

An Overview of America's Education History

The history of American educational reformers often seems to be the history of men fighting against an uncongenial environment. The educational jeremiad is as much a feature of our literature as the jeremiad in the Puritan sermons. That this literature should have been one of complaint is not in itself surprising, for complaint is the burden of anyone who aims at improvement; but there is a constant undercurrent of something close to despair. Moreover, one finds it not only on the educational frontiers of the West, or in darkest Mississippi, but in Massachusetts, the state that stood first in the development of the common-school system and has never lost her place among the leading states in education. Yet, in this state, the educational reformer James Gordon Carter warned in 1826 that if the legislature did not change its policies the common schools would be extinct within twenty years.⁶

The criticisms made by Horace Mann about one of the nation's best school systems during his years as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education after 1837 are illuminating. Schoolhouses, he said, were too small, and ill-situated; school committees, to save money, had neglected to insure uniformity in the textbooks, with the consequence that a single class might be using as many as eight or ten manuals in a given subject; school committees were neither well paid nor accorded social recognition; one portion of the community was so apathetic about education that it would do nothing for the school system, but the wealthier portion had given up on the common schools and were sending their children to private institutions; many towns neglected to comply with the state's school requirements; there was an "extensive want of competent teachers for the Common Schools," but the existing teachers, however ill-equipped, were "as good as public opinion has demanded"; there was "an obvious want of intelligence in the reading-classes"; "the schools have retrograded within the last generation or half generation in regard to orthography"; "more than eleven-twelfths of all the children in the reading-classes in our schools do not understand the meaning of the words they read." He was afraid that "neglectful school committees, incompetent teachers, and an indifferent public, may go on degrading each other" until the whole idea of free schools would be abandoned.⁷

The complaints continued, and the plaintive note spread from New England to the country at large. In 1870, when the country was on the eve of a great forward surge in secondary education, William Franklin Phelps, then head of a normal school in Winona, Minnesota, and later a president of the National Education Association, declared: ⁸

They [the elementary schools] are mainly in the hands of ignorant, unskilled teachers. The children are fed upon the mere husks of knowledge. They leave school for the broad theater of life without discipline; without mental power or moral stamina. . . . Poor schools and poor teachers are in a majority throughout the country. Multitudes of the schools are so poor that it would be as well for the country if they were closed. . . . They afford the sad spectacle of ignorance engaged in the stupendous fraud of self-perpetuation at the public expense. . . . Hundreds of our American schools are little less than undisciplined juvenile mobs.

In 1892 Joseph M. Rice toured the country to examine its school systems and reported the same depressing picture in city after city, with only a few welcome exceptions: education was a creature of ward politics; ignorant politicians hired ignorant teachers; teaching was an uninspired thing of repetitive drill.⁹ . . .

A generation later, after the nation had developed its great mass system of secondary education, and education itself had become highly professionalized, Thomas H. Briggs of Teachers College, delivering his Inglis Lecture at Harvard, assessed the nation's "great investment" in secondary education and concluded that it had gone sadly awry. "There has been no respectable achievement," he observed, "even in the subjects offered in the secondary school curricula." Performance in mathematics, he thought, was of the sort which, applied in business, would lead to bankruptcy or the penitentiary. . . .

. . . A year's study of ancient history yielded students who could not tell who Solon was; and after a year of American history, students were unable to define the Monroe Doctrine—even though both subjects were stressed in these courses. . . .

1963, Richard Hofstadter, an American historian