

*The
Troubled
Crusade*



American Education
1945-1980

DIANE RAVITCH

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DIANE RAVITCH

INTRODUCTION

In 1786, Thomas Jefferson, at that time the American minister to the French government, wrote his friend and adviser George Wythe in Williamsburg, Virginia. He was delighted that the Virginia legislature had finally agreed to enact the statute for religious freedom that he had proposed some seven years earlier. However, he wrote Wythe, the most important bill before the state legislature, which had still not passed, was that “for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness.” For Jefferson, any doubt of this was removed by what he had seen of the common people of France, who were surrounded by “blessings from nature” and yet miserable because they remained in the grip of “ignorance, superstition, poverty and oppression of body and mind in every form.” Jefferson exhorted his friend, “Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils, and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.”¹

This book is a report on the state of the crusade against ignorance during a particularly tumultuous time in American history. Many other crusades stormed through the nation’s educational institutions during these thirty-five years, sometimes complementing the crusade against ignorance, at other times subordinating it to some other worthy or unworthy cause. More than at any other time in American history, the crusade against ignorance was understood to mean a crusade for equal educational opportunity. At every level of formal education, from nursery school to graduate school, equal opportunity became the overriding goal of postwar educational reformers. Sometimes those who led the battles seemed to forget why it was important to keep students in school longer; to forget that the fight for higher enrollments was part of a crusade against igno-

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rance, and that institutions would be judged by what their students had learned as well as by how many were enrolled.

Probably no other idea has seemed more typically American than the belief that schooling could cure society's ills. Whether in the early nineteenth century or the late twentieth century, Americans have argued for more schooling on the grounds that it would preserve democracy, eliminate poverty, lower the crime rate, enrich the common culture, reduce unemployment, ease the assimilation of immigrants to the nation, overcome differences between ethnic groups, advance scientific and technological progress, prevent traffic accidents, raise health standards, refine moral character, and guide young people into useful occupations. While it has become fashionable in recent years to assert that schools and universities do little more than preserve the status quo and parcel out credentials, this hard-edged cynicism has less truth in it than the "myth" it is intended to debunk. Throughout history, Americans have expected much of their educational institutions; sometimes schools have been expected to take on responsibilities for which they were entirely unsuited. When they have failed, it was usually because their leaders and their public alike had forgotten their real limitations as well as their real strengths.

Defined as they so often were as instruments of national purpose, educational institutions became focal points for large areas of consensus (there is much, after all, on which Americans agree), but they also served as magnets for dissension, attracting all those who wanted to change the social order, preserve threatened traditions, challenge historic wrongs, or make sure that the next generation was not tainted by the errors of their predecessors. Ideology, social turmoil, racial and ethnic tensions, national and international events brought reformers to the schools and universities, eager to know what they were teaching; what books they were using; what kinds of ideas were espoused; who was being permitted to teach; what kinds of students were admitted, promoted, going to college, and winning degrees.

In 1945, American education had the strengths and weaknesses of a highly decentralized, pyramidal system. Everyone could go to school, but the difference in quality between the best schools and the worst schools was enormous. There were first-rate school districts and outstanding preparatory schools which sent large numbers of their graduates to great institutions of higher education. But there were also poor schools with narrow offerings, located in poor areas, where few students prepared for college. Good schools and good teachers were not equally available to all children; access to higher education was not open on an equal basis to all talented youths. One's educational chances were limited by the accident of birth and by the color of one's skin.

As the nation emerged from the Second World War, its idealism and aspirations raised high, the inequitable features of American education seemed more unacceptable than at any time in the past, though the problem of unequal opportunity was no worse than before. At the very least, the American crusade against ignorance required that the opportunity for education be made available to all young people, without regard to race, creed, national origin, sex, or family background. The obstacles to change were formidable. Idealism and aspiration alone were not enough to shake loose the shackles of the past; not enough, perhaps, to win the day, but enough to stir the nation's conscience and to keep alive the campaign for equal educational opportunity until the right political and social circumstances made success possible.

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The Troubled Crusade

CHAPTER 1

Postwar Initiatives

IN EARLY 1945, with the war in Europe coming to an end, the Senate Committee on Education and Labor opened hearings on a proposal for federal aid to education. The most insistent claimants for federal help were poor districts, which had a difficult time adequately financing their public schools from local property taxes. In addition to the usual statements of support and opposition from interest groups, several teachers told the senators about conditions in their schools. Miss Wilma Upchurch, a teacher from rural Nebraska, stated that her school had 487 pupils and twelve teachers, only seven of whom had college degrees. Because of low salaries, teacher turnover had been 50 percent the year before, and one out of every five teachers in the state had a temporary emergency teaching certificate, usually because of lack of qualifications. Her district, a poor one, taxed itself to the limit and yet was able to spend only forty to forty-seven dollars per pupil annually. "I am sure I could get a job in another state, or maybe I could work at the bomber plant," Miss Upchurch testified, "but I would rather stay in the teaching profession. Somebody has got to teach those children, and I would like to do it."¹

Mrs. Florence Christmas, a black teacher from Copiah County, Mississippi, described her school of 190 children and three teachers. As principal, she taught all subjects in four grades (fifth through eighth) and received \$60 per month for six months. The other two teachers were paid, respectively, \$292 and \$288 for the six-month term. Mrs. Christmas said:

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Our school is called Antioch and is located on the same ground as the Antioch Baptist Church. Some of our people in the community are small truck farmers. They have a great love for education. They built their own schoolhouse. It has grown from one room to a three-teacher type school. The money for the building was raised by the teachers, children, and patrons. We gave programs, entertainments, secured pledges from the parents and friends, and gave money from our salaries to help with the building. We have been able to put on one coat of paint, inside and out.

Parents and teachers were still trying to raise \$12.57, Mrs. Christmas said, to "finish paying for the paint," and their next project was to get enough benches "so that all the children may have seats, especially those in the primary room."²

Of six thousand Negro teachers in Mississippi, said Mrs. Christmas, five thousand received less than \$600 per year. During the months when school was not in session, she held a factory job, making containers for vegetables, where she earned almost as much in a week as in a month of teaching. When he heard this, Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas asked her, "Why do you do teaching?"

Mrs. Christmas responded, "Teaching is my profession. I would rather teach."

It was matter-of-factly noted in the record that in Copiah County, where Mrs. Christmas taught, the average salary for white teachers was \$889.53, compared to an annual average for black teachers of \$332.58; the length of the school term was eight months for whites and six months for blacks; of 91 white teachers in the county, 44 had no college degree, while of 126 black teachers, 122 had no college degree. The daily attendance rate for white children was 48 percent; for black children, it was 60 percent. At the Antioch school, the black parents dug down into their pockets to keep the school open for a seventh month.

Educational conditions throughout the South, particularly in rural areas, were equally depressed. Dr. E. B. Norton, the chief state school officer of Alabama, noted that "the only difference between our state and some of the others is that our emergency is not temporary, ours seems to be a permanent emergency." Some eleven thousand of Alabama's twenty thousand teachers had left their jobs in the three years after Pearl Harbor; many of their replacements had no college training. Low pay was one reason: the annual salary for white teachers was \$976, and for black teachers only \$600. Furthermore, more than half the school buildings in the state were heated with open stoves, and more than half lacked electricity.³

Other states, though not so desperately poor as those in the South, echoed similar complaints about teacher shortages caused by low salaries

and competition from defense industries. The Colorado Education Association held that "the schools of Colorado are facing the gravest crisis in all their existence. The salaries are so woefully low that we are losing hundreds of our best teachers to industry and to other States. . . . one out of every three teachers in Colorado is a temporary teacher." A spokesman from Utah declared that 25 percent of the state's teachers did not have proper certification, and in Iowa some eight hundred rural schools were altogether without a teacher.⁴

There were no supplicants at the hearings from city schools, which were generally well staffed and well financed; suburbanization had not yet become a major trend, and city schools provided the standard for teachers' salaries, class size, and facilities, against which rural schools seemed needy and inadequate.

The issue of federal aid to education had been raised periodically in the Congress since the 1870s and had consistently failed to pass, no matter how compelling the demonstration of educational calamity. Invariably, federal aid became a national question when some crisis riveted national attention on the schools. It was debated for several years after World War I, when the army discovered that large numbers of its draftees were illiterate; it became an issue during the Great Depression, when plummeting revenues forced school districts to close schools, fire teachers, cut salaries, and eliminate programs. The education lobby, led by the National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest group of teachers and supervisors, kept up the battle for federal aid during and after the war. Each era produced its own rationale for federal aid, and the major theme of the 1945 hearings—which teachers like Miss Upchurch and Mrs. Christmas dramatized—was the lack of equal opportunity in American education. The plea of the education interest groups was not just that American education was in a state of dire need, but that the incontrovertible fact of sharp inequalities from district to district and from state to state was manifestly unfair.

With the war coming to an end, the NEA and its allies—such as organized labor, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers—believed that the time was right to launch a new campaign for federal support of the nation's schools. As they well knew, the obstacles were formidable. Bills for federal aid had traditionally foundered for three reasons: race, religion, and fear of federal control. No matter how bleak the plight of the schools, every effort to formulate legislation had been stymied by conflicts over whether to fund the South's racially segregated schools; whether to fund nonpublic (largely Catholic) schools; and how to prevent federal subsidization from becoming federal domination of local schools.

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Every time the issue was raised, different coalitions formed, depending on how these questions were framed in potential legislation. Southerners, whose need for federal aid was greatest, supported it as long as it did not threaten their system of racial segregation. Blacks, organized labor, and liberal congressmen would support federal aid proposals only if they guaranteed equal funding without regard to race. The public school lobby, headed by the NEA, would not support a bill that offered any form of aid to nonpublic schools. But any bill that aided only public schools was opposed by Catholics and by congressmen from districts with large Catholic constituencies. The distribution formula was also a problem: a bill that granted money only to the poorest states risked losing the votes of representatives from states that would get nothing, while a bill that distributed money to every state was either too expensive or spread the aid too thinly to help the poorest states. A sizable number of conservative congressmen, mostly Republicans, opposed any federal aid to education, for fear that it would destroy local control of public schooling.

Yet there was reason to hope that the end of World War II might be the right time to break through these traditional grounds for deadlock. During the war years, Americans had talked a great deal about defending the ideals of democracy and the American way of life, and the education lobby sensed that the time had come to base its appeal on the promise of democratic ideology. But beyond ideology was compelling need. The teacher shortage was a national problem, as were low salaries. There was also a critical need for new classrooms and schools, not only because replacement and repair had been deferred by the Depression and the war, but because as early as 1946 and 1947, it was clear that the fast-rising birthrate would produce a "baby boom" that would overwhelm existing classroom capacity. No less important than sheer physical need was awareness, at least among educational leaders, that the nation was entering an age of technological and scientific advance that required rising levels of education in order to maintain economic growth. And, perhaps more sharply than at any time in the past, there was concern that both of these trends—the growth of population and the rising levels of education—would exacerbate divisions within the society along lines of race and class and intensify inequality unless educational opportunities were equalized across the nation.

Only crisis would stir the Congress to action, and in the years immediately following the war, America's schools were in deep enough trouble to gain a hearing. Benjamin Fine, the education editor of the *New York Times*, wrote in 1947, "America's public school system is confronted with the most serious crisis in its history." After a six-month tour across the coun-

try, Fine reported that three hundred and fifty thousand teachers had left the public schools since 1940 for war service or better jobs; that one of every seven teachers held an emergency ("substandard") certificate; that seventy thousand teaching jobs were unfilled; that six thousand schools would close because of the teacher shortage; that sixty thousand of the nation's teachers had only a high school education or less; that the average teacher's salary was \$37 per week, which was lower than the pay of the average truck driver, garbage collector, or bartender; that 20 percent of all teachers—one hundred and seventy-five thousand—were new to the job each year, a turnover double the prewar rate; that fewer students were entering teaching, and that men were deserting the teaching profession; that twelve major teachers' strikes had taken place in the six months following September, 1946; that teacher morale was at a new low; that "appalling" inequities existed throughout the nation, from the best classrooms (where as much as \$6,000 was spent per classroom unit) to the poorest (where as little as \$100 was spent per classroom unit); that the United States was spending less of its national income on schools than either Great Britain or the Soviet Union; and that school buildings were in a "deplorable state all over the nation."⁵

The sense of crisis extended well beyond the physical and financial needs of American education to larger questions of social policy that were unresolved as the postwar period began. In higher education, educators debated the problem of access, of who should be educated and for how many years, and at whose expense. Should higher education be available only to those who could afford to pay for it and to those talented enough and lucky enough to win a scholarship? Should a greater proportion of young people receive a postsecondary education, and if so, who should pay for it? Should public funds be given only to public institutions or should private colleges and universities also receive federal assistance? In elementary and secondary education, equally vexing problems pervaded the ongoing debates: What was to be done to improve the poor conditions in certain districts and states? How could already poor districts afford to pay higher teacher salaries or to build new schools? Since only the federal government had the taxing and spending power to redistribute funds from wealthy regions to poor regions, how could the traditional stalemate in Congress be broken to pass a federal aid bill? Should federal aid go only to schools that did not permit racial segregation or should it go to all schools based only on need? Should public money go only to public schools or should it go also to nonpublic schools? Was it possible to establish federal "standards" that would not turn into federal domination of local schools? And then there were questions of pedagogy. The rapid