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EDUCATION REFORM

REVISED EDITION

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Ian C. Friedman

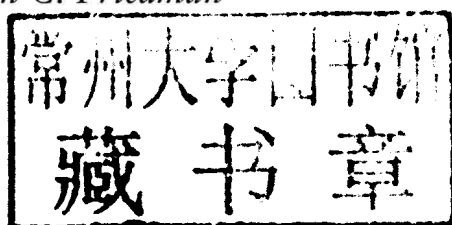


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Education Reform, Revised Edition

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

PART I OVERVIEW OF THE TOPIC

Chapter 1
Introduction to Education Reform 3

Chapter 2
The Law and Education Reform 56

Chapter 3
Chronology 101

Chapter 4
Biographical Listing 114

Chapter 5
Glossary 122

PART II GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

Chapter 6
How to Research Education Reform Issues 135

Chapter 7
Annotated Bibliography 144

Chapter 8
Organizations and Agencies 187

PART III
APPENDICES

Appendix A
Excerpts from *Cardinal Principles of*
Secondary Education, 1918 199

Appendix B
President Lyndon B. Johnson's Remarks upon Signing
the Elementary and Secondary Education Bill (HR 2362),
April 11, 1965 209

Appendix C
Excerpts from *A Nation at Risk*, National Commission
on Excellence in Education, April 1983 212

Appendix D
Excerpt from GOALS 2000: Educate America Act,
January 25, 1994 227

Appendix E
Excerpts from *Susan Tave Zelman, Superintendent of Public*
Instruction of Ohio, et al. v. Doris Simmons-Harris et al.,
June 27, 2002 232

Appendix F
U.S. Secretary of Education's Overview of Key Policy Provisions
in No Child Left Behind Act, July 24, 2002 242

Appendix G
Statistics State Charter School Enrollment and Operation 250

Index 253

PART I



OVERVIEW OF THE TOPIC

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO EDUCATION REFORM

It seems appropriate that a book about education reform in the United States begin with a standby of American schooling—a multiple-choice question.

Analyze the quotations below and answer the question that follows.

“The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.”

“Our standard for high school graduation has slipped badly. Fifty years ago a high-school diploma meant something.”

“Whether we like it or not, we’re beginning to see that we’re pitted against the world in a gigantic battle of brains and skills.”

The quotations above reflect beliefs about the condition of U.S. public education commonly held in the

- A 1980s
- B 1950s
- C early 1900s
- D all of the above

The correct answer is D.

The first quotation is from the landmark 1983 publication *A Nation at Risk*, which served as a key catalyst for the growth of education reform activity over the past 25 years. The second quotation is from a 1958 *U.S. News and World Report* interview of education historian and author Arthur Bestor.

Education Reform

The “fifty years ago” referred to by Bestor is almost exactly the date of the third quotation, taken from Stanford education dean Ellwood Cubberley’s 1909 book *Changing Conceptions of Education*.

Although more than 25 years have passed since the most recent of these quotations, each would be entirely plausible in the context of today’s debate on education reform. The issue of education reform—the effort to improve the quality, methods, and purpose of elementary and secondary schooling in the United States—traces its origins to the inception of public schools, which preceded the founding of the nation by almost 150 years.

Since that time, education reform has both reflected and led social change in United States. The widely held belief that schools play a critically important role in shaping the nation’s future has led to intense discussion on a variety of issues, including assimilation of immigrants, integration of African Americans, economic strength, the role of the federal government, constitutional rights of parents and children, and opportunity for individuals from lower economic backgrounds.

At present, as in the past, issues of effectiveness, fairness, and competitiveness shape the arguments over education reform. Advocates often have sharply contrasting views on such leading questions as

- Can school choice, including vouchers, charter schools, and privatization, successfully combat the cycle of poor children trapped in failing schools?
- What are the causes, outcomes, and implications of homeschooling?
- What are effective accountability measures for students and schools? Do curriculum standards and reliance on standardized assessments promote academic achievement? Are policies ending social promotion and bilingual instruction helpful and fair to students?
- Who will teach, particularly in chronically underserved areas? How can teaching become a profession that attracts, trains, and retains top candidates, especially in light of an expected teaching shortage?
- How can the culture within schools be strengthened to promote learning and safety? Are class-size reduction initiatives, zero-tolerance policies, and dress codes effective?

The background, themes, events, people, and movements that have shaped the history of education reform in the United States reveal a consistent though paradoxical tradition in which Americans maintain enormous faith in public schools while combating the nagging fear of their failure. This tradition is now at a critical juncture as the key issues of education reform evolve and assume an increasingly prominent place in U.S. politics, culture, and society.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF U.S. EDUCATION

The roots of American notions of education reach back to ancient Greece and ancient Rome. The link between the state and support of the educational system was first described in Plato's *Republic* written around 360 B.C. The Greek philosopher's beliefs that the most intelligent were best able to lead the state and that education promotes the happiness and fulfillment of the individual by fitting him or her into his or her role in society have been espoused by education reformers of various ideological and pedagogical persuasions. Plato also expressed the belief that education could prepare individuals to function positively within society. Roman educator Quintilian extended these thoughts in the first century A.D. by emphasizing the advantages public forms of education could have, particularly on the socialization of a person. Quintilian, the tutor of the emperor's grandsons, believed that education should be concerned with a person's whole intellectual and moral nature, with the goal of producing an effective person in society. He recommended a broad literary education that included music, astronomy, geometry, and philosophy, preferably in public schools where a student could develop relationships and learn from his peers. Quintilian's views and methods helped establish a foundation for the education reformers in the United States, particularly leaders of the Progressive movement, who would follow almost 2,000 years later.

The Renaissance in Europe, which began in the 13th century and lasted more than 300 years, also had a significant impact on the development of U.S. educational thought and practice. Early in this period, Dominican monk and scholar Thomas Aquinas (1224–74) advanced reason, as well as faith, as sources of truth, helping to provide the basis for formal Roman Catholic education through curriculum that contained both theology and the liberal arts. Toward the end of the Renaissance, Dutch humanist and writer Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466–1536) criticized the ignorance of the clergy and the injustice of society, advancing public education as a means of equity. His calls for the systematic training of teachers, abolition of corporal punishment of students, and recognition of the value of play and the importance of understanding the student's individual needs and abilities helped provide a philosophical base for subsequent education reform in the United States, including the current debates.

Other important contributors to Western educational thought included Martin Luther (1483–1546), John Calvin (1509–64), John Locke (1632–1704), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). Luther advanced the resounding notion that education is necessary for the economic well-being of the state and that it should include vocational training. Luther's views influ-

Education Reform

enced development of the concept of free and compulsory education as well as the concept of universal literacy, which became essential components of U.S. education. Calvin extended Luther's thought by stressing the need for elementary schools for the masses where they could learn to read the Bible and secondary schools to prepare the leaders of church and state. This helped establish a European tradition of a two-track system that was imported to the colonies and eventually spread throughout the United States.

British philosopher Locke and French philosopher Rousseau were leading advocates of education that promoted the development of reason, morality, and individual freedom. Locke's views helped establish a strong link between learning and participatory democracy, and Rousseau's beliefs—which led him to be considered by many the “father of modern child psychology”¹—were instrumental in establishing the adaptation of instruction for children at different stages of development. Although their impact on U.S. schools has been enduring, the extent to which Locke's views of civic education and Rousseau's belief in adapted instruction should be implemented have been argued throughout U.S. education reform history.

EDUCATION IN EARLY AMERICA

The English, the predominant settlers of the North American colonies, had the greatest influence on the educational system that emerged in early America, though the cultural diversity and the presence of many different religious denominations in the colonies had a considerable impact on schooling. Colonial governments allowed individuals and religious groups to establish schools of their own. In general, colonial governments did not engage in close supervision of such schools. This early form of church-state separation came about largely due to the variety of religious denominations in the colonies, each seeking freedom of worship and each uninterested or unable to reach consensus regarding religious principles to be taught in schools founded by civil authorities.

Social and economic differences among colonial regions of British North America were also reflected in the formation of schools. In the southern colonies, religion was reverently practiced but was not the dominating force of life, as it was in New England. Therefore, the desire to have each person educated so that he or she could read the Bible was not of high importance to the wealthy English gentleman governing the southern colonies. This commonly held attitude was expressed in 1671 by Virginia governor Sir William Berkeley, who believed that every man should instruct his own children according to his means, explaining: “I thank God that there are no free schools nor printing, . . . for learning has brought disobedience and heresy, and sects into the world.”²

Introduction to Education Reform

Some efforts at organized schooling did exist in the southern colonies, though the financial commitment to them was usually lacking. Educational opportunity was determined almost exclusively by social class, and many wealthy families sent their children to tutorial schools, essentially private institutions in which a tutor would instruct young people. Dame schools in which a woman would provide rudimentary instruction in her own home, often while carrying on household tasks, were also common throughout the colonies, including the South.

The Middle Colonies featured a striking diversity of faiths, languages, and cultures and tended to develop many different kinds of schools. This diversity prevented one particular group from imposing its will on the others and created a kind of tolerance of necessity. As a result of this, a coordinated system of public schools and state support or regulation of public schools failed to develop.

Among the Middle Colonies groups, the Quakers of Pennsylvania were the most active in education, particularly at the elementary level. Quaker schools were open to girls and the poor, and some provided education for free blacks.³ Practical education, similar to what would later be termed vocational education, offering training in merchandising, navigation, trade, and mechanics, was emphasized at Benjamin Franklin's academy in Philadelphia, which opened in 1751.

New England was witness to the greatest and most influential educational endeavors of all the colonial regions. Education in New England during the colonial period was driven by the Puritan philosophy, a tenet of which was that man's sinful nature required activity to prevent idleness and instruction to avert evil.⁴ New England had less fertile land than the rest of colonial America and consequently developed a greater emphasis on such occupations as shipbuilding, manufacturing, and trade. Because of this economic activity, it was essential to have people able to read, write, and think efficiently. The establishment of schools served the specific desires and needs of the people in this region.

In 1635, the Boston Latin School became the first public school in the British colonies. Seven years later, the first compulsory education law in the colonies was enacted with the passage of the Massachusetts Act of 1642. This law stated that parents and masters of those children apprenticed to them were responsible for their basic education and literacy. It also stated that should parents and masters not meet their educational responsibility, the government would have the right to remove the child from the home and place the child where he or she could receive adequate instruction. A half-decade later, Massachusetts again led the way in education legislation with the passage of the Massachusetts Law of 1647, also known as the Old Deluder Satan Act. Provisions of this law required the establishment of elementary schools in all towns of 50 or more families

Education Reform

and the establishment of secondary schools in towns of more than 100 families.

The significance of colonial education in New England was enormous, particularly in forming the traditions of public support for district schools, local autonomy, compulsory education, and distinct educational levels. Although New England's schools had, by modern standards, a rudimentary form, narrow curriculum, and weak support, they were the forerunners for what would eventually become the public education system in the United States.

In the years leading up to the American Revolution, education for the young was growing among the thirteen colonies, which had a total population of 2 million people. The ideas of the Revolution, such as those of Locke, were particularly influential. Locke believed that ideas came from experience and that the measure of truth of an idea is its correspondence with concrete, objective, commonsense reality. These beliefs helped lead to the growth of the kind of practical education programs supported by leaders such as Franklin.

The Revolution temporarily interrupted the momentum of education but eventually served to advance a unique form of American schooling. Though the formal bonds to Great Britain were broken, and with that any financial support previously provided, the United States began to define its own vision of public education. Among the primary architects of this vision were Noah Webster and Thomas Jefferson.

Webster, known as the "Schoolmaster to America," wrote the *Compendious Dictionary* in 1806, the first in a series of dictionaries that validated and disseminated an American lexicon. Also, Webster's *Elementary Spelling Book*, often referred to as the "Blue-Back Speller," was the most successful textbook ever produced in America, with an estimated almost 20 million sold by the time of his death in 1843. The book reflected Webster's strong nationalism and emphasis on the virtues of liberty, hard work, and morality. Accordingly, Webster vigorously supported legislative action leading to free schools in which U.S. children could learn these virtues.

Jefferson's impact on U.S. education was prodigious and mainly the result of efforts unrelated to his presidency. His support for the expansion of educational opportunity to ensure a wise populace that could protect democracy was evidenced with his 1778 proposal in the Virginia legislature known as the Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge. The plan called for a state system of free elementary schools with local control of secondary schools supported by tuition and scholarships to help pave the way for poor boys. Although these provisions of the bill were not passed, it provided an often-imitated framework for future school systems, particularly the pattern of decentralized control and localization of financial responsibility. Jefferson's advocacy of the bill also served to help reduce the

Introduction to Education Reform

stigma of poverty as a barrier to receiving an elementary education and helped establish an American perception of educational equity, which is often at the center of today's education reform discussions.

The U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1789, did not explicitly mention education. The First Amendment's prohibition of government establishment of religion or religious practice did set a critical and oft-debated precedent separating state support for religious schools, though schools of all types continued to use religious material in instruction. The federal government supported the promulgation of schooling in the early republic through such acts as the Northwest Ordinance of 1785, which reserved a section in each township for schools and stated that schools and education should always be encouraged in the newly added regions covered by the act.

States emulated such support for provisions in their constitutions establishing funding for the creation of schools. The Pennsylvania Constitution, adopted in 1776, became a model for many states with its requirement that the state pay the salaries of public-school teachers. By the beginning of the 19th century most states had set up a system of schools with their constitutions. Formal education was not yet widespread, but the character and foundation of U.S. public education was established and ready to expand.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND BEYOND

The first half of the 19th century in the United States saw social, economic, and political developments that led to the advancement of what is often referred to as the "common man." This increased adherence to the notion of equality led many citizens to believe that all should be able to read in order to participate in government and improve their standing in society.

One important factor in the growth of public education during this time was the rise of industrialization. During the early stages of America's Industrial Revolution, efforts to promote public education suffered because so many children were part of the working force. For example, in New England during the 1830s, approximately 40 percent of children under the age of 16 were employed in industrial occupations. However, industrialization also required training and often led to a need for affordable activities for the children of working-class parents. In addition, many reformers viewed education as a means of combating the negative effects of industrialization, such as urban poverty.

Industrialization also led to a population boom in the United States, particularly in northern and eastern cities. Much of this growth was the result of huge waves of immigration from Europe. Schools were seen by many as an excellent tool to Americanize these newcomers, whose language and customs were different and often viewed as a threat to those of the native-born. Simultaneously, western settlers on America's frontier estab-

Education Reform

lished one-room schoolhouses, often the only public building in a community, to educate their children. They were generally more reluctant than those in urban areas were to allow government influence over their educational institutions, reflecting an attitude that would be echoed decades later by advocates of homeschooling across the United States.

The emerging publicly supported common schools of the mid-1800s varied in size, organization, and curriculum. In rural areas, the one- or two-room schoolhouse was dominant. Progress in these schools was not marked by movement from one grade to another but rather by completing one text and beginning another. On the frontier, where there remained some distrust of too much education, the curriculum was limited to reading, writing, and arithmetic, while in larger cities the curriculum tended to be broader.⁵ A wider variety of textbooks began to appear in common schools by the late 19th century, and the popular practice of rote learning, drill, and practice was beginning to be chipped away by early and sporadic measures of reform aimed at developing the individual talents of a child.

During the first half of the 19th century, states had gradually moved toward establishing educational systems. State superintendents, as educational officers were often called, of free schools, or common schools, usually had weak powers. Legal requirements for the collection of school taxes and compulsory attendance were often ignored as the tradition of parental and church responsibility for the education of children remained resilient.⁶

Two important leaders of this time who helped to propel state systems of education were Horace Mann and Henry Barnard. Mann was a Massachusetts legislator who led the effort to create a state board of education. When this measure was approved, he resigned to become the board's first secretary. During his 12 years in the post (1837–49), Mann was the most active leader of the common school education movement in the country. He succeeded in attaining state tax support for teacher salaries and new buildings, creating three of the first normal, or teacher training, schools in the country and establishing 50 new high schools. Attendance increased dramatically during Mann's tenure. Mann's educational philosophy influenced many other states and has had a profound impact on current mainstream thought.

Barnard, another important state education leader of the mid-19th century, had been a Connecticut state legislator before becoming secretary of the state board of education there and later in Rhode Island. Also like Mann, he espoused a democratic philosophy of education and was effective in spreading his message through the publication of the *American Journal of Education*.

The first half of the 19th century had also witnessed the emergence of the public high school. In 1821, the English Classical School was opened in Boston, becoming the first of its kind in the United States. High school