

Education Reform in Antebellum America

by Barbara Winslow



Detail from a Harper's Weekly cartoon by Thomas Nast, February 26, 1870. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Education reform is often at the heart of all great reform struggles.[1]

By the 1820s Americans were experiencing exhilarating as well as unsettling social and economic changes. In the North, the familiar rural and agrarian life was slowly being transformed with the rise of factories, the emergence of a market economy, and the growth of towns and cities. The government—primarily state governments—and private individuals were investing in roads, turnpikes, bridges, canals, and railroads, linking the distant parts of the expanding republic. The new world of industry was transforming the rhythms of work, discipline, and social relations. Young men and women were leaving the farms for factory life, changing forever traditional family forms. Skilled craft workers were being replaced by machines and age-old crafts began to disappear.

The emergence of manufacturing and the growth of cities and towns led to new social problems: the deterioration of working and living conditions; the rise of poverty and indebtedness; and the increasing disparity between rich and poor. Meanwhile, periodic economic slumps created greater hardships and uncertainty. The Protestant ruling elite expressed alarm at these developing social conditions, concerned that poverty would lead to prostitution, gangs, drunkenness, crime, and other manifestations of social decline and disorder. Increased immigration after 1830, especially of the impoverished, unskilled, Catholic, and non-English-speaking Irish, further threatened the Protestant middle class.

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Political changes accompanied the economic and social changes. In particular, suffrage was expanded to all white male citizens, which resulted in the emergence of new popular political activity. This increased political activity brought about labor strife and labor organization in response to the growth of waged labor and increasing social stratification. That, along with other changes brought about as a result of industrialization and the growing difference between the North and South over slavery, combined with a genuine concern for the plight of the poor, led to the development of reform movements in the areas of temperance, prison, mental health, land ownership and development, women's rights, and abolition.

A desire to reform and expand education accompanied and informed many of the political, social, and

economic impulses toward reform. Three particularly important core components of education reform developed in the antebellum period: education for the common man and woman, greater access to higher education for women, and schooling for free blacks.

At the heart of the common school movement was the belief that free common schooling dedicated to good citizenship and moral education would ensure the alleviation of problems facing the new republic. The “common school movement” was a description of a particular type of formal education, one that would become available to all citizens, developed and managed through increased governmental activity at the state level and supported by local property taxes. Common schooling was free and “universal”; that is, it was to be available to all children regardless of class (although African Americans or Irish Catholics were marginalized or excluded). The main purpose of the common school was to provide a more centralized and efficient school system, one that would assimilate, train, and discipline the emerging working classes and prepare them for a successful life in an industrial society.

The person most identified with the common school movement was Horace Mann (1796–1859), a member of the Massachusetts state legislature, and then secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. Mann’s ideology was based upon a strong sense of Protestant Republicanism that was rooted in a secular, non-sectarian morality. He believed that education was a child’s “natural right,” and that moral education should be the heart of the curriculum. In order to accomplish education reform, Mann advocated state-controlled boards of education, a more uniform curriculum, and greater state involvement in teacher training. Mann was firmly convinced that public education had the power to become a stabilizing as well as an equalizing force in American society—as he put it, “Education . . . is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery.”[2]

Mann and the common school movement had critics then, as well as now. The common school movement failed to address the issue of racial exclusion and segregation. Only when African American parents and their political allies challenged the whites-only schools and school districts would there be partial, but not lasting reforms. Catholics in Massachusetts and New York opposed Mann’s Protestant Republicanism in the common schools. Fearing religious and anti-immigrant discrimination, Catholics set up their own system of parochial schools. Historians such as Michael Katz have challenged the widely held assumption that the common school movement was an enlightened liberal reform movement designed to ameliorate the social divisions in American society. Rather, Katz and others argue that the common school movement was a deliberate attempt by the Protestant elite to control the lower classes, force assimilation of immigrants and non-Protestants, and prepare the working classes to acquire the “virtues” necessary to factory life—in particular, respect for discipline and authority. All of the criticisms of Mann and the common school system—racial segregation, religious (or lack thereof) bias, centralized school boards, and a curriculum designed for conformity were left unresolved, and are recurrent themes in the history of education and the subsequent movements for meaningful educational reform.

The struggle for greater educational opportunities for women was clearly linked to the antebellum reform movement, and in particular the campaign for women’s rights. The demand for greater educational opportunities has always been a cornerstone demand of feminists. While young women were admitted into the public or common schools, the majority of women in the United States were denied educational opportunities at every level. In 1830, women’s literacy was but half of men’s. Just as Horace Mann defined the common school movement, Emma Willard (1787–1870), Catharine Beecher (1800–1878), and Mary Lyon (1797–1849) were three leading figures in the advancement of women’s education. However, unlike Mann and the common school movement, woman reformers themselves had to struggle for education as outsiders and as second-class citizens.

Emma Willard started teaching when she was seventeen; in 1814 she founded the Troy Female Seminary, the first recognized institution for educating young women. It was later renamed the Emma Willard School. An advocate of a rigorous curriculum for girls, she addressed the New York State legislature in 1819 and challenged Thomas Jefferson's disparaging views about women's mental capacities. Her entire life was devoted to women's education, and many of the graduates of the Emma Willard School joined the ranks of the women's rights movement.

Catharine Beecher was born into a prominent family; her father, Lyman Beecher, was the well-known religious reformer; her sister was Harriet Beecher Stowe, abolitionist and author of the anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Dissatisfied with her limited education at private school, Beecher was determined to provide greater opportunities for women. In 1823 she founded the Hartford Female Seminary, and offered her students a rigorous academic curriculum with an emphasis on women's physical education. Like Mann, Beecher believed that women were natural teachers; teaching was the extension of women's domestic labor into the schools. Furthermore the purpose of women's education was to prepare them to be better mothers and teachers. Not a feminist, Beecher opposed women's suffrage.

A few women combined their passion for abolition, racial equality, and education. One of the most courageous of these reformers was Prudence Crandall (1803–1890), who in 1831 founded the Canterbury (Connecticut) Female Boarding School. The next year she admitted Sarah Harris, an African American student. Almost immediately white parents protested and took their daughters out of the school. In response Crandall reopened her school as an academy for African American girls. The town retaliated with racist laws and violence. In spite of support from prominent abolitionists, Crandall was forced to close the school in 1834.

The struggle for women's education was also epitomized by the founding of Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, Massachusetts, the first institution of higher education for women. It was established in 1837 by Mary Lyon, who served as its first president. Her vision for higher education included bringing in women from all socio-economic levels to study a demanding curriculum with a clear moral vision. Mt. Holyoke's success was followed by the founding of other women's colleges, such as Wellesley, Smith, and Vassar.

Feminist and educational reformers also struggled for coeducation in higher education. Oberlin College in Ohio was the first to admit women; Antioch College (founded by Horace Mann) was the first college to allow women to publicly accept their graduation diplomas as well as the first college to hire woman professors and pay them equally with men. Both colleges were "stations" on the Underground Railroad and graduated generations of leading education reformers as well as social justice activists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Reform struggles did not sweep through the American South as they did in the North. The institution of slavery militated against the emergence of manufacturing and urbanization, two critical factors that led to educational reform in the North. White southerners relied primarily on voluntary, parental, and church schooling. Wealthy planters sent their sons (and sometimes their daughters) to private academies in the North and South and to England. Education for poor white southerners was provided by charity schools and some religious institutions.

Education for black slaves was forbidden, especially after Nat Turner's slave insurrection in 1831. The abolitionist movement provided educational opportunities for African Americans. Quakers were in the forefront of this movement, establishing racially integrated schools in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. There were a tiny handful of schools for African Americans in the South. One exceptional

effort to educate free blacks in the South involved the work of John Chavis, a well-educated free African American. In 1831 he conducted classes in a school in Raleigh, North Carolina, for whites during the day and for free blacks in the evenings. Sunday Schools, which were founded in part to provide literary, religious, and moral instruction to working class and poor rural children, also educated some slaves. Whatever limited educational progress existed in the slave south, it was not connected to the larger movements for social reform.

The struggle to expand educational opportunities continued after the Civil War. Freedom Schools were created by abolitionists to educate the newly emancipated slaves; historic black colleges, such as Howard University were founded. Not all efforts were benign; in particular the Indian schools such as Carlisle were racist attempts to destroy Native American cultures. In the early years of the twentieth century, Chinese Americans successfully sued to desegregate the public school system; women's educational opportunities continued to flourish, and finally the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean, as well as African Americans from the south, changed the face of public education in America. The issues of the purpose of public education as well as its accessibility and curriculum originally faced by Mann, Crandall, Beecher, and Chavis, continue to be a part of the national debate.

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[2] Massachusetts Board of Education, *Twelfth Annual Report of the Secretary* [Horace Mann] (Boston, 1848).

Barbara Winslow is a historian who teaches in the School of Education and for the Women's Studies Program at Brooklyn College, The City University of New York. Her publications include *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (1996) and *Clio in the Classroom: Teaching US Women's History in the Schools* (2009), co-authored and co-edited with Carol Berkin and Margaret Crocco. She is the founder and director of the Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism, 1945 to the Present (chisholmproject.com) and is currently completing a biography of Shirley Chisholm as well as writing about the Seattle Washington Women's Liberation Movement.
