

- IV. The importance of geography and social instruction in developing self-reliance, young men to read history, geography, and laws, and to be instructed in the principles of agriculture, commerce, and the arts, and to be instructed in the principles of the constitution...
- V. The importance of the study of the principles of the constitution, and the principles of the laws, and the principles of the arts, and the principles of the constitution...
- VI. The importance of the study of the principles of the constitution, and the principles of the laws, and the principles of the arts, and the principles of the constitution...
- VII. The importance of the study of the principles of the constitution, and the principles of the laws, and the principles of the arts, and the principles of the constitution...
- VIII. The importance of the study of the principles of the constitution, and the principles of the laws, and the principles of the arts, and the principles of the constitution...
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NOAH WEBSTER, ON THE EDUCATION OF YOUTH IN AMERICA, BOSTON, 1790

While his name continues to be remembered through the omnipresent Webster's Dictionary, Noah Webster himself has been virtually forgotten. He was, in fact, the single most influential

person in the early development of a uniquely American version of the English language. His dictionary as well as his speller, grammar, and reader were designed to clearly differentiate a democratic American English from the more flowery language of monarchical England. The fact that to this day people in the United States use a simpler form of spelling—"honor" rather than "honour," for example—is due to Webster's work. In addition to his schoolbooks, Webster was one of the most prolific authors of the revolutionary generation on the question of the appropriate kind of education for the new nation. In the following essay Webster outlined his beliefs. Following that essay is a brief selection from his American Spelling Book, known to generations because of its cover as the Blue-Backed Speller, in which Webster made his ideas concrete in a textbook with stories and lists of words to be learned with guides to good spelling and good pronunciation.

Education is a subject which has been exhausted by the ablest writers, both among the ancients and moderns. I am not vain enough to suppose I can suggest any new ideas upon so trite a theme as education in general; but perhaps the manner of conducting the youth in America may be capable of some improvement. Our constitutions of civil government are not yet firmly established; our national character is not yet formed; and it is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country. It now becomes every American to examine the modes of education in Europe, to see how far they are applicable in this country and whether it is not possible to make some valuable alterations, adapted to our local and political circumstances . . .

The first error that I would mention is a too general attention to the dead languages, with a neglect of our own.

This practice proceeds probably from the common use of the Greek and Roman tongues before the English was brought to perfection. There was a long period of time when these languages were almost the only repositories of science in Europe. Men who had a taste for learning were under a necessity of recurring to the sources, the Greek and Roman authors. These will ever be held in the highest estimation both for style and sentiment, but the most valuable of them have English translations, which, if they do not contain all the elegance, communicate all the ideas of the originals. The English language, perhaps, at this moment, is the repository of as much learning as one half the languages of Europe. In copiousness it exceeds all modern tongues, and though inferior to the Greek and French in softness and harmony, yet it exceeds the French in variety; it almost equals the Greek and Roman in energy and falls very little short of any language in the regularity of its construction . . .

But the principal defect in our plan of education in America is the want of good teachers in the academies and common schools. By good teachers I mean men of unblemished reputation and possessed of abilities competent to their stations. That a man should be master of what he undertakes to teach is a point that will not be disputed, and yet it is certain that abilities are often dispensed with, either through inattention or fear of expense.

To those who employ ignorant men to instruct their children, permit me to suggest one important idea: that it is better for youth to have no education than to have a bad one, for it

is more difficult to eradicate habits than to impress new ideas. The tender shrub is easily bent to any figure, but the tree which has acquired its full growth resists all impressions.

Yet abilities are not the sole requisites. The instructors of youth ought, of all men, to be the most prudent, accomplished, agreeable, and respectable. What avail a man's parts, if, while he is the "wisest and brightest," he is the "meanest of man-kind?" The pernicious effects of bad example on the *minds* of youth will probably be acknowledged, but with a view to *improvement* it is indispensably necessary that the teachers should possess good breeding and agreeable manners. In order to give full effect to instructions, it is requisite that they should proceed from a man who is loved and respected. But a low-bred clown or morose tyrant can command neither love nor respect, and that pupil who has no motive for application to books but the fear of a rod will not make a scholar.

The rod is often necessary in school, especially after the children have been accustomed to disobedience and a licentious behavior at home. All government originates in families, and if neglected there, it will hardly exist in society, but the want of it must be supplied by the rod in school, the penal laws of the state, and the terrors of divine wrath from the pulpit. The government both of families and schools should be absolute. There should in families be no appeal from one parent to another, with the prospect of pardon for offenses. The one should always vindicate, at least apparently, the conduct of the other. In schools the matter should be absolute in command, for it is utterly impossible for any man to support order and discipline among children who are indulged with an appeal to their parents. A proper subordination in families would generally supersede the necessity of severity in schools, and a strict discipline in both is the best foundation of good order in political society.

The only practicable method to reform mankind is to begin with children, to banish, if possible, from their company every low-bred, drunken, immoral character. Virtue and vice will not grow together in a great degree, but they will grow where they are planted, and when one has taken root, it is not easily supplanted by the other. The great art of correcting mankind, therefore, consists in prepossessing the mind with good principles.

For this reason society requires that the education of youth should be watched with the most scrupulous attention. Education, in a great measure, forms the moral characters of men, and morals are the basis of government. Education should therefore be the first care of a legislature, not merely the institution of schools but the furnishing of them with the best men for teachers. A good system of education should be the first article in the code of political regulations, for it is much easier to introduce and establish an effectual system for preserving morals than to correct by penal statutes the ill effects of a bad system. I am so fully persuaded of this that I shall almost adore that great man who shall change our practice and opinions and make it respectable for the first and best men to superintend the education of youth.

Another defect in our schools, which, since the Revolution, is become inexcusable, is the want of proper books. The collections which are now used consist of essays that respect foreign and ancient nations. The minds of youth are perpetually led to the history of Greece and Rome or to Great Britain; boys are constantly repeating the declamations of Demosthenes and Cicero or debates upon some political question in the British Parliament. These are excellent specimens of good sense, polished style, and perfect oratory, but they are not interesting to children. They cannot be very useful, except to young gentlemen who want them as models of reasoning and eloquence in the pulpit or at the bar.

But every child in America should be acquainted with his own country. He should read books that furnish him with ideas that will be useful to him in life and practice. As soon as he opens his lips, he should rehearse the history of his own country; he should lisp the praise of liberty and of those illustrious heroes and statesmen who have wrought a revolution in her favor.

A selection of essays respecting the settlement and geography of America, the history of the late Revolution and of the most remarkable characters and events that distinguished it, and a compendium of the principles of the federal and provincial governments should be the principal schoolbook in the United States. These are interesting objects to every man; they call home the minds of youth and fix them upon the interests of their own country, and they assist in forming attachments to it, as well as in enlarging the understanding . . .

In our American republics, where government is in the hands of the people, knowledge should be universally diffused by means of public schools. Of such consequence is it to society that the people who make laws should be well informed that I conceive no legislature can be justified in neglecting proper establishments for this purpose. When I speak of a diffusion of knowledge, I do not mean merely a knowledge of spelling books and the New Testament. An acquaintance with ethics and with the general principles of law, commerce, money, and government is necessary for the yeomanry of a republican state. This acquaintance they might obtain by means of books calculated for schools and read by the children during the winter months and by the circulation of public papers . . .

In a system of education that should embrace every part of the community, the female sex claim no inconsiderable share of our attention.

The women in America (to their honor it is mentioned) are not generally above the care of educating their own children. Their own education should therefore enable them to implant in the tender mind such sentiments of virtue, propriety, and dignity as are suited to the freedom of our governments. Children should be treated as children, but as children that are in a future time to be men and women. By treating them as if they were always to remain children, we very often see their childishness adhere to them, even in middle life. The silly Language called *baby talk*, in which most persons are initiated in infancy, often breaks out in discourse at the age of forty and makes a man appear very ridiculous. In the same manner, vulgar, obscene, and illiberal ideas imbibed in a nursery or a kitchen often give a tincture to the conduct through life. In order to prevent every evil bias, the ladies, whose province it is to direct the inclinations of children on their first appearance and to choose their nurses, should be possessed, not only of amiable manners, but of just sentiments and enlarged understandings.

But the influence of women in forming the dispositions of youth is not the sole reason why their education should be particularly guarded; their influence in controlling the manners of a nation is another powerful reason. Women, once abandoned, may be instrumental in corrupting society, but such is the delicacy of the sex and such the restraints which custom imposes upon them that they are generally the last to be corrupted. There are innumerable instances of men who have been restrained from a vicious life and even of very abandoned men who have been reclaimed by their attachment to ladies of virtue. A fondness for the company and conversation of ladies of character may be considered as a young man's best security against the attractives of a dissipated life. A man who is attached to good company seldom frequents that which is *bad*. For this reason, society requires that females should be well educated and extend their influence as far as possible over the other sex . . .

In all nations, a good education is that which renders the ladies correct in their manners, respectable in their families, and agreeable in society. That education is always *wrong* which raises a woman above the duties of her station.

In America, female education should have for its object what is *useful*. Young ladies should be taught to speak and write their own language with purity and elegance, an article in which they are often deficient. The French language is not necessary for ladies. In some cases it is convenient, but, in general, it may be considered as an article of luxury. As an accomplishment, it may be studied by those whose attention is not employed about more important concerns.

Some knowledge of arithmetic is necessary for every lady. Geography should never be neglected. *Belles-lettres* learning seems to correspond with the dispositions of most females. A taste for poetry and fine writing should be cultivated, for we expect the most delicate sentiments from the pens of that sex which is possessed of the finest feelings . . .

Before I quit this subject, I beg leave to make some remarks on a practice which appears to be attended with important consequences; I mean that of sending boys to Europe for an education or sending to Europe for teachers. This was right before the Revolution, at least so far as national attachments were concerned, but the propriety of it ceased with our political relation to Great Britain.

In the first place, our honor as an independent nation is concerned in the establishment of literacy institutions adequate to all our own purposes, without sending our youth abroad or depending on other nations for books and instructors. It is very little to the reputation of America to have it said abroad that after the heroic achievements of the late war these independent people are obliged to send to Europe for men and books to teach their children A B C.

But in another point of view, a foreign education is directly opposite to our political interest and ought to be discountenanced, if not prohibited.

Every person of common observation will grant that most men prefer the manners and the government of that country where they are educated. Let ten American youths be sent, each to a different European kingdom, and live there from the age of twelve to twenty, and each will give the preference to the country where he has resided.

The period from twelve to twenty is the most important in life. The impressions made before that period are commonly effaced; those that are made during that period *always* remain for many years and *generally* through life . . .

A foreign education is the very source of this evil; it gives young gentlemen of fortune a relish for manners and amusements which are not suited to this country, which, however, when introduced by this class of people will always become fashionable.

But a corruption of manners is not the sole objection to a foreign education; an attachment to a *foreign* government, or rather a want of attachment to our *own*, is the natural effect of a residence abroad during the period of youth . . .

Americans, unshackle your minds and act like independent beings. You have been children long enough, subject to the control and subservient to the interest of a haughty parent. You have now an interest of your own to augment and defend: you have an empire to raise and support by your exertions and a national character to establish and extend by your wisdom and virtues. To effect these great objects, it is necessary to frame a liberal plan of policy and build it on a broad system of education. Before this system can be formed and embraced,

the Americas must *believe* and *act* from the belief that it is dishonorable to waste life in mimicking the follies of other nations and basking in the sunshine of foreign glory.

Noah Webster, *A Collection of Essays and Fugitive Writings on Moral, Historical, Political and Literary Subjects*, Boston, MA: L. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1790, pp. 3–36, from an original copy at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

NOAH WEBSTER, *THE AMERICAN SPELLING BOOK*, 1783

The design of this Grammatical institute is to furnish schools in this country with an easy, accurate, and comprehensive system of rules and lessons for teaching the English language.

To frame a complete system upon such an extensive plan, it was judged requisite to compile a small cheap volume for the use of beginners, containing words methodically arranged, sufficient to give the learner a just idea of spelling.

FABLE I. *Of the BOY that stole Apples.*

AN old man found a rude boy upon one of his trees stealing apples, and desired him to come down; but the young saucebox told him plainly he would not. Won't you, said the old man, then I will fetch you down; so he pulled up some tufts of grass and threw at him; but this only made the youngest laugh to think he should pretend to beat him out of the tree with grass only.

Well, well, said the old man, if neither grass nor words will do, I must try what virtue there is in stones: so the old man pelted him heartily with stones: which soon made the young cha hasten down from the tree and beg the old man's pardon.

M O R A L

If good words and gentle means will not reclaim the wicked, they must be dealt with in a more severe manner.

Table XXVII.

In all words ending in *ow* unaccented, *w* is silent, and *o* has its first sound. Many of these words are corrupted in vulgar pronunciation; *follow* is called *foller*, &c. for which reason the words of this class are collected in the following table.

2			
Bar-row	bel-lows	hal-low	win-no-w
bel-low	har-row	shad-ow	yel-low
bil-low	cal-low	shal-low	5
el-bow	mal-lows	spar-row	bor-row
fel-ow	mar-row	tal-low	fol-low
fal-low	mead-ow	whit-low	mor-row
far-row	mel-low	wid-ow	sor-row
fur-row	min-now	wil-low	wal-low
gal-lows	nar-row	win-dow	swal-low