CHAPTER ONE

The Origins of the Common School

The year was 1845. In April the New York State Convention of County School Superintendents met in Syracuse, and among the featured speakers was none other than Horace Mann, the most prominent school reformer of his generation. A sober, upright man who endorsed temperance reform and was antislavery, Mann was born in Franklin, Massachusetts, in 1796 and attended district schools and Brown University. Trained as an attorney, he became a congressman for the Whig party but made his mark as an educational leader. A legendary figure in his own lifetime, thanks to his writings on public schools and his labors as secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education (1837–48), he was later lionized by the education profession as the leading champion of free, universal education.

Mann was still in the prime of his life as he complimented the assembled listeners for playing an integral role in the cause of school reform. Progressive citizens throughout New England, he said, wanted to perfect the schools and affirm their centrality in shaping the character, morals, and intelligence of the rising generation. They pressed for the consolidation of small schools and more state intervention into local affairs. To build a sturdy system of schools,

Mann warned, would not be easy, and the failure to do so ominous. Social class divisions had widened in recent years. Riots and public disorder were especially common in the cities, reflecting social tensions between rich and poor, native born and immigrant. Mass education, however, promised to restore social harmony to the land. Rising wealth among the few had been accompanied by rising rates of poverty among the many, but the schools could cement bonds in a world where community ties had dissolved. So said America's leading advocate of the common schools.

Before Mann finished his speech, he praised a fellow reformer, Henry Barnard. Like Mann, Barnard was a New Englander by birth, a Connecticut Yankee to be precise, a Yale alumnus also trained in the law. Professional training for educators was in its infancy, and these were amateurs, though the most famous of the day. Like many reformers, Barnard attended a private academy early in life but now championed the public sphere. The great educational question of the day was whether citizens would rally around the fledgling public system to enable all children and not just the poor to receive a free education. Most rural children attended locally controlled district schools, which were not always free but were widespread in New England, though less common in the mid-Atlantic states and scarce in the slave South. Since the 1790s, the urban poor in most regions had access to free charity schools, founded by elite philanthropic Protestants. These schools were becoming incorporated into more class-inclusive urban systems, but "free" education of any sort in the cities retained a class stigma. As Mann wrote, neither he nor Barnard wanted a system of schools that "was necessarily cheap, ordinary, inferior, or which was intended for one class of the community; but such an education as was common in the highest sense, as the air and light were common; because it was not only the cheapest but the best, not only accessible to all, but, as a general rule, enjoyed by all."

In the decades preceding the Civil War, a range of institutions—from hospitals to workhouses, children's asylums to prisons—appeared in the northern states, becoming a familiar aspect of public life. Faith in education and in the importance of schools had preceded the attempts of Mann and his allies to build a system of universal education. By the 1830s, white Americans were already among the most literate people in the world, and school attendance in a variety of institutions—charity schools for the urban poor, tuition academies and female seminaries, and rural district schools in particular—had risen dramatically in leading northern states such as Massachusetts. Though families,

churches, apprenticeships, and other mechanisms of learning and socialization shared the main responsibility for nurturing and educating the young, New England's Puritans and other Protestants had promoted schools since the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, a growing secular emphasis on the value of literacy, numeracy, and basic knowledge further fueled support for formal education. After the American Revolution, civic leaders on the national and local levels trumpeted the importance of schools in promoting republican values and citizenship. Indeed, as historians Carl F. Kaestle and Maris A. Vinovskis revealed in their pathbreaking scholarship in 1980, for a variety of reasons enrollments in Massachusetts schools were already quite high prior to Mann's appearance as a school reformer, particularly for youth between the ages of eight and thirteen. "Per capita consumption of schooling in the American Northeast was probably increasing substantially before the reforms that began in the late 1830s," they write, "although the exact dimensions are as yet unknown."

A variety of educational reforms built upon relatively high enrollments already achieved. Mann and other reformers called for longer school terms, better daily attendance, school consolidation, the professional training of teachers, and a host of other improvements that yielded some success in the decades that followed. Thanks to Mann and his allies, the clamor for a single system of public schools soon intensified in the northern states, especially in long-settled New England. In an age that witnessed considerable support for social improvement, public schools often took center stage. By the 1830s, a chorus of reform-minded people began to sing the praises of free, tax-supported schools: Thaddeus Stevens, later a prominent Republican activist in Pennsylvania; Catharine Beecher, advocate of more educational opportunities for women; Caleb Mills, an evangelical minister who later became Indiana's leading common school advocate; and even notable Southerners, who faced the greatest opposition and whose efforts bore the least fruit. Enthusiasm for social improvement through education flourished. Since the turn of the century, countless pamphlets, speeches, reports, petitions, testimonials, newspaper editorials, books, and articles had promoted the importance of education in a republic. A few dozen educational periodicals also popularized the cause of learning by promoting a class-inclusive school system, especially for white children.

In Philadelphia, New York, and other cities, the editors of workingmen's newspapers—the voice of the skilled artisan minority—despaired over the fate

of youth as apprenticeships declined and unskilled factory labor increased; they endorsed instituting a common system and eliminating the stigma attached to free schools. "I think that no such thing as *charities* should be instituted for the instruction of youth," wrote one articulate worker in the *Mechanics' Free Press* in Philadelphia in 1828. He favored free schools dependent not on "private charities" but "founded and supported by the government itself." One Ohioan added, "Unless the Common Schools can be made to educate the whole people, the poor as well as the rich, they are not worthy of the support of the patriot or the philanthropist." "Give to education . . . a clear field and fair play," said a recent immigrant in *A Treatise on American Popular Education* in 1839, "and your poor houses, lazarettos, and hospitals will stand empty, your prisons and penitentiaries will lack inmates, and the whole country will be filled with wise, industrious, and happy inhabitants. Immorality, vice and crime, disease, misery and poverty, will vanish from our regions, and morality, virtue and fidelity, with health, prosperity, and abundance, will make their permanent home amongst us."

Born in an age when millennial ideals, such as universal peace and prosperity following Christ's imminent return to earth, influenced wide sectors of the population, the common schools became a useful barometer of the extensive social changes that transformed the nation before the Civil War. Cities, factories, and foreign immigration generated moral panic and social fears among many northern reformers, whose search for solutions to public ills centered on a more expansive public school system. Reflecting the contradictory passions of the reformers, schools not only favored greater access to literacy and academic study but simultaneously downplayed intellectual achievement by elevating the moral aims of instruction. America's ambivalent attitude toward the life of the mind and scholarship thus found expression in the nation's emerging school system, where character development and moral uplift took precedence even as lifeless instruction in academic subjects predominated. Setting a pattern that long endured, reform-minded citizens increasingly assumed that individual welfare and social progress depended upon an extensive network of public schools.

"School-houses and churches are the true symbols of New England civilization, as temples, pyramids and mausoleums were the symbols of ancient civi-

lization," declared a college professor at midcentury at the New Hampshire State Constitutional Convention, where he endorsed the creation of a new state office, the superintendent of public instruction. Schools, he said, were not like clocks, once wound ticking of their own accord; someone needed to operate and guide them. Moreover, "no reform is carried in the State or the world without a reformer. Improvements originate with original minds, and are usually presented to the people by interested advocates." Whether the cause was temperance or antislavery, pacifism or women's rights, crusades for social improvement abounded in the pre–Civil War era.

Historians need a wide lens to capture the interlocking changes that shaped American economic, social, and political life during these crucial decades, changes that formed the backdrop to vigorous campaigns for school improvement. By the 1820s many Americans experienced exhilarating as well as unsettling changes that undermined a familiar rural and agrarian world. In the South, the invention of the cotton gin and rising world demand for cotton breathed new life into slavery despite the formal end of the slave trade in 1808. After a series of insurrections, frightened southern leaders by the 1830s increased the fines and penalties for anyone educating slaves, dampening regional support for the common school. The economic chasm between North and South widened, decisively shaping views on government and education. The idea of free public schools—theoretically for everyone, with boys and girls taught together—soon became associated with Yankee culture, not American culture, deepening the sectional divide.

Throughout the North, the region's integration into a larger market culture in the early national period entailed changing rhythms of work, discipline, and self-identity among farmers and urban workers alike. Most farmers still consumed most of their own crops, sold their surplus locally, and bartered for materials and services. In the 1820s, northern farmers sold around 20 percent of farm products in the marketplace, but their self-sufficiency and independence soon faded. As government (especially the states) and private individuals invested in improved roads, bridges, turnpikes, and then canals and railroads, farmers, like everyone else, felt the birth pangs of change. Cheap print and the telegraph fostered a communications revolution, which along with transportation improvements knit an expanding nation closer together. The great hope of Thomas Jefferson—the perpetuation of a nation of independent yeoman farmers, seemingly assured by the Louisiana Purchase—was dashed as survival and the lure of making money strengthened commercial market val-

ues. White Americans prided themselves on their republican heritage: they were independent and free, enabling them through hard work to provide for their families. But economic changes increasingly challenged their family authority and control over their livelihood.

The appearance of textile mills in New England in the decades following the American Revolution represented the early stages of mechanization and the factory system, even though most people still worked on farms or small shops at midcentury. Women and children fresh from the farms worked in the mills, in advance of the new world of industry that would soon change the face of work and social relations. Change seemed unrelenting as skilled craftsmen were increasingly replaced by machines, which routinized labor and dramatically increased the percentage of unskilled workers. Some age-old crafts such as shoemaking disappeared quickly, and fears of dependency, even among advantaged white workers, accelerated. This only heightened perceptions of disparities between North and South, free citizens and slaves. Deteriorating working conditions led to some of the earliest trade unions, labor newspapers, and social conflicts of the period and alarmed many, who became attracted to reform.

The decline of apprenticeships for boys was an ominous indicator of change. For centuries in Western Europe and throughout much of American history, apprenticeships were a common way for young white males to come of age, moving from a state of semidependence to independence. An apprentice lived under the roof of a master craftsman, who assumed the parental duties of teaching morals and discipline plus the "mysteries and art" of a particular trade. From early adolescence to the age of twenty-one, the apprentice was taught skills as well as values that theoretically produced a responsible, self-sufficient adult. Economic changes, however, undermined this familiar world. As historian William J. Rorabaugh has demonstrated, apprenticeships became increasingly scarce in the antebellum period. Master and apprentice had had mutual, nonremunerative obligations, but now most laborers simply competed for wages in a world of supply and demand. Traditional pathways to independence disappeared, and the life of Benjamin Franklin—who had broken his apprenticeship, run away from home, and enjoyed fame and riches—became legend, if not exactly a blueprint for what awaited those set free in the marketplace. Wage workers increasingly feared becoming "wage slaves," measuring their declining status against the lives of those further down the social scale in the slave South. Many northern mechanics would later endorse the

symbols of the new Republican Party: free men, free soil, and free labor, as well as its close ally, free schools.

Cities, too, were the focal point of dramatic social changes in the generation after American independence. Into them arrived youth displaced from New England farms made less competitive by the 1825 opening of the Erie Canal, which connected the East and newer western states. Only one in five Americans lived in an urban area in 1860, but antebellum cities grew at a rate never again matched in the nation's history. Between 1840 and 1860, Boston jumped from 93,000 to 177,000 residents, Philadelphia from 220,000 to 565,000, and mammoth New York from 312,000 to 805,000. Urban issues were never far from the minds of reformers. Symbols of both economic growth and moral degradation, cities contained millionaires and paupers, demonstrating the widening gap between extremes of wealth and poverty.

The cities were home to banks, moneylenders, and middlemen: visible signs of a more interdependent, unequal society. Here lived novelists, editors, and reformers of all stripes who found tales of cheer and woe, contradictions galore. Beautiful hotels, theaters, restaurants, and fabulous homes, said some critics, heralded an emerging aristocracy, an affront to republican simplicity and virtue. As historian Steven Mintz has documented, contemporaries were terrified by the "specter of social breakdown" seen so vividly in the city. Ostentatious display contrasted sharply with the degradation of the poor, ever isolated in their own neighborhoods; the gangs of youth cut loose from traditional moorings; and the homeless ragamuffins, beggars, pickpockets, and thieves astride the city streets. Moralists who did not even live in cities talked endlessly about the evils existing there, calling out for concerted public action. When Irish Catholic immigrants—the victims of famine, brutal landlords, and British imperialism—arrived by the tens of thousands on the eastern seaboard by the 1840s, Protestant anxieties about the moral health of the nation only deepened.

A broad range of citizens responded to these developments by forming innumerable voluntary associations dedicated to social reform. These reformers recoiled at the ugliness and distortions of modern social life but were sanguine about the salutary effects of newly established public institutions. Scholars disagree sharply about how to characterize the reformers, especially their motives. Most conclude that they were largely middle class, native born, and Protestant, fearful of the consequences of social change but otherwise convinced of the fundamental goodness of an expanding market society. News reports from

abroad, especially after the numerous failed revolutions in Europe in 1848, terrified them: the restrictions on suffrage (which had largely been eliminated here for white males), the repressive authority of church and state, and the defense of a fixed social order. As numerous historians make clear, reformers sought to reform the individual, not change the social system, which is why so many turned to the schools to address poverty, immoral behavior, or corrupt politics. They thought the solution to social ills resided in the hands of individuals, who needed discipline and self-control to succeed and improve themselves and the social order.

Evangelical Protestantism decisively shaped the world views of the antebellum reformers. Horace Mann abandoned the religion of his youth, Puritan Calvinism, and became a Unitarian, a largely upper-class faith that emphasized God's love, human reason, and the possibilities of universal salvation. The classroom became his pulpit. Catharine Beecher, the daughter of America's most famous preacher, failed to have a conversion experience and ultimately joined the high-church Episcopalians. But she too became a social reformer, championing the professional training of female teachers and middle-class domesticity. Whether working to create prisons or schools, reform leaders were mostly evangelical Christians, whose intensity and influence naturally varied in different locales. Reformers who might differ philosophically, politically, or temperamentally generally applauded the wondrous expansion of the capitalist economy but worried about the accompanying social ills. They hoped that the fallen woman, the habitual drunkard, or the ignorant child could be set straight, sobered up, or educated by appeals to self-improvement or through the disciplinary power of institutions, which often bore the markings of religious enthusiasm.

The cautious optimism of reformers came from many sources, including seemingly contradictory influences such as the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Various Protestant denominations had long shaped community life in the northern states, promoting literacy to ensure children's access to scriptural authority. With declining support for the Calvinist ideal of predestination and growing emphasis upon free will and salvation by good works, evangelical Christianity held out the promise of individual reformation and social improvement, often anticipating God's ultimate return to earth. It is not surprising, then, that Protestant ministers usually strongly supported the public schools, frequently wrote school textbooks, and commonly served on school boards and steering committees. Between 1838 and 1879, ten of the first eleven

superintendents of public instruction in Kentucky were Protestant ministers, a pattern common elsewhere before professional educators arrived on the scene.

The Scottish Enlightenment (and not its anticlerical French cousin) decisively affected intellectual life in the early republic. Especially influential in the colleges and among well-educated Protestant leaders, it stressed the possibilities of human improvement and the common-sense striving of ordinary people for right living. Moreover, a less easily definable but palpable romantic view, evident in mainstream Protestantism by midcentury, also grew in prominence. It emphasized the goodness of the child, the power of the environment, and the benevolent work of God and His worldly emissaries, such as the local reformers. The Reverend Horace Bushnell, in sermons and popular writings on Christian nurture, popularized these ideals among his socially mobile, middle-class congregation in Hartford, Connecticut. Although cool toward revivalism as well as reform passions such as women's rights and the abolition of slavery, Bushnell idealized middle-class domesticity and praised gentle methods of child rearing and the benevolent work of public education, as did his neighbor and political ally, Henry Barnard. Critical of predestination and original sin, Bushnell called for common schools and other moral reforms to bridge the class divisions endemic in urban America, believing that *all* people could exercise their free will and "rise."

Successive waves of religious enthusiasm swept across America after the 1790s. After remarkable camp meetings on the western frontier—such as one at Cane Ridge, Kentucky in the early 1800s that attracted over twenty thousand people—revivals sporadically spread like wildfire. In the 1820s and 1830s, booming commercial towns and cities including Rochester, New York, which had been economically transformed by the Erie Canal, were set ablaze spiritually by revivalism. Evangelicalism made Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians the nation's largest Protestant denominations, and their members joined Unitarians, Quakers, and other religiously inspired men and women in the cause of social uplift. With the increased materialism spawned by commercial and early industrial capitalism, revivalists called for a restoration of virtue among the citizenry. The Reverend Lyman Beecher, father of famous daughters Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, spoke for many kindred spirits in 1835 when he warned of the dangers of western expansion and commercial and industrial growth. Without the leavening influence of churches and schools in society, commerce would corrupt the morals of the people. "We

must educate! We must educate!" Beecher thundered. "Or we must perish by our prosperity."

Protestant concern for education did not alone account for the growing citizen interest in schools and school improvement. Theorists of republican political thought traditionally juxtaposed virtue and commerce, the private good and the public good, a theme that resurfaced in public oratory as market relations spread across the growing nation. Reformers typically did not criticize the economic system that produced many failures and weakened moral restraint, leading to excessive drinking, occasional wife beating, and child abuse. Instead, they focused on the responsibilities and obligations of individuals: if people admitted their failures and softened their hearts, God's grace would rescue them from strife and eternal damnation. If they strengthened their character, they could also better ensure success in the here and now. Hard work, punctuality, honesty, and sobriety—the lessons taught in Benjamin Franklin's popular *Poor Richard's Almanack* in the eighteenth century—would prevent a downward slide into poverty and strengthen family and community during an era of profound social change. On such fundamentals evangelical reformers and secular-minded allies could easily agree.

The family was the bedrock of society, wrote many reformers who drew upon stereotyped images of middle-class homes. Jeremiads about weakened families and disobedient children are timeless, but anxieties over family decline intensified before the Civil War. As men increasingly left the farm and moved to towns and cities, writers and moralists emphasized the existence of separate spheres: men at work away from the home and women at home protecting the young from worldly temptations. In truth, of course, women's labor, paid and unpaid, everywhere remained crucial to family survival. Wives and daughters worked part time outside the home, grew and sold surplus crops, and occasionally labored in cotton mills and other factories. But the fiction of separate spheres, though never an accurate description of most middle-class homes, persisted in much reform literature. The home was characterized as a female preserve, a haven from a heartless society. While women's domestic responsibilities for child rearing intensified, men of all classes were expected to become more temperate and pious, avoiding the grog shop while attending to familial duties. Although their aim was to make individuals moral and bring them closer to God, evangelical Christians thus helped impose disciplinary values, teaching the self-restraint necessary to survive in a competitive society.

Evangelical sentiments thus colored the reformers' views of the family, gen-

der relations, and evolving public institutions. Focusing on the faults, shortcomings, and ignorance of the individual, rather than on the inequalities in the social system, these activists were reformers, not revolutionaries. Some wrote compassionately about the poor and those in distress while condemning immoral behavior. Even as soft-spoken a minister as Horace Bushnell, hearing of Catholic criticisms of the schools, exploded with fury. Bushnell told his congregation in a fast-day sermon in 1853 that if Catholics and foreigners did not like the common schools, they were welcome to leave the country. This powerful grip of Protestantism on everyday life amazed foreign visitors. They marveled at the rising church membership, rousing tent meetings, and religious impulse that spawned countless voluntary associations, including Sunday school societies, temperance groups, and missionary associations. Politicians routinely called the United States a Christian nation, despite church disestablishment. "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and types of disposition are forever forming associations," the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville noted after a visit in 1831. "As soon as several Americans have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce before the world, they seek each other out, and when found, they unite." Joining in common cause tempered American individualism and also produced tangible results, including the founding of business corporations, churches, hospitals, and schools.

One crucial voluntary association was the political party. The so-called first party system, which pitted the Federalists, who favored a strong national government, against the Jeffersonians, who wanted strong state government, disappeared by the 1820s. By the 1830s, the newly created Whig Party attracted most contemporary reformers. Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and many of their less famous counterparts were Whigs and sometimes very active politically. The Democrats, the party of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, urged limited government and more personal liberty (for white people), endearing them to slaveholders and to immigrant groups such as Irish Catholics, who rightly concluded that the largely Protestant Whigs were hostile to their religion and culture. The Whigs more often endorsed state-sponsored internal improvements such as turnpikes and railroads and reform movements, including public education and temperance. Economically progressive and socially conservative, as historian Daniel Walker Howe has aptly characterized them, Whigs believed in government aid in economic development and moral uplift. Market economies, they believed, promoted a rising standard of living but weakened the social bonds of community. Many Democrats also believed

in temperance, and in many communities they similarly championed the public schools. Thus, the dichotomy between the two major parties on public issues can be overdrawn. But the Whigs—whose leadership and followers were mostly native born, middle class, Protestant, and strongest in cities and in areas undergoing market development—appealed to the majority of reformers between the 1830s and early 1850s.

The birth of the Republican Party in 1854, coalescing from the remnants of the Whigs, whose party collapsed due to factional disputes over slavery, and some third parties, proved pivotal in the history of reform. Heirs to Whig views on public investment in the economy and institutions, the Republicans promoted themselves as the party of free men; free soil, free labor, and free schools. A former Whig named Abraham Lincoln endorsed public schools for their civilizing and disciplinary qualities, and Radical Republicans after the Civil War demanded more educational opportunities for ex-slaves. The party of Lincoln remained widely identified as the faithful friend of the common school. The rise of free labor in the North and intensification of southern slavery, the spread of unskilled labor among Yankee working classes, and the growth of cities with their unprecedented wealth and abysmal poverty provided the backdrop to the rising agitation for common schools and their place in party politics. Activist citizens, who gravitated toward the Whig and then Republican parties, wanted to provide each individual with guidance and direction, the stewardship that evangelical ministers preached about in their sermons. In 1838 a Jacksonian Democrat typically moaned that "a peaceable man can hardly venture to eat or drink or to go to bed or to get up, to correct his children or kiss his wife, without obtaining the permission and the direction of some moral or other reform society." Reforming society by reforming the schools had increasingly become a northern, Yankee ideal, supported by those who welcomed economic growth and expansion yet worried about the fate of morals and tradition in a divisive age.

Before the Civil War, common school reformers throughout the northern states promised to solve an array of grave social problems. In a multitude of speeches, articles, editorials, reports, and books, antebellum reformers highlighted the positive benefits of the common school. "Education is a social want: its costs therefore ought to be sustained by society," declared the Rev-

erend Benjamin O. Peers in a speech printed in 1838. "Popular education is a common good," and government should provide every child access to an elementary education in basic subjects and Christian morality, without which the republic would disintegrate. "In a society where every man may do pretty much as he pleases, it is of utmost importance that its members should be so educated that they shall choose to do right." As countless writers stated, corruption and immorality caused even mighty Greece and Rome to fall. At a time when economic divisions had widened, public schools offered common ground and the prospect of social harmony.

According to Peers and other reform-minded citizens, the common schools promised social stability, so visibly absent in times of labor strife, and access to knowledge and values essential to the rise of talent in America. As Thomas Jefferson and other theorists had so eloquently written, this would prevent the hardening of social classes, especially for the white citizenry. Contrary to Calvinist precepts, children did not enter the world fully formed or with a certain destiny; even if some children had vicious parents, moral education might save them from a life of vice and crime. "The germs of morality must be planted in the moral nature of children at an early period of their life," said a typical contributor in the *Common School Journal*. The journal's editor, Horace Mann, agreed that sound mental and moral training countered the tendency toward rampant individualism and wayward behavior so evident in a more urban, commercial society. In Europe, autocratic governments had "thousand-eyed police to detect transgression and crush it in the germ," said Mann in a lecture in 1840, a time of severe economic depression just before most U.S. cities hired their first professional police officers. "Forts, arsenals, garrisons, armies, navies, are means of security and defense, which were invented in half-civilized times and in feudal or despotic countries," he wrote in a report the following year, "but schoolhouses are the Republican line of fortifications, and if they are dismantled and dilapidated, ignorance and vice will pour in their legions through every breach." The young needed self-control and moral restraint, essential in a republic without a standing army or state-sponsored church to monitor personal behavior. To check the influence of "the mobs, the riots, the burnings, the lynchings perpetrated by the *men* of the present day" required widespread support for free and universal education.

Mann left an abundant written record of his views on school and society. As biographer Jonathan Messerli concluded, Mann was a "circuit rider to the next generation," a tireless champion of an expanding system of public edu-

cation. Yet he often sank into despair, privately brooded, and had a moralizing demeanor. Humans, he concluded, were by nature selfish. "From our very constitution," Mann wrote in 1840, "there is a downward gratification forever to be overcome. The perpetual bias of our instincts is, from competency and temperance to luxury and inebriation; from frugality to avarice; from honest earnings to fraudulent gains; from a laudable desire for reputation, and a reasonable self-estimate, to unhallowed ambition." The young therefore needed to learn socially redeeming virtues at the earliest opportunity.

Happily, Mann wrote, the human capacity for good works revealed itself through temperance crusades, prison reform, and other social causes. But Mann was ever the watchful pedagogue, alert to disorder in the classroom and immorality in the wider world. "Even in the present state of society," he continued, "and with all our boastings of civilization and Christianity, if all men were certain that they could, with entire impunity, indulge their wishes for a single night, what a world would be revealed to us in the morning? Should all selfish desires at once burst their confines, and swell to the extent of their capacity, it would be as though each drop of the morning dew were suddenly enlarged into an ocean." Just as the Luddites destroyed machinery in Britain, race riots and ethnic disturbances scarred American cities, where arsonists too often plagued society. But it was a loving God, said Mann, who planted the seed of benevolence in the human breast. Vice and immorality would persist in the darkest corners of society, but well-managed families, schools, and other benevolent institutions would nurture the best within the citizenry. They were the American substitute for the "thousand-eyed police" of aristocratic nations.

Republican values seemed precarious in a world of brutal class conflict, ethnic and racial divisions, and unimaginable riches and unspeakable poverty, but public schools vowed to teach a core of common values and to promote social cohesion. To strengthen the republic in a growing free market society, citizens, said many northern Whigs and Republicans, required the systematic training of the young, not the accident of birth. Private schools separated the rich from everyone else: they were antirepublican to the core. Catholic schools, rising in prominence in many cities after the 1840s, served a different, poorer population but were even less republican, pledging allegiance to a pope who opposed freedom of conscience and political liberty. In contrast, as the editor of the *Common School Assistant* claimed in 1839, teaching pupils "in the same house, the same class, and out of the same book, and by the same teacher" reflected the best in republican values, an essential way to shore up morals and ensure

greater opportunity for everyone. Honoring personal merit in such schools was the highest good and gave the lie to critics of the social order. The curriculum would enhance literacy and character development, weakening the specter of social conflict or class war while promoting a fluid social order and the common weal. So believed many northern educational leaders, who shared a fairly coherent mentality about the aims and purposes of public schooling in the pre–Civil War era.

Bands of citizens after the 1820s debated anew the purposes of education and community responsibility for the schools. Horace Mann and Henry Barnard called these citizens the "friends of education." On village greens, from Protestant pulpits, and in long-forgotten town meetings far from the glare of city lights, they lectured, debated, and otherwise urged citizens to strengthen and reform the schools. School trustees, local ministers, and prominent teachers and community leaders realized that theirs was not the first generation to value formal schooling. Many of them believed that the Pilgrims and Puritans had planted the common school on American shores, and that the current generation needed to restore public support for education, which they said had slackened in recent decades. This trope on the alleged decline of the schools and the need for revival was commonly heard in New England. In a series of lectures and writings in the 1820s, James Carter, a prominent New England reformer, depicted the state of schools as calamitous. The ubiquitous lament of cultural decline was the secular analogue to original sin, a cry for repentance after the Fall. Such appeals to time-honored ideas would recur in subsequent eras of profound social change.

Among the keywords that dominated educational discourse in the antebellum period, none was so ubiquitous as republicanism. Hardly a local school report, stump speech, or appeal for a graded school, nicer building, or better textbooks escaped the embrace of this hallowed word. It underpinned the civic purposes of the common school and became a tiresome cliché. Robert Rantoul Jr., a Massachusetts Democrat and school activist, spoke before the Beverly Mechanics' Association in 1839. Echoing Thomas Jefferson and the Founding Fathers, he reminded his audience that "Intelligence and Virtue are the only safe foundation of Republics." Since the Revolution, every political faction and social group had claimed to uphold the principles of 1776, when brave republicans fought against monarchical tyranny. White mechanics invoked the image to explain why moneylenders had to be vanquished and the credit system reformed to allow working men to earn a decent living and not become like

slaves. Jacksonians said only less government would preserve republicanism, while the Whigs and then the Republicans often argued that proper moral guidance and government investment in internal improvements would promote greater prosperity and freedom. Southern plantation owners used the word to justify their ownership of slaves, invoking the rights of property owners.

Discussions of republicanism in educational writing superseded more open discussions of social class but reinforced the common fear that America was on a collision course with history, which was unkind to republics. "Americans of the 1830s and the 1840s," writes Carl F. Kaestle, "inherited from the revolutionary generation an anxious sense of the fragility of republican government." That republics were short-lived and threatened by unfair privileges, corrupt politics, and private interests was a staple of political oratory between the Revolution and the Civil War. Jacksonians lashed out at the conspirators poised to rob the people of their liberties: bankers, monopolists, and college-educated Whigs, whom they viewed as modern-day Federalists and aristocrats. Nothing less than the safety and perpetuation of the republic was at stake, ordinary citizens were told in political broadsides and Thanksgiving-day sermons. Cheaply printed reading material of every variety, the product of technological advances and new distribution networks, flooded the marketplace. New ideas about how to shape the common mind competed for public favor.

Alpheus Packard spoke to the Teachers' Association of Bowdoin College at a meeting in Freeport, Maine in the winter of 1837, and his speech proved so popular he delivered it again in North Yarmouth. The title of the talk was "Characteristics of a Good District School," referring to the tiny one- and two-room schools that dotted the New England countryside. The "district" had become the legal basis for local school organization in the North outside of the cities after the American Revolution, but Packard typically traced the idea to the wisdom of the Pilgrims. The pride of New England, "the school house . . . is one of the characteristic features of the land of the Pilgrims. Wherever the New Englander may roam over the face of the earth, next to his father's fireside, the school house is one of the familiar objects that come up most frequently in his visions of home. There are comparatively few hearts in which the District school has not a place."

But these were dangerous times. Class divisions threatened the harmony of the people. Universal male suffrage was almost a reality, a momentous political change that required stepped-up efforts to educate the masses. "Now, what

is the ground of our confidence, that anarchy and misrule will not prevail, and our beloved constitution of government be overthrown?" asked Packard. "I put it to every one present, what is your security, that mob-law, which has exhibited such frightful scenes of violence and lawlessness in many parts of our land, will not extend over the whole country, sweeping before it the barriers which have hitherto guarded the rights of property and the comforts and privileges of social and civil life, and mingle all in one common ruin?" Only religion and education, he and countless reformers said, could address these dire problems.

Charity schools were no answer, as citizens were discovering in the cities. In New York City and other places that once had free schools for the poor alone, "a feeling of self-respect and a sort of pride" kept many parents from sending their children, who frequently hustled on the streets and stole from the greengrocers and from the docks, adding to the woes of city life. But by the late 1830s and 1840s the charity schools were losing some of their stigma, as city authorities increasingly took them over from private, quasi-public voluntary societies. Now these free schools would receive only public funding and draw children from all backgrounds. While the South lagged behind in provisions for mass education, many northern states were actively encouraging more public support for the common schools. It was often said that education deterred crime, and Packard added that the movement to educate all classes together would make the system "manifestly *republican,* entirely republican." If "the sons of wealth and of poverty" sat side by side in school, they would learn mutual respect. At school the only "distinction" that mattered was individual merit, "superior worth. The child of the cottage may bear home, exulting, the little badge of merit which she has won from her companions, as frequently, and probably more frequently so, than those who have been brought up in luxury."

Republicanism colored the passionate political debates of the antebellum period. Irish Catholic immigration in the 1840s and 1850s aroused the hostility of native Protestants, who exuded anti-immigrant rhetoric that linked the common schools with liberty and freedom for everyone and accused private schools of dishonoring the memory of the Pilgrims and Founding Fathers. "Common schools," announced Horace Bushnell from the pulpit in 1853, "are nurseries . . . of a free republic, private schools of factions, cabals, agrarian laws and contests of force." A contributor to the *Pennsylvania School Journal* similarly praised the common schools for preventing the hardening of social classes. "The high and the low, the favorite child of fortune and the offspring

of the pauper, have equal right to pluck the rich fruit from this tree of knowledge, planted in the very midst of the garden, and to experience alike its enlightening, its elevating influences." Sensitive to the stigmas associated with free education, especially in the cities, he echoed Horace Mann, adding that common schools (despite their name) were not "of a lower order than other institutions established for the education of children, but common as the air we breathe is common,—its benefits are free to all who choose to partake of them."

Much republican rhetoric substituted for frank deliberations on social class, just as later generations were more comfortable discussing the "culturally disadvantaged" or those "at risk" than "the poor." But writers sometimes offered sensitive commentaries on economic deprivation, fears of moral decline, and the fragility of the republic. That very rich citizens did not patronize public schools discouraged reformers throughout the century. Whig politicians, aware that the wealthy feared their children's contamination by association with the poor, often lectured the well-to-do on their civic responsibilities. In the 1830s the governor of Maine spoke optimistically: "I want to see the children of the rich and the poor sit down side by side on equal terms, as members of one family—a great brotherhood." In the classroom, only individual merit mattered, not family wealth, and poor but talented and hard-working students could rise to the top and preserve a fluid social order. "The different classes are so much separated when young," he added, "that they greatly misunderstand each other when they grow up." Without closer "bonds of sympathy . . . society is well nigh rent asunder by distrust, envy, and all hateful passions."

As the gap between rich and poor widened and periodic economic panics and depressions took their toll, educational rhetoric accelerated regarding the role of schools in guaranteeing social stability but also opportunity for the most talented. An essayist in the *Common School Journal* in 1840 attacked the elitism of private schools and wanted to infuse public schools with the spirit of Christian brotherhood and republicanism to enhance "an equality among the people; not by depressing those who are exalted, but by lifting up those who are bowed down." Horace Mann realized that many citizens wanted social uplift but not a hint of revolution. He thus emphasized that public schools would not level social distinctions but strengthen republicanism by guaranteeing that merit alone counted in life.

But even Mann editorialized that both Sunday schools and common

schools were "*the great leveling institutions of this age.* What is the secret of aristocracy? It is that *knowledge* is *power.*" The challenge of the day was to diffuse knowledge, create excellence in a common system, and make the schools "good enough for the richest, open to the poorest." In a celebrated report on the ties between education and economics, Mann carefully chose his metaphors, saying that people could have social stability and economic mobility simultaneously. For education was "the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery." Schools would uplift the poor, protect the property and wealth of the successful, and obliterate "factitious distinctions in society." Some Americans were beginning to think the schools could do all this and more.

To attain such lofty ends, educators in the antebellum period waxed enthusiastic about how the schools would fulfill their promise. First, reluctant taxpayers whose bills were rising in an age of dramatic spending on improvements in transportation and communication had to open their pockets wider. By midcentury, U.S. investment in mass education surpassed that of any other Western nation, but the pedagogical collection plate was never full. To offer every child, at least every white child, a common experience at school would mean huge investments in buildings, textbooks, and teacher salaries. After all, it was a youthful country. In 1830 one-third of the white populace was under the age of ten. With few alternatives for respectable employment outside the home before the Civil War, women increasingly became elementary school teachers in the urban North and, in later decades, in the countryside. Mann, Beecher, and other reformers applauded the domestic qualities of women, who were described as naturally talented teachers of young children especially and, since they were paid less than men, easy on the budget. On their shoulders rested the responsibility for teaching a common course of study as well as the moral values and sensibilities that would preserve and perpetuate the republic.

By the 1830s, the common curriculum usually included a handful of elementary subjects. Rural district schools, the typical schools most children in the North attended, taught at least reading, writing, and arithmetic. Though ungraded schools had many similar characteristics, there were thousands of them in the expanding rural republic, and local variation ensured some unique

features. For example, some schools might have only five or ten pupils, all siblings or cousins; others were crowded with an assortment of children, some shoeless and undisciplined, others more prosperous, ambitious, and likely to excel. Common district schools were initially located in barns, prosperous farmers' living rooms, or new churches, which were often the first community institutions built in newly settled areas. Some schools were well maintained and in bucolic settings; typically, they were basic, plain buildings, what local farmers thought suitable and affordable. By the early nineteenth century, male teachers in the countryside usually taught in the winter terms, which were frequently crowded since the older boys, who could be unruly, had fewer chores on the farm. Young women, seen as more delicate, more often taught in the summer terms.

Yet teachers everywhere, including the majority laboring in small ungraded country schools, mostly pursued the same goals through the same means. Few schoolmasters in 1830 had ever studied pedagogy or thought much about the curriculum, and didactic teaching practices had long been common in all types of schools. Reminiscing in 1833 about his childhood experiences in a district school in Massachusetts, the Reverend Warren Burton, who later applauded more European-style, child-centered teaching methods, could recall the names of the handful of prominent, well-known textbooks that he and most children read and memorized. He also remembered that "we occasionally had our hair pulled, our noses tweaked," and "our ears pinched and boxed" by one particularly cruel master. Horace Mann became a major champion of better teacher training and urged the creation of normal schools, teacher training institutions that soon opened in Massachusetts. But most teaching and disciplinary practices still resembled the world Burton remembered. The purpose of the common school remained the same: to teach Christian morality, discipline, and a handful of academic subjects, a process sometimes reinforced by the generous use of the rod. Despite local variations in the size of schools, background of children, and character of teachers, most pupils at midcentury spent their school days memorizing material and reciting it while standing beside their barebacked desks. And everywhere children studied in whatever textbooks—no matter how tattered or out-of-date—their families owned or could afford.

Teachers usually taught this bare course of study in ungraded, one-room buildings. As Tocqueville noted in *Democracy in America,* Americans valued useful learning and practical subjects but denounced the metaphysics of medieval scholasticism, Catholicism, and aristocratic education. An observer in Maine

said that local communities generally agreed upon the core of the curriculum. "If inquiry is made regarding the branches to be taught in our district schools, the reply is obvious," he wrote in 1838. "Every thing should be taught which may be of use in the common business of life. There is no question about Reading, Writing, Grammar, Arithmetic, and Geography. These branches are established in all our schools." Some schools also taught history, but the observer's assessment otherwise aptly highlighted the usual subjects.

The curriculum was a product of tradition, and it anchored schools amid massive changes in the larger society. Since colonial times, Protestants valued reading as essential to exposure to the Bible and religious print. "Knowledge is power" had become a familiar adage by the eighteenth century, and antebellum writers extolled the genius of free institutions and the multiple uses of reading for traditional religious ends as well as for widening secular purposes. Newspapers, magazines, and books inundated a growing reading public. Numerous politicians and educators in the early nineteenth century insisted that good reading skills enabled citizens, particularly recently enfranchised white males, to understand the laws, vote wisely, and function well in the marketplace. Noah Webster's blue-backed spellers gained renown by opening up a world of letters and then words that provided the foundations for more advanced accomplishments. As school enrollments expanded, salesmen of spellers, primers, and readers abounded, hawking the titles of previously unknown authors including the Reverend William Holmes McGuffey, whose first textbooks appeared in the 1830s and whose sales ultimately trailed only those of the Bible.

Born in western Pennsylvania in 1800, McGuffey was an ordained Presbyterian minister, whose name became synonymous with his popular textbooks. According to historian Elliot J. Gorn, McGuffey's books in their various editions may have sold fifty million copies, and they were frequently handed down to siblings, relatives, and neighbors, adding to their influence. They thus introduced reading and writing to countless children, offering some semblance of a common curriculum in America's tens of thousands of ungraded schools. The readers included excerpts from the Bible such as the Sermon on the Mount, speeches by Patrick Henry as well as Hamlet's soliloquy, and selections by American writers including Washington Irving and William Cullen Bryant. They explicitly taught moral and religious values and included stories about the importance of honesty and virtue, courage and patriotism, diligence and hard work. In addition, like most textbooks of the day, they offered a vision of

a social order where proper behavior multiplied the chances of personal happiness and social mobility, or at least respectability. An 1866 edition of a McGuffey Reader included a story about a barber who refuses to work on Sundays, despite the resultant economic hardship. One Saturday night, as the barber tells his sad tale of economic woe to an equally pious customer, he learns that he is heir to a fortune, one currently claimed by "an imposter"! Young children encountered numerous tales, many less fantastic, that showed that hard work, discipline, and doing right often led to self-respect, public honor, and economic success.

In previous centuries, writing was particularly important for men working in the public sphere. Often taught in colonial New England by special teachers, writing was less important than reading for the majority of people, who were farmers. Pens, ink, and paper were expensive and traditionally associated with the labors of clerics, merchants, government officials, and lawyers. In the modest schools of the early nineteenth century, the hiring of separate writing masters was largely unknown. Teachers in ungraded classrooms, the most common before the Civil War outside the cities, taught all ages and all subjects. Yet writing, while less important than reading, also enhanced communication in an expanding nation, as Native Americans and foreign challenges to manifest destiny were eliminated or defeated, and as postal delivery and transportation quickened and became more reliable. Steel pens were neither cheap nor easily available until after the 1830s, and the quill and slate had to suffice in writing instruction. Enough was already being spent, thought many parents, on costly textbooks, dear to any beleaguered family.

Arithmetic, in contrast, had been a fit subject for children since the early modern period, when commerce and trade gave birth to expanding capitalist relations and business transactions. The third "R" became basic to survival in a commercial and industrial society and was the quintessential useful subject. "Perhaps the importance of no other Common School study can be made more obvious and palpable to all pupils than that of Arithmetic," said an editorial in a school journal in 1843. "Almost every week, if not every day, the young arithmetician in solving his imaginary questions, disposes of such quantities of goods as would make or ruin the fortune of a wholesale dealer; he makes calculations respecting such sums of money as but few capitalists have the disposal of." Among the many competing arithmetic and mathematics texts, the most popular were by Joseph Ray, a high school and college teacher in Cincinnati. His books introduced the young to the mysteries of computation, com-

pound interest, and the conversion of British sterling to American dollars. Ray tried to teach youngsters how to determine crop yields in a particular field, the height of a tree as determined by its shadow, and profits turned on so many bales of cotton.

While given less overall attention, history and geography helped to round out the basic elementary curriculum. Both subjects had had their advocates since the colonial period, when imperialism and revolution nurtured curiosity about the larger world. Ethnocentric and heavily patriotic to modern eyes, these textbooks extolled the glorious struggle for political independence, the treachery of Benedict Arnold, the superiority of America's institutions, and the grandeur of its natural resources. Children in Hartford or New Haven and in rural Maine or Ohio read of the striking contrasts to their happy fate: Africa was a benighted continent, full of savages deprived of Christianity; Italy a land with a great artistic heritage but made servile by the papacy; and Ireland an unhappy place thanks to the imperial British and the power of Catholicism.

By the 1830s the major authors of school textbooks were native-born Protestants, frequently ordained ministers, often college presidents, and Whigs. Not surprisingly, most of the authors after the 1850s were Republicans. While the common school curriculum was modest, many school principals and superintendents boasted that it reflected republican simplicity, the foundation stones of a house built on the idea of equality. Globes, maps, chalk and blackboards, and other new school apparatus appeared on the market after the 1820s, but textbooks formed the main course of study. Textbooks aimed to diffuse knowledge, emphasize personal responsibility, and ensure social stability by teaching all students a common core of beliefs. At the dedication of a new school in San Francisco in 1854, a speaker said that though the public schools were "the most unassuming places in the world," they "lay the groundwork of the man—and that is everything because it amounts to everything." Schools would help make men moral, productive, and free people who would prosper in a free land.

Educational leaders wanted to create graded classrooms to replace the highly individualized instruction in the typical country school. Guides on how to organize such classrooms appeared in Boston as early as 1831, and city-based educators across the country soon offered detailed blueprints for reform. In an ideal school, children of roughly the same age proceeded through school together, read the same books, and encountered more difficult material as they climbed the academic ladder. Without a concentration of students of the same

age, however, this was difficult. Small, ungraded or only partially graded schools remained the norm outside of the cities. In many northern states, schools in little villages and adjacent rural areas by the 1840s consolidated independent districts into larger "union" schools, where some age grading was achieved. These were proudly featured in northern school reports issued by villages, small towns, and the state superintendent's office, but remained a small percentage of the system into the late nineteenth century.

In her memoirs, teacher and city school superintendent Mary D. Bradford reminded readers of the nature of rural education in Wisconsin at midcentury, describing a fairly common situation in most states. "There was no grading which would afford parents and teachers a standard or proper measure of progress," she wrote. Instead, "students started a particular study and went ahead as fast as they could. Progress made was reported to the next teacher, who, either doubting the ability of his predecessor, or realizing the devastating effect on a child's memory of a long intervening vacation, would often put the child back in work, to do it all over again." Some of the children, bored with all the memorization and repetition, became obstreperous. But Bradford, unlike most reformers at the time, actually saw at least one redeeming feature of the multi-age classroom. "It afforded the opportunity for younger pupils, when unoccupied, to listen to the recitations of the older ones—to listen, to wonder, admire, and catch a vision of similar future achievement for themselves; also to pick up information which they were apperceptively prepared for."

Only the large cities had the potential to form actual age-graded classrooms. In the cities came the first innovations: early attempts at graded classrooms, the hiring of superintendents without teaching responsibilities and women as elementary school teachers, more uniform textbooks, and more access to advanced knowledge in high schools, the first of which opened in Boston (though only for boys) in 1821. Cities had the concentration of wealth and the tax base to construct larger schools, pay higher salaries, and build rudimentary bureaucracies with administrative posts to attract ambitious educators, especially after the Civil War when the office of school superintendent became common and well paid. For the majority of pupils, however, the common district school in the country, with its modest curriculum in a modest building, was their reality. Many educators and reformers believed it still made vital contributions to republican America.

Despite considerable talk that "knowledge is power" and basic literacy a

practical tool, antebellum educators were more interested in training children's character. The founders of the public schools were often well-educated academy or college graduates who loved to read and write and reflect upon society and its problems. But theirs was a moral mission. They did not believe that the schools should focus only on intellectual training, however important. Even Ralph Waldo Emerson, who found many of the reformers distasteful, frequently told his lyceum audiences that the aim of education was to make a life, not a living. Character was everything in an age of fast deals, confidence men, geographical mobility, and changes that battered body and soul. Like republicanism, character was a slippery word, an indirect way of talking about, say, the morals of the poor. It nevertheless remained an integral facet of republican education, a way to ensure that economic success remained a possibility for the hard-working, intelligent student. Success depended upon how one behaved. Most jobs did not require high educational attainment or school credentials, and leading educators, whether teachers or administrators, believed that while useful knowledge promoted economic success and personal happiness, the values learned at school were far more valuable than any textbook knowledge. The formal curriculum was "but a small part of the teachings in a school," most educators assumed. "The rudiments of feeling are taught not less than the rudiments of thinking. The sentiments and passions get more lessons than the intellect." Honesty would outshine any academic prize on graduation day.

Antebellum Americans were certain that morally upright behavior strongly shaped academic achievement. In speech after speech, Whigs and Republicans linked intelligence and virtue with the survival of the republic. Still, they knew that immorality flourished even during this time of overall economic expansion, rising church membership, and the spread of libraries and schools. Everyone marveled at the growth of popular education and availability of inexpensive reading materials. Yet, according to the reformers, simultaneously came a rise in excessive drinking, juvenile delinquency, and overall crime. How had this occurred? They concluded that there had obviously been a breakdown in character and that academic learning alone, apart from moral instruction, was insufficient to ensure social order and human improvement.

According to prominent reformers and educators, the diffusion of basic knowledge, republicanism, Christianity, and character formation were among the many benefits of public education. Consider, for example, the speech George B. Emerson delivered at a school dedication in Somerville, Massachu-

setts, in 1848. Emerson was a revered teacher in Boston, a pious Protestant who had taught in America's first high school before opening a prominent girl's academy. He stressed character formation and elevated Christian piety and morality above worldly knowledge. A huge turnout at the local ceremony forced the overflow crowd from the school to a nearby church. There Emerson invoked sentiments heard throughout the northern states in countless speeches, addresses, and books on education. "The Common School is preeminently a Christian institution," Emerson told his listeners, who were proud of their new school. "The friends of the common school feel that they stand on Christian ground, when they promise to regard with equal favor the poorest child from the poorest cottage, and the child who is clad in soft garments and comes from the palace of a prince." Public schools could be as good as the best private schools, and to participate in social uplift was a sacred duty. The health of the individual, family, and nation depended upon steadfast Christian values. In *Reminiscences of a Teacher* (1878), Emerson would recall: "I taught as well as I could, but always considered this teaching of little consequence with that of the formation in my pupils of a single and noble character. . . . To be able to speak confidently to the effect of teaching, I must be able to look into the hearts of my pupils."

Public school activists and educators never strayed beyond a few core beliefs: that the soundest morals came from Christianity in general and Protestantism in particular; that learning without piety was dangerous; and that schools, while concerned with training the mind, should preeminently focus on shaping character. "What is your education, with all its intellectual completeness," said a primer on teaching, "if it does not secure that the child shall become the true man, the pure friend, the worthy parent, the noble citizen, to say nothing of the Christian?" Whether in tiny villages or expansive cities, the moral aims of instruction predominated. Common schools, said one Philadelphian in 1830, should promote "the advancement of private interest, the maintenance of public virtue, the due appreciation of talents, the preservation of a sacred regard to principle, and a high tone of moral sentiment."

Pre–Civil War reformers often assumed that Americans would succeed and improve as a people, especially if schools imparted the right values and sentiments to the rising generation. In *American Education* (1838), the Reverend Benjamin Peers prophesied national ruin if teachers forgot that pupils had "hearts as well as heads." "Education without religion, is education without virtue," said Horace Bushnell in the 1850s. "Religion without education, or

apart from it, is a cold, unpaternal principle, dying without propagation." In a world where vice and dissipation threatened individual morality and public order, cautionary tales abounded about the evil paths onto which youth could stray. Writers excelled at painting the stark choices facing the citizenry. In 1842, Orville Taylor, a self-styled patriot, public school zealot, and publicist said that "to govern men, there must be either Soldiers or Schoolmasters, Books or Bayonets, Camps and Campaigns, or Schools and Churches—*the cartridge or the ballot box*."

Heavy moralizing came with the territory. In a special report in 1848 on moral instruction, the State Board of Education in Maine recommended hiring teachers with only the highest ethical character. "Those teachers who most successfully enforce the precepts of morality, are, usually, the most successful in promoting the intellectual advancement of their scholars. And the reason," the committee continued, "is evident. Morality is the parent of order; and order is indispensable to intellectual success." A North Carolinian explained in the 1850s that only when schools taught more Christian values would the "godless creeds" of spiritualism and socialism disappear as well as "the mental hallucinations" of feminists, "the ravages of Mobocracy and Filibusterism, and the terrors and disgraces of Mormonism and Abolitionism."

By custom, teachers began the school day with the Lord's Prayer and excerpts from the King James version of the Bible, usually read without comment. Protestants congratulated themselves for their magnanimity and open-mindedness in doing so, since this was part of their celebrated non-denominational ethos. While Protestants had subdivided into numerous denominations, they usually agreed on certain fundamental truths. Catholics, agnostics, and atheists, of course, saw things differently. Catholics, whose numbers swelled with German and especially Irish immigration, were the most vocal and numerous critics of teaching Protestant values in schools. This led to infamous school wars and two main demands: to end what were viewed as sectarian practices in the common schools, and to allow tax dollars to help support an emerging parochial system. Both ideas angered and horrified the Protestant reformers. They occasionally compromised on the most insulting of school practices, such as forcing a Catholic child to read from the Protestant Bible, but they absolutely refused to budge on the question of tax support, which Catholic schools had sometimes received earlier in the century. By the 1850s, in the midst of a rising tide of immigration, even Protestant ministers such as Bushnell, who wrote so lovingly on Christian nurture, denounced Catholics from the pulpit. The

common school should be a Christian, non-denominational institution, reflecting shared Protestant values.

"I regret exceedingly that the principal opposition to the school systems of the country, comes from a single religious body, a very large proportion of whom were not born on our soil; and who necessarily bring with them many opinions and habits entirely foreign to the spirit of our institutions." So wrote a minister in 1853 in a typical reaction to the newcomers in the *Pennsylvania School Journal*. In New York City (most famously), Pittsburgh, Louisville, and countless towns and cities with growing numbers of immigrants, Catholic leaders were labeled "whining sectarian bigots," the enemies of the common schools. A Thanksgiving sermon in Newark, New Jersey, warned of a vile "plot" to undermine America: "The poisonous stream arises in the seven hills of Rome." That the common school should "Americanize" the foreign born was abundantly clear to the Protestant majority. Another minister, who taught Latin at the University of Michigan, said the schools had a solemn duty to teach the basic subjects and only impart common Christian values. "We do not want Methodist, or Protestant common schools . . . we should as soon think of asking for a Methodist post-office, or an Episcopal court-house, or a Presbyterian road." Angry Catholics were wrong to believe that schools were sectarian, when according to Protestant reformers, classrooms simply promoted "that homogeneity of character so essential to safety in a democratic republic."

The whole point of common schools, after all, was to teach the same things to every white child of a neighborhood or area, in the same classroom, with the same teacher. Majority rule dictated that Christian (though not sectarian Protestant) values would dominate, as antebellum writers and public school activists insisted. Protestants quarreled over whether to use the Bible as a textbook, and practices varied in the many tens of thousands of schools across the nation. But to exclude "Christian" instruction was unthinkable to most citizens. Catholics did not want a morally neutral school, but one that reflected their own church teachings and version of the Bible, taught in catechetical style by priests and nuns.

Usually written by ministers or deeply religious men (and sometimes women), school textbooks frequently reflected the common faith of the Protestant majority. Public school history books thus praised the Protestant Reformation and condemned the followers of Rome. In addition to prayers and Bible reading, religious sentiments flowed from songbooks and hymnals, which of-

ten included adaptations of traditional Protestant hymns or popular tunes. Asa Fitz, a leading compiler of school hymnals and songbooks, provided pupils with words and music to sing the Lord's Prayer, among other religiously inspired materials. These, too, helped shape the character of the young. So said the reformers, with greater intensity as Catholic migration swelled.

School textbooks, which largely defined the curriculum and determined classroom instruction, abounded with lessons on morality and character development. Textbooks were part of a larger disciplinary process that tried to reinforce adult authority, morals, and literacy. The McGuffey Readers, whose first editions in the 1830s were fairly sectarian, soon moderated their religious tone but continued to teach about the kindness of Jesus and value of the Golden Rule, honesty, and fair play, in a context that emphasized the majority Protestant faith. They provided explicit moral lessons about the contrasting fates of memorable characters such as Hugh Idle and Mr. Toil as well as a taste of Edgar Allen Poe, William Shakespeare, and *Ivanhoe*. Joseph Ray's arithmetic series was not theistic but contained numerous story problems that assumed the superiority of private property and capitalism to any alternatives and taught a language of money and investment. The future farmer, artisan, factory worker, or housewife could learn the benefits of saving for old age, how to balance a budget, or even measurements for cooking. Similarly, history was a moral tale of the goodness of the Pilgrims, Founding Fathers, and pioneers, and of the treachery of loyalists, Indians, and Romanists (Catholics). Schoolbooks offered the young guidance in a world where traditional controls on human behavior seemed undermined by impersonal economic and social forces that made Americans rich but not necessarily contented or always morally upright.

Most school officials, whether local worthies or nationally prominent, shared common ideas on political economy, a constellation of views about capital and labor that informed, in unpredictable and uneven ways, the lives of children in classrooms. This found expression in the formal structure of the school day, which often began with prayer and was governed throughout by rules and regulations not always honored dutifully by children. Punctuality, like deportment and scholarship, was seen as a moral as well as a practical concern in the nineteenth century. The need to show up on time signaled one of the profound changes altering the workplace. Many lives were now governed by the ticking of the clock rather than customary rhythms of work, once de-

termined by the seasons, the rising and setting of the sun, or the task in question. Time-consciousness became a ubiquitous concern of educators, whose school reports included statistics on daily attendance, enrollment, and punctuality. Many a forest fell to keep the tally.

Increasingly cheap and mass produced, clocks and watches became more common in the schools, especially in wealthier urban districts. Early public schools were often held in rented rooms, church halls and basements, or other buildings that resembled Protestant churches. Soon the ringing of the school bell and church bell became as familiar as the ticking and chime of the clock. "There ought to be a Timepiece, of some kind, in every schoolroom, so placed that all the children can see it," thought one typical reformer in 1839. "It relieves their bodies by its assurance that the time of relaxation is approaching; and it stimulates their minds by its admonition, that the sands of time are wasting." In modest country schools without a clock, teachers rang cowbells or struck iron triangles, announcing that play must stop and work begin.

Songbooks added their own meter to the school day. Singing likely broke the boredom of silent study and the endless string of recitations heard by the teacher and fellow students. The singing books also explicitly taught punctuality, perseverance, honesty, and other virtues undergirding the work ethic. The lyrics thus connected youth to seemingly timeless values, reminiscent of the homilies of Benjamin Franklin. Traditional values might provide moral ballast in a society governed by the rhythms of supply and demand and the sounds of whistles and bells. *The School Harp* (1855) characteristically drove home familiar messages about duty and responsibility, hardy values for the rising generation. Like many songs, "Haste to the School Room" was sung to a popular tune, "Wait for the Wagon," thus connecting past and present.

> Will you come to me, my schoolmates, to yonder schoolhouse free,
> Where our lessons are recited, O come along with me;
> Yes, every schoolday morning, happy faces bright,
> We'll hasten to the schoolroom, where we all take delight.
> Haste to the schoolroom, Haste to the schoolroom,
> Where we all take delight.
> Haste to the schoolroom, Haste to the schoolroom,
> Where we all take delight.

Other songs in *The School Harp,* with similar didactic intent, included "O, Yes, I Must Study My Arithmetic Now," "Seek the Schoolroom," and "The Temperance Song." "The Truant's Soliloquy" added a cautionary tale, a lament by a

misguided lad whose "wayward heart" could only be mended by returning to school.

This was the great age of etiquette books, themselves expressions of bourgeois respectability. Use your handkerchief, not your sleeve, when blowing your nose, do not belch or worse in public, and practice common courtesies, the children were told, as adults combated the specter of cultural decline. Cockfights, fistfights, eye gouging, race riots, and common thievery and disorder seemed ascendant. Teachers and children alike were constantly warned to mind their manners and to live morally. Indeed, the annual reports of local school trustees, from Maine to Wisconsin, read like a sermon on republicanism, Christian ethics, and the duty to prepare youth for upright behavior. Manners and morals, hard work and diligence, honesty and punctuality were the only sure routes to success, the only safe pathways to national prosperity and personal happiness.

Every prominent textbook on political economy written for high school and college students underscored the importance of showing up to work, church, and school on time. Working hard was the only antidote to penury and public disgrace. As a contributor to the *Common School Journal* affirmed at midcentury, "laziness has been the parent of all the sins that have been committed since the morning of creation. Eve was in a lazy fit at the time Satan tempted her; if Adam had been kept busy, she would have been kept out of mischief, and we should all have been as innocent as young lambkins." Contemporaries debated whether labor was a curse, required to discipline humanity after the Fall. The alternatives to diligence, they said, were the almshouse, workhouse, and asylum, all less attractive than learning to live by the sweat of one's brow.

While "it is sometimes said that labor is a curse," wrote Horace Mann in 1843, "it is an inevitable condition of our well-being in this life," and "those who strive to avoid this curse, always incur a greater one." Like most educational leaders, Mann argued that people lacked equal talent and ambition. To anticipate the charge that he was a utopian or socialist, he emphatically stated that children would not leave school equal. Schools, however, should offer everyone a chance, and those who worked hard would do better than the lazy, even if the hard workers never won an academic medal. Mann believed that God had instituted labor as an act of love. In 1845, he said that, in a land blessed with abundant resources and opportunities, hard work ensured that America honored a "Divine Economy" in which "the privilege of primogeni-

ture attaches to all; and every son and daughter of Adam are heirs to an infinite patrimony." Drawing upon the teachings of Adam Smith and classical economics, Mann linked divine and secular knowledge, concluding that more education made "a more industrious and productive people. Knowledge and abundance sustain to each other the relation of cause and effect. Intelligence is a primary ingredient in the Wealth of Nations."

The rising generation could only gain from long evenings of study. Self-improvement was an inevitable outcome, with moral, intellectual, and material benefits. Primers on how to teach multiplied during these years, as numerous writers offered new approaches to pedagogy. The followers of Johann Pestalozzi, a European romantic, published solemn treatises on the virtues of "object teaching," contending that little children in particular should not read as much as learn from solid, real objects and contact with the natural world, to lay the basis for higher-order thinking later. Many writers complained loudly about the dull, monotonous character of the typical school, based on sing-song drill and heroic feats of memorization and recitation. Despite recurrent complaints, pupils still memorized the rules of grammar, the names of mountain ranges, the capitals of distant nations, the facts, names, and dates of important military battles, and lists of words ordinary people almost never used. At the end of grammar school, said officials in Cincinnati in the 1840s, pupils should be able to spell not only *refugee* and *drawl* but also *thanatopsis, orgies,* and *ennui*. In Chicago, *effluvia, inimical,* and *trisyllable* helped build a good vocabulary. Throughout the nation, educational periodicals were filled with points and counterpoints on the alleged evils of "emulation," the desire to excel by surpassing others. Those who reached the top of the class, said the naysayers, were often smug and without regard for the hurt feelings of the less talented. However, in practice, as in the spelling bee, only one scholar was called the best. And study and recitation were the only sure way to learn, for they were the alpha and omega of the classroom.

Hiram Orcutt offered the usual sober advice on how to best shape character and promote a good school in *Hints to Common School Teachers, Parents, and Pupils; Or, Gleanings from School-Life Experience,* published in Vermont in 1859. Typical for his generation, the author explained that of all the traits needed in a teacher—common sense, love of children, and mastery of subject matter—having a "moral and Christian character" was indispensable. "Every arrangement in the school should be systematic," he asserted. "There should be a time for everything, and everything in its time; a time to open the school, which

should never vary; a definite time for every school exercise; a time for study and a time for recess; a time to whisper and a time to keep silent." Only quacks and theorists, he said, thought moral suasion "*alone* will govern schools." Like most educators, Orcutt assumed that corporal punishments to fit the crime were permissible as a last resort. Barbaric practices occasionally found in some schools were indefensible: "Holding weights in extending arms, 'sitting upon nothing,' bending forward with the arm extended to the floor, all blows on or about the head with stick or ferule, and all violent shaking of children by the shoulders, endangering their health and life, are entirely improper." As for study, Orcutt felt that the Bible was unparalleled for teaching moral truths, and the various school subjects all "abound in moral sentiments. Indeed, there is a moral in everything; in every lesson recited, in every school-exercise, in every action, thought, and feeling of school-life."

Antebellum reformers agreed that the public schools stood as the antidote to crime, the defense of republicanism, and a bulwark against atheism, socialism, and alien ideologies that threatened private property and public morals. Self-discipline and moral character mattered more than anything else. Schools provided republican alternatives to the repressive social controls that regulated and governed the masses in despotic lands. Hard work was among the chief virtues taught in common schools, and despite many complaints about memorization and recitation, about too much homework and too many rules and restrictions, the specter of anarchy or irreligion, as Orcutt noted, was the alternative. "Study and recitation are the principal means by which the desirable results of education are secured. These constitute the business of the schoolroom."

After the Civil War, criticisms of teachers would intensify. The curriculum would seem outmoded and out of touch with industrial culture, and a new generation of educators would try to redefine the aims and purposes of public education. Anticipating debates that would revive in every generation, Orcutt warned about soft pedagogical approaches that took away the incentive for children to study and work hard. While countless educators condemned the parrot-like recitations heard in school, year after year the practices continued. To most educators, the mind was a muscle strengthened through use, like the strong arms of workers laboring in fields and factories. "How many lessons would be learned in any school if no recitation were required?" Orcutt asked in his book. "How much knowledge or discipline would be gained by hard study, if the pupils understood beforehand that the hour for recitation would be occupied by the teacher in lecturing or asking questions?"

By the 1850s, northern Whigs, Republicans, and other activist citizens had turned to the common school in their search for a positive force in a nation that had undergone rapid social, economic, and political change. White children might attend school for only four or five months a year and a few years of their life, but the majority did so, and reformers predicted even longer school terms and more consolidation and graded classrooms in the coming years. Rallying behind the call of free men, free labor, and free schools, many educators later concluded that the Civil War could have been prevented if the South had also built common schools. They would have taught the young that theirs was a common national destiny. Throughout the antebellum South, however, the idea of free schools retained its traditional association with the children of the poor. The only notable exception, as historian Joseph W. Newman has written, was in a handful of southern port cities, including New Orleans, Charleston, Mobile, and Savannah. There a concentration of New Englanders, often Unionist Whigs, constructed a fledgling system of public schools for whites only in the decades preceding secession.

More typically, Southern states meagerly attended to the education of their poorest white citizens and warned against cultural imposition from the North. As James Henry Hammond, the governor of South Carolina, wrote in 1843, despite some provision for the education of poor whites, "the paupers, for whose children it is intended, but slightly appreciate the advantages of education; their pride revolts at the idea of sending their children to school as *'poor scholars'*; and besides, they need them at home to work. These sentiments and wants can, in the main, be only countervailed by force." And no one proposed forcing anyone to go to school, something even Northerners opposed, as evidenced by poorly enforced compulsory education laws late in the century.

To Southerners, the specter of blacks learning to read and write raised terrifying thoughts about the notion of human equality, and it united whites of all social classes into a deadly defense of slavery. In the 1840s and 1850s, champions of free public schools for white children existed in the South, especially in North Carolina and Virginia. But the southern sparseness of settlement, fear of government intrusion in existing social arrangements, and the hostility of the planter class to the education either of poor whites or black slaves meant that common schools were largely a Yankee ideal. In a culture dedicated to preserving both a racial and social hierarchy, the notion of common schools for everyone in the South, even in theory, was repugnant. Southern leaders smirked at the idea that free schools, North or South, would change the hard realities of life. Social class and racial differences, they insisted, would always

matter in America. When the peace arrived and Reconstruction commenced, however, a new generation would debate anew the place of education in a changing world. Schools were expected to not only save the republic, develop character, uplift morals, and train the mind, but also help address racial problems that remained unresolved in the larger society.