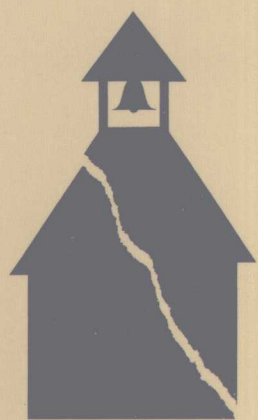
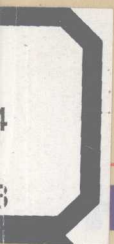


F O U R T H E D I T I O N



# THE IMPERFECT PANACEA

American  
Faith in  
Education



HENRY J. PERKINSON

# *The Imperfect Panacea*

## *American Faith in Education*

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FOURTH EDITION

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*American Faith in Education*

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## *About the Author*

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# Preface

Most of my professional life has revolved around the issues dealt with in this book. Since the early 1960s, when I first took up the theme, I have been trying to uncover both the origins and the consequences of America's faith in education. With each successive edition of the book, I have corrected earlier errors and mistakes. Few authors are so fortunate to have such an opportunity, and I am grateful to my editor, Lane Akers, for the chance to do it one more time.

*The Imperfect Panacea* first appeared at a time when the history of American education was undergoing a remarkable transformation. Educational historians had begun to shake the narrow, parochial, in-house, celebrationist outlook that had long characterized the field. Under the leadership of Bernard Bailyn of Harvard and Lawrence Cremin of Teachers College, a fresh group of historians brought a new rigor and depth to the field. Schools of education prepared better-trained historians of education and history departments turned out historians interested in the American educational history. Historians like Rush Welter, Stanley Schultz, Selwyn Troen, Paul Mattingly, Carl Kaestle, Robert Church, and Marvin Lazerson, have all made contributions that have enriched and improved the history of American education.

At the same time as it was becoming more academically respectable, the new history of education had more relevance to practicing educators—particularly in the domain of educational policy. As they came to look at American education in less pietistic ways, historians of education became critical of American education. Some—especially those who took practicing educators, rather than professional historians, as their primary audience—tried to find out why American schools were failing.

Lawrence Cremin, in his pathbreaking *The Transformation of the School*, laid the blame on the professionalization of schooling, which had cut educators off from the political allies needed to bring about and secure reform in American schools. In his later, monumental, *American Education*, Cremin presented the converse of the same argument, claiming, and demonstrating, that education,

if construed more broadly than mere schooling, has been widely successful in America.

One of the most influential explanations of why American schools have failed has come from those scholars who adopt a Marxist, or neo-Marxist, approach to history. Scholars such as Michael Katz, Colin Greer, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, Clarence Karier, Paul Violas, Joel Spring, and David Nassau, have argued that capitalism lies at the root of the failure: schools necessarily serve the interests of the capitalist class and help to reproduce that inherently unfair system.

Other historians have traced the failure of the schools to the ideologies of those who have promoted and maintained them. According to David Tyack and Carl Kaestle, the ideologies of the educators of the past and present have colored and narrowed their vision, resulting in the creation of rigid, inflexible bureaucratic school systems.

Another popular explanation of school failure has come from Diane Ravitch, who has argued that the intransigence and doctrinaire outlooks and personalities of too many of the participants has destroyed the give and take of negotiation and compromise necessary to the political world of educational policy making.

In *The Imperfect Panacea*, I originally argued that the failure of the schools followed from the grandiose expectations that Americans had—expectations that the schools can and should solve all of the problems of the society. In subsequent editions, I pointed out that in addition to the problems of racial inequality, urban decay, unemployment, and nationalization, Americans now expected the schools to solve the problems of overpopulation and AIDS via sex education programs, the problem of pollution via environmental education, the drug problem via drug education programs, the automobile safety problem via driver education, discrimination and intolerance via multicultural education, crime via values education . . . on and on.

Since first publishing the book, I have come up with the hypothesis that this faith in education rests on the conception that education is socialization. This notion that education consists of changing people in some predetermined way is what underlies the faith in education to solve our social problems. Once the schools change people, the story goes, the problem of racial inequality, or unemployment, or poverty, or social conflict, would go away. The problems did not go away. The schools failed.

I have devoted a large chunk of my professional work in recent years to formulating an alternative conception of education, which I call a critical approach. However, although I think that the notion that education is socialization is mischievous and corrupting, I do not believe many educators are likely to give it up.

In this fourth (and final) edition, I have added a chapter on the development of the public school in the nineteenth century. I have also integrated the epilogue from the third edition into the body of the text. And I have incorporated what is called cultural theory, as developed by the anthropologist Mary

Douglas, to explain some of the goings on I talk about in the book. In this edition, I have concluded that, besides being an imperfect panacea, public schools are no longer viable institutions in the society we now live in.

In writing this edition, I am indebted to the work of the scholars I have mentioned in the preface, but most of all, I am indebted to the friendly and insightful criticisms of my students at New York University.

Henry J. Perkinson

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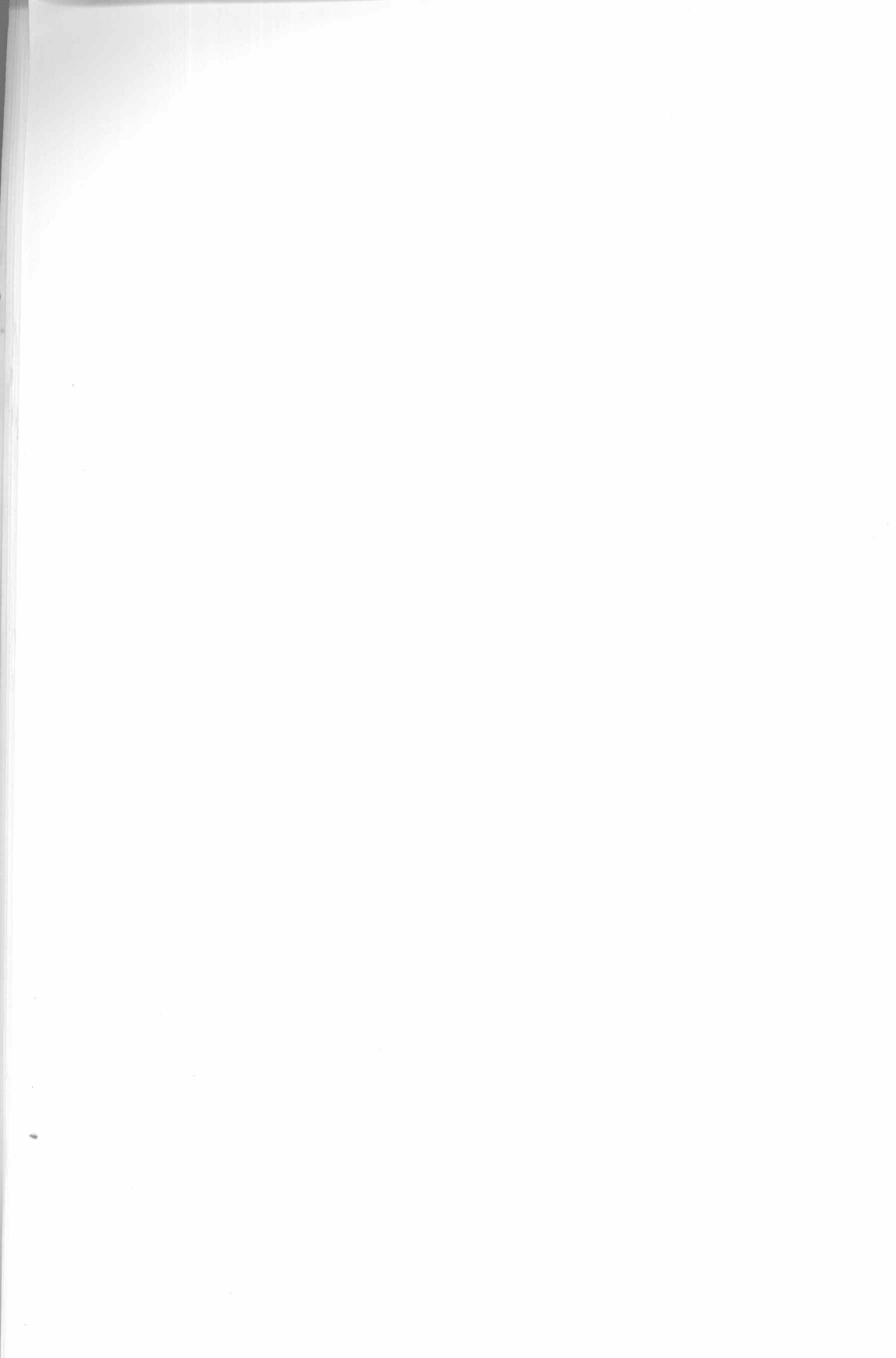
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PART ONE

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*American Faith  
in Education*



# *Americans and Their Schools*

## I

From the beginning Americans depended on their schools. Alone in the savage wilderness of their new settlements, the earliest colonists had to rely upon schools and schoolteachers far more than they did in Europe. Forced to spend their days securing the basic necessities of life, these pioneer parents had little time to care for their children. Moreover, since their New World lacked the agencies of civilization commonplace in the mother country, parents in the New World feared that their children, if untended, might degenerate into savagery—not an unlikely fate in this strange, wild, and dangerous land.

In the colony of Massachusetts this fear resulted in the 1642 compulsory education law, which made parents legally responsible for the education of their children. The problem, of course, lay not with parents, who, for the most part, wanted to educate their children, but in finding the time and energy to care for them. The colony realized that it needed schools and schoolmasters, and in 1647 Massachusetts adopted a law that required each town to provide them. Thus it happened that the first compulsory education laws of modern times appeared in the least civilized part of the Western world and, in fact, were a product of that very lack of civilization.

Other New England colonies copied the Massachusetts compulsory education laws, and in the Middle Atlantic colonies the settlers similarly relied heavily on schools and schoolmasters. The Quakers, a year after their arrival in Pennsylvania in 1682, asked Enoch Flower to become a schoolmaster in Philadelphia and in the same year adopted a compulsory education law.

The Dutch in New Netherlands never had any laws or statutes concerning compulsory education, but they did establish a number of schools to care for their children. The absence of laws is less surprising than the existence of schools, since the colony was actually not much more than a hunting and trapping preserve, attracting single men in search of fortune and adventure. A few families did come to settle, and these parents also turned to schools and school-

masters to do what they found impossible to do alone. When the British acquired this colony in the late seventeenth century, much of the wilderness had been tamed. Consequently, the English families who came to New York had little fear for their children and, thus, no great concern for schools or schoolmasters. This helps to explain the colony's frequently noted "policy of indifference toward educational legislation." Yet this indifference to educational legislation should not be taken as an indifference to schools and schooling. The New Yorkers did not have to look to the schools to preserve civilization; civilization was secure. Instead they looked to the schools to perform a different yet no less vital function: to prepare children for the unexpected.

## II

Throughout its early history America suffered from a short supply of labor. In the South this led to the introduction of Negro slaves. In the rest of the country it led to a decline in the system of apprenticeship. While in Europe future physicians, lawyers, merchants, bankers, artisans, and craftsmen of all kinds received their training through apprenticeship, in the New World the short supply of labor prevented Americans from becoming specialists. Rather than apprenticing themselves to one master to learn one skill well, colonial Americans had to learn to perform many different tasks. They frequently had to provide their own clothing and shelter, clear the land and plant the crops, tend their animals and care for their children, and nurse the sick and settle disputes. They had to be jacks-of-all-trades; they could not afford to be specialists. To get along, the American had to be, in Daniel Boorstin's words, "an undifferentiated man."

Since Europe had no labor shortage, it could continue to train children for specific jobs, jobs suited to their social status. In Europe each child expected to enter a specific occupation, which could usually be predicted with a fair amount of accuracy, since the social position of his or her family (and frequently his or her position in the family—the eldest son, for example, inherited the father's estate) inevitably determined career opportunities.

But in America a child's future was indeterminate. Even in the cities that were well established by the eighteenth century, the expanding economy and the shifting population combined to produce unlimited and unexpected opportunities for all. The problem, then, was to prepare for the unexpected. Yet how could this be done? In an unfamiliar, unknown land there was no one to learn from.

On the frontier farm, or in the forests, one learned from one's own experience. There were no other guides. But in the settled cities on the Eastern seaboard the case was different, since one found trade and commerce carried on in more or less traditional ways. There, young Americans preparing for the future never knew what business, calling, or profession they might enter. It was to help solve this problem of urban youth that Benjamin Franklin set forth, in his "Idea of the English School, Sketch'd Out for the Consideration of the

Trustees of the Philadelphia Academy," a proposal for a school in Philadelphia, from which youth "will come out . . . fitted for learning *any* Business, calling, or Profession." This proposal to use the school to prepare youths for the unexpected was not a novel one. Throughout the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries private "adventure" schools had sprung up in all of the Eastern towns and cities. These schools usually consisted of one teacher, who provided instruction in a great number of "modern subjects": commercial subjects, including arithmetic, accounting, bookkeeping, penmanship, letter writing; pure and applied mathematics, including engineering, surveying, navigation; modern foreign languages, Spanish, French, Portuguese; as well as geography and history.

Franklin's contribution lay in his attempt to establish a permanent school, an academy, which would take the "adventure" out of such schooling. With the academy, he hoped to institutionalize and guarantee the continuation of the kind of instruction heretofore dependent upon the immobility and longevity of the private teachers. Actually the academy, after a few years, strayed from Franklin's original purpose, becoming primarily a Latin grammar school. Franklin then severed his connections with it, asserting that it "was no longer concerned with education for such a country as ours."

Although his own academy was a sore disappointment, others took up Franklin's idea for a permanent school where youths could be prepared for the unexpected. By the end of the century academies had been set up in all parts of the country, offering both modern and traditional subjects. Yet even as the academy idea triumphed, other educational developments took center stage. Once they had gained their independence from Britain, the Americans looked to the schools and the schoolmasters to perform a new function: a political function.

### III

As soon as the War for Independence ended, Americans began to talk about the vital relationship between education and government. In the 1790's the American Philosophical Society sponsored a contest to select the best essay on a "system of Liberal Education and Literary Instruction adapted to the genius of government. . . ." Most accepted the claim that, in a republic, the chief end of education is to promote intelligent citizenship. This followed logically from the American negative conception of government, a conception embodied succinctly in the statement, "that government is best that governs least." Fearful of governmental tyranny, the Americans had set up a national government that could be restrained and held in check. To do this they had adopted a variety of institutional devices: a Bill of Rights; a written Constitution that enumerated specific powers; a separation of the three branches of government, with each one having the power to veto, or check, the others; and regular, frequent elections, so that the citizens could peacefully get rid of undesirables in public office. But the proper working of all these institutional devices

depended upon an enlightened citizenry, an educated citizenry. No one saw this more clearly than Thomas Jefferson. In a letter to George Washington in 1786 he wrote: "It is an axiom of my mind that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that too of the people with a certain degree of instruction."

Jefferson went on to say that he thought this "is the business of the state to effect, and on a general plan." A few years earlier he had submitted to the Virginia legislature just such a general plan for a statewide system of schools, the famous "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge." Here we find clearly articulated the new political function expected of the schools: "experience has shown," he wrote, "that even under the best forms [of government], those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny and it is believed that the most effective means of preventing this would be to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large."

The Federal Constitution makes no mention of education, which meant that it remained among the powers that the Tenth Amendment reserved "to the states respectively, or to the people." During this early national period each state government, in one way or another, did encourage the setting up of schools. Usually this took the form of financial help—anything from the allotment of special tax revenues to state lotteries. Sometimes the state donated grants of land for schools. Most states created a permanent fund to provide school grants.

Encouragement for the creation of schools came from the national government as well. The famous Northwest Ordinance of 1787 required each township in the Northwest Territory to set aside a mile square section of land for educational purposes. This ordinance captured perfectly the sentiment of most Americans when it declared: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education should forever be encouraged."

The same Northwest Ordinance provided that each state in the territory must set aside not more than two townships "for the purposes of a seminary of learning." This concern with higher education also had its roots in the political theory of the new nation. In contrast to the political practices of Europe, where governmental power was in the hands of a hereditary aristocracy, the Founding Fathers proclaimed that theirs was a free society, an open society, where positions of power were accessible to all men. They fondly hoped that this openness of their society would allow men of talent to rise to positions of leadership, regardless of their ancestry or their economic status. Rejecting the artificial aristocracies of the Old World, the Americans looked for, as Jefferson put it, "a national aristocracy of talent."

The identification, cultivation, and preparation of these men of talent became the task of the schools. The schools were expected to produce future leaders. Jefferson's plan for the state of Virginia clearly embodied this function of selecting and training leaders. His proposed hierarchical educational system would, he declared, rake the best geniuses "from the rubbish."

Few, other than Jefferson, saw the necessity for an entire system of education, but most did see the need for institutions of higher learning to perform this political function of producing leaders. During this early national period a number of prominent statesmen—including George Washington, James Madison, and John Quincy Adams—publicly proposed the establishment of a national university. Religion and political difficulties prevented its inception. However, throughout the country colleges and universities sprang up. Some were private, usually religious, institutions; others were public or state colleges. By 1799 America had 25 institutions of higher learning. Only twenty-five years earlier there had been but 9. By 1820 the number of colleges had increased to 50.

#### IV

Where did this American faith in education come from?

Originally I thought, and so argued in the book, that this faith in education was typically American, an outcome of being the first *new* colony in the modern world, and later, the first *new* nation. Lacking established institutions and settled arrangements for dealing with their social, economic, and political problems, Americans, from the beginning, I suggested, turned to their schools to solve them. But I now think otherwise. Americans are not the only people to have faith in education. People in other countries, especially developing countries, share this faith, display this outlook. Where, then, did this faith come from?

I now think that this faith in education emerged as one of the consequences of the invention of the printing press in Europe in the late fifteenth century. The argument that connects the printing press to this faith in education is complex and convoluted. Briefly, I think that the printing press first made mass education possible, and then made it necessary. More important: the printing press helped to create a new concept of education itself, a concept that lies at the heart of the belief that education is a panacea for all of society's ills. Let me briefly elaborate this argument.

The printing press made mass education possible by reproducing books in multiple copies that could be scattered everywhere. Scholars no longer had to consult hand-copied rolls of parchment hidden away in dusty monasteries. The printing press liquified knowledge and sent it coursing throughout the Western world so that everyone who could read had access to it, even children. Moreover, through the printing press, scholars could now reclaim, permanently, the writings of the ancients—the writings of the Greeks and Romans as well as the writings of the early Christians and Jews. The printing press preserved all these writings, preserved them in “typographical fixity,” to use Elizabeth Eisenstein’s felicitous phrase.

Yet, although the printing press provided the materials—books in multiple copies—that made mass education possible, no one at that time thought it necessary to educate the masses. The masses were laborers, most of them serfs

who grew the crops and raised the livestock and processed the foods; others were craftsmen who manufactured and mended the utensils and artifacts used in daily life. No need to educate them. They had no use for reading and writing. Traditionally, only the clergy were literate. They served as clerks for the church and for the secular rulers as well—maintaining records and accounts, writing letters, copying manuscripts and documents. Some secular rulers might have known how to read and write, but it was more important that they know how to use a sword, how to ride a horse, how to joust; these were the arts central to *their* education. But after the printing press made books readily available, some scholars persuaded some of the aristocracy to educate their sons in the liberal arts—the arts that one could learn from a book (*liber*). These arts were the humanities, the arts that “liberated” one from living the life of a mere animal and enabled one to realize oneself as a human being. So, those who received the new education—which, ironically, consisted of “ancient” books and texts—were not the masses but the children of the aristocracy.

It was not until after the Protestant Reformation that anyone thought it necessary to educate the masses. And here, too, the printing press played a role. Without the printing press, Martin Luther’s quarrel with the papacy would have been little noticed and soon forgotten. The printing press rapidly reproduced and transmitted the broadsides and pamphlets of Luther and his supporters through all of Christendom, fanning the fires of discord and discontent within the church. The Protestant Reformation tore the church asunder, splitting it into competing, and sometimes warring, sects. When the conflicts ended and peace ensued, the clergy of each competing sect realized that it was necessary to educate the masses so that they could read the Bible and understand it as they ought. The children of each sect had to be taught which doctrines to embrace and the proper creeds to which they must subscribe.

By this time, many secular rulers concurred with the proposal to educate the masses—but for their own reasons. The princes and kings of Europe had long sought to secure centralized control over their realms. The printing press finally enabled them to do just this by reproducing multiple copies of the various laws, decrees, communiques, rules, documents, and records that the rulers could use to regulate the lives of their subjects and to unify the state. But if they would be rulers of their realms, the kings and princes required loyal, obedient, and industrious subjects. Here, too, then, was a reason for mass education—for the “good of the nation.” So, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both church and secular authorities began to see the necessity for educating the masses. And throughout Europe, fledgling efforts began to take root.

Let me summarize my argument on this point. As I see it, the printing press helped to change the religious and the political arrangements in Europe, as a consequence of which it became necessary to educate the masses, educate them to be loyal and faithful followers.

This education for the masses was actually an alternative to the “true” education provided for the upper classes. The distinction can be summed up by the terms *initiation* and *socialization*. The education provided the children of the



upper classes initiated them into the cultural heritage of Western civilization by having them study the best that had been thought and said and done, as contained in the classic texts from Greece and Rome. "Within these two literatures," Erasmus wrote, "are contained all the knowledge which we recognize as of vital importance to mankind." There was no extrinsic purpose to this liberal education; the sole purpose was to help people become human beings. But the education now beginning to be provided to the masses was quite different. First of all, it was briefer: reading and writing (in the vernacular) and religion. But it also had a different purpose—an extrinsic purpose: to make the masses industrious workers, loyal subjects, faithful church members. In short, this education was a process of socialization: the integration of children of the lower classes into the existing society by having them learn the skills, understandings, sentiments, and beliefs to keep it going.

With the emergence of this new kind of education, new metaphors appeared. The traditional education provided for the upper classes had used the metaphor of the teacher as a mentor who initiated the student to the cultural heritage of Western civilization by guiding his or her study of the classical texts. In contrast, people now described the education provided for the lower classes by recourse to the metaphor of the printing press. Here is how Comenius, an influential educator of the seventeenth century, put it: "Instead of paper, we have pupils," Comenius wrote, "pupils whose minds have to be impressed with the symbols of knowledge. Instead of type, we have classbooks and the rest of the apparatus devised to facilitate the operation of teaching. The ink is replaced by the voice of the master since it is this that conveys information to the minds of the listener, while the press is school discipline, which keeps the pupils up to their work and compels them to learn."

In Europe, this concept of education as a process of socialization applied only to the education provided for the lower classes. But in America, which was settled by Europeans *after* the Protestant Reformation, and by Europeans mainly from the lower classes, this kind of education took root and became the only recognized mode of education. Recall Benjamin Franklin's insistence that the study of Latin and Greek literatures was simply not suited "for such a country as ours."

With the socialization concept of education, one must start off by deciding upon the extrinsic purpose of education, what talents, knowledge, beliefs, values, skills, and understandings must be transmitted to children in order to keep society going. Thus, the construction of education as a process of socialization leads logically to the notion that education is a panacea. Americans, from the earliest colonial times, have been the unwitting captives of the concept that education is a process of socialization, a concept that lies at the heart of this enduring faith in education.

In the nineteenth century this faith in education was institutionalized in the public schools, with the consequence that Americans came to believe that the public schools could solve all of society's problems.