two hundred years. It would take a generation of strong and committed leaders to establish the role of state governments in providing common schools for the children of their state. Foremost in this group of leaders in the decades of the 1830's and 1840's was Horace Mann of Massachusetts.

Notes

1. V. T. Thayer, *Formative Ideas in American Education*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, Inc., 1974), 4.

2. James C. Klotter, "The Black South and White Appalachia," *Journal of American History*, (March 1980), pp. 832-49.

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3. Robert F. McNergney and Joanne M. Herbert, *Foundations of Education*, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 48.
 4. Peter S. Hlebowitsh and Kip Tellez, *American Education: Purpose and Promise*, (Belmont, CA: West/Wadsworth, 1997), 17.
 5. Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education, the National Experience: 1783-1876*, (Cambridge, MA: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980), 155.
 6. Editors Sarah Mondale and Sarah B. Patton, *School: The Story of American Public Education*: (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 27-28.
 7. Cremin, *American Education, the National Experience: 1783-1876*, 116.
 8. Cremin, *American Education, the National Experience: 1783-1876*, 117.
 9. L. Dean Webb, Arlene Metha, and K. Forbis Jordan, *Foundations of American Education*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 2000), 169.
 10. Webb, Metha, and Jordan, *Foundations of American Education*, 169.
 11. Joel Spring, *The American School: 1642-2004*, (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 50-51.
 12. Spring, *The American School: 1642-2004*, 52.