

CHAPTER 4

The Ideology and Politics of the Common School

During the 1830s and 1840s, the common or public school movement put into practice many of the educational ideas of previous generations. As part of the growing globalization of education, common school advocates traveled to Prussia to study that country's development of mass schooling. Common school reformers believed that education could be used to assure the dominance of Protestant Anglo-American culture, reduce tensions between social classes, eliminate crime and poverty, stabilize the political system, and form patriotic citizens. For common school advocates, education would be the key to creating the good society. The major difference between schools before and after the common school movement was their goals. The common school was to be administered by state and local governments for the purpose of achieving public goals, such as remedying social, political, and economic problems.

It is important to understand that children went to school *before* the lofty dreams of social reform were actualized by common school reformers. Before the common school period, a variety of public and private school organizations existed. Massachusetts had laws requiring the provision of education and had established the first system of urban education in Boston in the 1790s. Many states, such as New York and Pennsylvania, supported charity schools, although a majority of children in those states attended private schools. Newer states had passed laws allowing for the development of schools but had not actively created organized systems of education. For instance, Ohio, after its admission to the Union in 1802, passed legislation in 1806 and 1816 allowing for the organization of schools supported by rents from lands and tuition. Beginning in 1821, Ohio law permitted the taxation of all property in a district for the support of schools. The state created a permanent school fund in 1827.

These educational developments occurred prior to the common school movement. Then, according to Carl Kaestle and Maris Vinovskis,

between 1840 and 1880—after the common school movement—the percentage of people under twenty years of age attending school in Massachusetts actually declined. In addition, the amount of money spent per \$1,000 of state valuation increased only slightly during this period. Nevertheless, the average child in the same period received more days of instruction, and the length of the average school year in Massachusetts increased from 150 days in 1840 to 192 in 1880. Kaestle and Vinovskis found that one of the primary effects of the common school reform was a shift of student population from private to public schools.¹

The common school reform brought education into the service of the public goals of the government and created new forms of school organization. It established and standardized state systems of education designed to achieve specific public policies. Three distinctive aspects of the common school movement made it different from past educational developments.

In this chapter I will discuss first the development of the common or public school including these three distinctive features.

THREE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE COMMON SCHOOL MOVEMENT

- The first distinctive feature of the common school movement was educating all children in a common schoolhouse to create a common culture and reduce social-class conflict.

Common school advocates argued that if children from a variety of religious, social-class, and ethnic backgrounds were educated in common, there would be a decline in hostility and friction among social groups. In addition, if children educated in common were taught a common social and political ideology, a decrease in political conflict and social problems would result. Obviously, this aspect of the common school movement can be traced to late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century educational advocates who wanted to teach nationalism as a means of promoting national unity and to those supporters of charity schools who wanted to use education as a means of eliminating poverty and crime. The idea of using education to solve social problems and build a political community became an essential concept in the common school movement. The term “common school” came to have a specific meaning: A school that was attended in common by all children and in which a common political and social ideology was taught.

- The second important aspect of the common school movement was the use of schools to improve public morality, end crime and poverty, and provide equality of opportunity.

Certainly, this aspect of education had existed in the past. Colonial schools were established to train a population that would understand and obey secular and religious laws. Writers after the Revolution advocated systems of schools to provide leaders and a responsible citizenry. What was different about the common school movement was the acceptance of the idea of a direct linkage between government educational policies and the solving and control of social, economic, and political problems. In this concept, the common school was to be a panacea for society's problems.

- The third distinctive feature of the common school movement was the creation of state agencies to control local schools.

In part, this was necessary if schools were to carry out government, social, political, and economic policies. In the past, some states, like Massachusetts, had passed laws requiring the establishment of schools in local communities or, in the cases of New York and Pennsylvania, had established state school funds for charity schools. In these situations, an official position had not been established to oversee the state educational system. In 1812, New York became the first American state to create the position of state superintendent of schools. In the 1820s, some other states followed New York's lead and created the office of state superintendent of education, but it was during the 1830s that state supervision and organization of schools became a major educational reform. In part, this was the work of the "father of the common school," Horace Mann, who in 1837 became the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education.

These three distinct features of the common school movement reflected beliefs about the social and political role of education, beliefs that had been gaining increasing support during the early nineteenth century. Probably the most important of these ideas was the belief that human nature can be formed, shaped, and given direction by training within formally organized institutions. This thinking was embodied in faculty psychology and in the charity schools. It was a logical step for common school reformers to apply this reasoning to the entire society and to argue that government-operated schools could create the perfect society. Also, various groups, such as advocates of Lancasterian schools and charity schools, believed that schooling could be a means of economic and social improvement. They began to demand common schools, but often for reasons quite different from those given by full-time common school reformers. Although these differences existed within the common

school movement, the outcome of the movement's reforms was the beginning of the modern American school system.

No other period in American educational history has stimulated as extensive a debate about the meaning and goals of education. In part, this debate reflects the importance of the common school movement to the American educational system. This chapter continues with a discussion of the various social and political groups that supported the common school movement, including the full-time educational reformers who devoted their lives to the common school ideal. Political, economic, and religious groups that opposed the establishment of the common school are considered next. Last, I will discuss the meaning of the common school movement for the later development of the American school.

The time line in Chapter 3 is intended to illustrate the intersection of multicultural concerns and social reform impulses with the development of the common school. As indicated, the removal of the southern tribes to Indian Territory was occurring at the same time that Horace Mann was advocating the creation of a common Anglo-American culture by the common school. Also, before and after Mann initiated his campaign, there were disputes about the education of freed African Americans, and confrontations between Protestants and Irish Catholics over religion in the schools. Illustrated in the time line are the importance of multiculturalism, nationalism, and social reform during the common school period.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE COMMON SCHOOL MOVEMENT

What is important about the ideology of the common school movement was that it established the basic framework, from the nineteenth century to the present, for popular and official discussions about the goals and purposes of public schooling in American life. Within these early arguments for common schools can be found most of the hopes and aspirations that many Americans have had for the public schools. These early justifications for public schooling not only claimed that schools could solve the major social, economic, and political problems of society but also argued that common schools were necessary for society's very survival.

For the purpose of understanding the basic ideology of these full-time common school reformers, this section concentrates on the life and ideas of Horace Mann. It is important to understand that the popularly stated common school ideology did not necessarily reflect the reality of the changes taking place in American education or reflect the positions held by all supporters of the common school. For instance, as mentioned briefly and as will be discussed in the following section, the workingmen's parties supported the establishment of common schools for

different reasons from those given in the more popular rhetoric of the common school movement.

The life and writings of Horace Mann can be characterized as a constant search for a means of social salvation. During his life he rejected Calvinism and adopted law as the means of social redemption; and after finding little hope in saving society through the establishment of proper laws, he turned to education. Mann was born in 1796 into a harsh Calvinistic environment in Franklin, Massachusetts. He claimed throughout his life that he abandoned Calvinism when, at the funeral of his twelve-year-old brother, who had died of drowning, the family's Calvinist minister used the occasion to warn other young people of the dangers of dying unconverted. Mann described this minister as one who expounded all the doctrines of total depravity, election, and reprobation and not only the eternity, but the extremity, of hell torments, unflinchingly and in their most terrible significance, while he rarely if ever descanted upon the joys of heaven and never, if ever, upon the essential and necessary happiness of a virtuous life.²

For Mann, phrenology and the common school became substitutes for his youthful experience with Calvinism. Calvinism had created for him a living hell that "spread a pall of blackness . . . beyond [which] . . . I could see the bottomless and seething lake filled with torments, and hear the wailing and agony of its victims."³ In a series of letters to his sister in 1836, one year before becoming secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, he describes his rejection of this haunting vision of hell for a belief in good works in the present life. "My nature revolts at the idea of belonging to a universe in which there is to be never-ending anguish . . . while we are on earth, the burden of our duties is toward man."⁴

Mann entered the practice of law with the same fervor that would later characterize his involvement in common school reform. He was educated at Brown University and in 1823 was admitted to the bar and practice of law at Dedham, Massachusetts. Between 1827 and 1833, he served in the Massachusetts state legislature, where concerns with reforming society made him instrumental in enacting laws limiting the sale of alcohol and lottery tickets, establishing hospitals for the insane, and creating the Massachusetts State Board of Education.

While serving in the state legislature, he was surrounded by political and social events that affected his belief in the importance of common school reform and helped to shape his justification of the movement. A good way of understanding the social context of his decision to accept common school reform as the answer to society's problems is to read his description in his journal of events between the time he was asked

to serve as secretary of the Board of Education and his acceptance of that position.

On May 18, 1837, Mann received a letter proposing his nomination to the newly created State Board of Education and urging him to lead the board as secretary. He wrote in his journal on that date that, could a person be successful in that office, "what a diffusion, what intensity, what perpetuity of blessings he would confer! How would his beneficial influence upon mankind widen and deepen as it descended forever!"⁵ He did not communicate his acceptance of that position until the end of June. During that time, according to his journal entry for May 25, he read *Combe on the Constitution of Man*. This was his basic text in phrenology, which provided him with the scientific hope that the mental faculties could be developed and shaped to create a moral and good individual and, consequently, a moral and just society. His continued involvement in general social reform was reflected by his attendance at meetings of the Massachusetts Temperance Society. This society believed that the ending of alcohol consumption would contribute to the elimination of poverty and crime and add stability to the family. Mann noted on May 25, after attending a meeting of the society, "The faith [temperance] is now in a forward state of realization; and what a triumph it will be! not like a Roman triumph that made hearts bleed, and nations weep, and reduced armies to captivity, but one that heals hearts, and wipes tears from a nation's eyes, and sets captivity free."⁶

Mann's fear of growing social disorder in the United States was heightened when, on May 30, someone tried to start a fire next to his hotel room. He says about the event, "Fortunately it was discovered early, and extinguished. A gang of incendiaries infest the city. What a state of morals it reveals." Mann wondered how a group or individual could be driven to such an act. In the closing line of his description of the event, he touched on an important theme in the common school movement: The hope for eliminating this type of crime, as he argued in his later writings on education, was the training of the young child. Or, as he asks in his closing line, "When will society, like a mother, take care of all her children?"⁷

His fear of social disorder and religious conflict was further intensified when on Sunday, June 11, a riot took place between Catholics and Protestants in Boston. Tension between the two religious groups had been increasing in the United States with the immigration of large numbers of Irish. Irish Catholics generally were widely discriminated against in housing and employment. One of the more popular songs of the time was "No Irish Need Apply." In his description of the riot, Mann writes, "As I sit down to write, martial music is playing in the streets. A riot of almost unheard-of atrocity has raged for several hours this afternoon

between the Irish population . . . and the enginemen and those who rallied to their assistance. . . . It is said lives are lost: it is certain that great bodily injury has been inflicted."⁸ Mann goes on to reflect that the real problem was public opinion, which played a major role in the power of American government. The key to eliminating this type of riot, he felt, would be the proper education of public opinion.

Three days after the riot, Mann worried in his journal over whether or not to accept the leadership of the Board of Education. Finally, on June 30, after having reflected on phrenology, attended temperance meetings, experienced a firebombing, and observed a religious riot, he accepted the position. His journal for the date contains a statement of his belief in the ameliorating power of the school. With almost a religious passion, he states, "Henceforth, so long as I hold this office, I devote myself to the supremest welfare of mankind upon earth. . . . I have faith in the improbability of the race."⁹

Horace Mann believed that he was moving from the profession of law, which he felt had failed to save society, to a field of endeavor that promised universal salvation. A month after his acceptance he wrote to a friend that he had abandoned the practice of law for a higher calling. He explained that laws failed because they dealt with adults, whose character was already shaped, and that the real hope was in molding the child: "Having found the present generation composed of materials almost unmalleable, I am about transferring my efforts to the next. Men are cast-iron; but children are wax. Strength expended upon the latter may be effectual, which would make no impression upon the former."¹⁰

Mann's hopes and dreams for the common school unfolded in the pages of the reports he wrote as secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education. The most important was the Twelfth Annual Report, written in 1848 after Mann resigned his educational post for a seat in the U.S. Congress. This report contained a summary of his ideas on the purposes of the common school.

In the Twelfth Annual Report, Mann returned to the reasoning he had used eleven years earlier when abandoning law for education. Again he argued that the hope for ridding society of evil actions was not in the law but in moral education. The increasing complexity of society, he felt, continually expanded the possibilities for moral transgression. He even dismissed as futile his earlier involvement in the passage of laws against the sale of alcohol, because "the government sees the evils that come from the use of intoxicating drinks, and prohibits their sale; but unprincipled men pander to depraved appetites, and gather a harvest of dishonest profits."¹¹

The answer to this steady expansion of crime, he maintained, was to educate the child. In language reflecting his ardent belief in the moral

power of the school, he stated that there was one experiment society had not tried in its attempt to control crime: "It is an experiment which, even before its inception, offers the highest authority for its ultimate success. Its formula is intelligible to all; and it is as legible as though written in starry letters on an azure sky." This formula, and the key to the good society, he stated, was "best expressed in these few and simple words:—'*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.*'"¹² Mann claimed that all attempts to reform humanity had failed to realize the possibilities for shaping the character of children and youth.

In a broader sense, Mann put his hope in the schoolteacher, who, by educating children so that they would not transgress the law, would replace the police. This concept made schools the central institution for the control and maintenance of the social order. Also, it opened the door to the explosive political issue of whose morality would be taught in the public schools.

Mann walked a delicate tightrope in his advocacy of moral education in the schools. Given the temper of the times, moral education, which for most people meant a religious education, was considered an essential part of overall education. On the one hand, this meant that if Mann did not advocate a moral education with religious foundations, he faced the possibility of being called irreligious and of having the common school condemned as a secular institution without religious foundations. For most people during this period, the education of character had to be linked to religious doctrines; otherwise, it could be accused of being antireligious. On the other hand, if he did link moral education to religion, he had to make a choice about the religious tenets to which moral education should be linked. Given the fierce denominational rivalries of the time, any choice he made would create the possibility that the common school might be destroyed by competing religious groups.

Mann defended his position on this issue in the Twelfth Annual Report by arguing that the presence and use of the Bible in the schools provided instruction in the fundamental doctrines of Christianity without reference to denominational differences, and this provided the basis for all creeds: "Is it not, indeed, too plain, to require the formality of a syllogism, that if any man's creed is to be found in the Bible, and the Bible is in the schools, then that man's creed is in the schools? . . . If a certain system, called Christianity, were contained in . . . the Bible, then wherever the Bible might go, there the system of Christianity must be."¹³

In addition to the use of the Bible in the schools, Mann claimed that the laws of Massachusetts required the teaching of the basic moral doctrines of Christianity, which he listed as instruction in piety, justice, love of country, benevolence, sobriety, industry, frugality, chastity,

moderation, and temperance. "Are not these virtues and graces," asked Mann, "part and parcel of Christianity?"¹⁴ Within the framework of this reasoning, religious education in the common schools was to be based on a nonsectarian use of the Bible with the teaching of broad religious principles common to all Christian denominations.

Mann envisioned four destructive alternatives to this form of nonsectarian moral education. The first was to exclude all religious instruction from the schools. This, he argued, would make the schools "un-Christian," and the schools would receive no support from the general population. The second alternative was for the law to define and prescribe a system of religion for the schools, which, according to Mann, would involve the government in the establishment of religion and force a particular religion on all children. The third alternative was to give each religious sect with a majority in a community the power to define the religion of the schools. Mann strongly felt that this would result in the destruction of the common school by the heat of religious rivalries as all denominations fought for the inclusion of their doctrines. The last alternative was for the government to abandon all interference in the education of the young. As an advocate of the common school system, Mann quickly rejected this last possibility.

In the context of these arguments, the term *common* took on added meaning. Children in the common school were to receive a common moral education based on the general principles of the Bible and on common virtues, and such education was to eliminate crime and corruption in society.

Mann used the same type of reasoning in defining his goals for political education in the common schools. Like religious instruction, political instruction opened the door for groups with differing political ideas to fight over the content of political instruction. Mann stated in his Twelfth Annual Report, "It is obvious . . . that if the tempest of political strife were to be let loose upon our Common Schools, they would be overwhelmed with sudden ruin." His answer was to have schools teach only those articles of republican faith that were approved by "all sensible and judicious men, all patriots, and all genuine republicans." This political education, he proclaimed, would contain "articles in the creed of republicanism, which are accepted by all, believed in by all, and which form the common basis of our political faith."¹⁵

To avoid political controversy in the schoolroom, Mann proposed that the teacher avoid any discussion of or comment that touched on political disputes. However, "when the teacher, in the course of his lessons or lectures on the fundamental law, arrives at a controverted text, he is either to read it without comment or remark; or, at most, he is only to

say that the passage is the subject of disputation, and that the schoolroom is neither the tribunal to adjudicate, nor the forum to discuss it."¹⁶

In this manner, Mann hoped to provide instruction in the fundamentals of politics without destroying the common school in the fury of political controversy.

Within the context of political education, the "common" in "common school" meant the teaching of a common political creed. The combination of moral and political instruction meant that the student leaving the common school would share with fellow students a set of moral and political beliefs; the result would be the creation of a society with a consensus of political and moral values.

For Mann, the inculcation of a common set of political beliefs would reduce the level of political violence in society as a whole. He hoped that a common school education would lead to political discussions based on a shared set of political beliefs. Thus, even though some disputes over political issues might arise, these disputes would take place in the context of a common political faith. Mann envisioned that political violence would be avoided because of the adherence to common articles of republican faith.

According to Mann, it was necessary to teach the importance of using the vote, as opposed to revolution and violence, to bring about political change. This was a particularly important issue during Mann's time because the extension of universal male suffrage had taken place in the 1820s. Before that time, the vote had been restricted by property requirements. In reference to the vote replacing political violence, Mann stated: "Had the obligations of the future citizen been sedulously inculcated upon all children of this Republic, would the patriot have had to mourn over so many instances, where the voter, not being able to accomplish his purpose by voting, has proceeded to accomplish it by violence."¹⁷

Mann wished to avoid not only political violence but also violence between social classes. Like Karl Marx in Europe, Mann was concerned with the creation of divisions between social classes caused by the growth of modern industry. *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels was published in 1848, the same year that Mann wrote his Twelfth Annual Report for the Massachusetts State Board of Education. Unlike Marx and Engels, Mann believed that the answer to social-class conflict was a common school education—not revolution by the working class.

Like Marx and Engels, however, Mann recognized that modern industrial development had created a major split between capital and labor and thus the intensification of class consciousness. Writing in the Twelfth Annual Report about industrial development in Massachusetts, he poses a warning question: "Are we not in danger of . . . those hideous

evils which are always engendered between Capital and Labor, when all the capital is in the hands of one class and all the labor is thrown upon another?" He goes on to argue that if one class possesses all the wealth and education, and the other is poor and ignorant, then the latter will be "servile dependents and subjects of the former."¹⁸

"Now, surely," Mann writes with a great deal of conviction about the social power of the common school, "nothing but Universal Education can counter-work this tendency to the domination of capital and servility of labor." He believed that two alternatives existed through which common schooling could eliminate the problems between capital and labor. The first was to eliminate the friction caused by class consciousness. Mann admits that "a fellow-feeling for one's class or caste is the common instinct of hearts not wholly sunk in selfish regards for person, or for family." For Mann, the problem was not the elimination of class consciousness but its expansion across social boundaries. Mann hoped that a common school education would spread feelings of class consciousness among all members of society: "The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society." In Mann's words, the expansion of class consciousness would "disarm the poor of their hostility towards the rich."¹⁹

The second way common schooling would eliminate the conflict between capital and labor was by increasing the general wealth of society. Mann felt that common schooling, by improving the general wealth of society, would be the answer to those reformers who were calling for a redistribution of property from the rich to the poor. His argument is one of the earliest considerations of schooling as capital investment and of teaching as the development of human capital. Within his framework of reasoning, education would produce wealth by training intelligence to develop new technology and methods of production. Investment in education is a form of capital investment because it leads to the production of new wealth, and teaching is a means of developing human capital because it provides the individual with the intellectual tools for improved labor.

In other words, according to Mann, common schooling would eliminate the problems of the unequal distribution of property by increasing the general wealth of society and, consequently, improving the economic conditions of the poor. It would prevent poverty by giving individuals the tools for enhancing their economic position in society. Therefore, as Mann stated in one of his more famous passages in the Twelfth Annual Report, "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is

the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery.”²⁰

Mann’s arguments regarding the conflict between labor and capital added another meaning to the word *common*. Common schooling was to create a common social class by the extension of a common class consciousness among all members of society. Mixing the rich and poor within the same schoolhouse would cause social-class conflict to give way to a feeling of membership in a common social class and would thus provide society with a common set of political and moral values.

Mann used arguments about education as capital investment to justify public financial support of the common school. One of the questions asked during the period was why those without children, or those who sent their children to private schools, should pay for the education of other people’s children. Mann’s answer was that the value of property is dependent on the work of previous generations and on the general level of prosperity of the community. He argued that property is held in trust by each generation, which through its labors increases its value. In other words, even a family without any children benefits from common schooling because common schooling increases the wealth of the entire community, which, in turn, increases the value of the family’s property. Therefore, all members of society benefit economically from common schooling, whether or not they make any direct use of the schools.

With minor variations, Mann’s statement of the goals and purposes of common schooling in his reports to the Massachusetts Board of Education were shared by the leading educational reformers of the time. This does not mean that they were shared by all members of society. In a sense, Mann’s reports represented the official justification for the creation of a common system of education. Involved in this justification was the hope that all the social, economic, and political problems of society would be solved by putting together in a common school the children of all members of society and by teaching them a common set of political and moral beliefs.

But this utopian vision of the good society created by a system of common schooling has, and had then, certain inherent problems. First was the real problem of agreement on a common set of political and moral values to be taught in the classroom. Such agreement concerning religious values never occurred, and, as a result, a private parochial system of education developed side by side with the common school. In the simplest terms, the common school never became common to all students. In addition, no proof existed that education would eliminate crime. In fact, one could argue that increased education simply meant improving the educational level of the criminal. Nor was there any real proof that a common school education could eliminate social, political,

and economic unrest. It is possible, for instance, that social unrest is rooted in real economic and political problems that cannot be solved without dealing directly with the problems themselves. In this sense, the official ideology of the common school might be considered as essentially conservative because it did not call for any basic changes in the economic and political structure of society but placed its hope for social improvement on the education of the individual. In fact, the official ideology of the common school accepted the existing political and economic organization of society and held that any problems were the result of individual deviance or failure. Therefore, it was argued by common school reformers, the common school could create a utopian world by educating the individual to conform to the needs of existing political, social, and economic organizations.

Although there were obvious flaws in the reasoning of common school reformers, their faith in the power of the school continued into the twentieth century. The ideology of the common school became a standard part of the beliefs held by most Americans. Since the mid 1800s, the school has continually been seen as a means of eliminating poverty, crime, and social problems. In addition, the idea of education as capital investment and as a means of developing human capital became one of the major justifications for schooling in the twentieth century. Horace Mann and other common school reformers made a lasting contribution to the ongoing debate about the relationship between school and society.

WORKINGMEN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A REPUBLICAN EDUCATION

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The educational demands made by the workingmen's parties between 1827 and 1835 provide an example of how support of similar ideas and institutions by different groups and for different reasons can contribute to social change. Clearly, workingmen's parties wanted common schools, but for reasons different from those given by common school reformers. Nonetheless, the combined efforts of the workingmen's parties and the common school reformers gave the appearance of a popular struggle for the establishment of a common school system.

Although the political impact and social composition of workingmen's parties between 1827 and 1835 have been debated, there has been no dispute about the importance of education in the political campaigns of the workingmen's parties. Their educational arguments shared many of the characteristics of the ideology of common school reformers, particularly a general demand for free common public schooling to serve political and economic purposes. But the reasons given by workingmen's parties for the establishment of common schools were distinctly different from those given by Horace Mann and other common school reformers.

The reformers stressed the necessity of teaching a common moral and political creed as a means of eliminating crime, poverty, and social unrest and providing for equal economic opportunity, whereas the workingmen's parties argued for the necessity of education as a means by which workers could protect themselves from economic and political exploitation. Common school reformers emphasized education as a mechanism of social control, while the workingmen's parties emphasized education as a mechanism for gaining political and economic power. Both groups agreed that a common education was necessary to eliminate distinctions between the rich and the poor and to promote equality of economic opportunity.

The workingmen's political movement began in Philadelphia in 1827 with a demand by the Mechanics Union of Trade Associations for worker influence on legislative action. In the spring of 1828, the Philadelphia Workingmen's Party nominated and campaigned for candidates to the state legislature. The organization of labor parties quickly spread through Pennsylvania, Delaware, Massachusetts, and New York. For most of these workingmen's parties, education became a central theme of their political campaigns.

Representative of the workingmen's parties' concern about education was the establishment in 1829 by the Philadelphia Mechanics Union of Trade Associations of a committee to investigate educational conditions in the city and state. In all areas of the state except Philadelphia, Lancaster, and Pittsburgh, the committee found little support for public instruction. The committee also attacked the existence of charity schools. First, there was a concern that private individuals were using government money to provide education of questionable quality for the poor. In his excellent study, "Education and the Working Class: The Expansion of Public Education during the Transition to Capitalism," historian William Russell quotes the committee as claiming that a large number of charity schools were "irresponsible institutions, established by individuals, from mere motives of private speculation or gain, who are destitute of character, and frequently, of the requisite attainments and abilities." In addition, the schools suffered from "ignorance, inattention and immorality." Criticisms were also raised that charity schools offered a limited curriculum and led to a loss of pride among parents.²¹

In general, the committee believed that government monies were being used primarily to support colleges and universities—a situation it argued was "exclusively for the benefit of the wealthy, who [were] thereby enabled to procure a liberal education for their children, upon lower terms than it could otherwise be afforded them." If this condition persisted, the committee reported, knowledge would be mostly in the hands of the privileged few and would "[consign] the multitude to

comparative ignorance, and [secure] the balance of knowledge on the side of the rich and the rulers."²² The answer to this situation was to make equal knowledge a common property of all groups in society.

In New York, a similar complaint was voiced about the private control of charity schools by the New York School Society (originally the New York Free School Society). The New York Workingmen's Party believed that the existence of charity schools and the lack of adequate funding of schooling were increasing social-class differences. The lack of education among workingmen, it was argued, kept them ignorant of their rights and allowed for exploitation by the privileged.

One of the most important points made in the arguments of the New York Workingmen's Party was that, in an industrial society, knowledge was power. Thus, keeping knowledge from the masses was considered one method of assuring the upper classes a monopoly on power. Russell explains the general view of the workingmen's parties: "Kept in ignorance, workers could be deprived of their rights, cheated in their daily business, and 'gulled and deceived' by 'designing schemers,' 'parasitic politicians,' 'greedy bank directors,' and 'heartless manufacturers.'"²³ In summary, workingmen's parties believed that the lack of a common school system was an attempt to deny them their rights and their share of economic and political power.

Workingmen's groups believed that common schooling was essential to the protection of their rights—that knowledge was necessary for the equal exercise of power in a democratic system of government. This argument is best expressed in an 1830 statement in the *Workingmen's Advocate*: "*The right of self government implies a right to a knowledge necessary to the exercise of the right of self government. If all have an equal right to the first, all must consequently have an equal right to the second; therefore, all are entitled to equal education.*"²⁴

In addition, access to knowledge meant protection of rights against what was considered the tyranny of the upper class. One statement in the *Workingmen's Advocate* in 1831 stresses that education was the only sure "defense against not only an infringement, but a total usurpation of the native rights of the people, by the monopolizing demagogues of the land."²⁵ An editorial in 1830 in the *Sentinel*, a workingmen's newspaper, wishfully claims that if the previous generation had been properly educated, it would not have been cheated and blinded by those currently wielding political and economic power.

Differences and similarities existed between the workingmen's parties' arguments for the necessity of education in a republic and those of the common school reformers like Horace Mann. Both groups agreed that education was necessary for the maintenance of a republican and democratic form of government, but the common school reformers emphasized

political education as a means of making individuals worthy of democratic rights and as necessary for maintaining political harmony, whereas workingmen's groups emphasized the necessity of education for the equal sharing of power and the protection of rights. These differences suggest a different content in the political instruction to be offered in the schools. As a means of achieving his objectives, Mann wanted the basic principles of government and a common republican creed to be taught, while workingmen's groups called for the teaching of how to exercise power in the political system, the nature of political rights, and the protection of those rights as the means of achieving their goals.

With regard to crime and poverty, workingmen's groups and common school reformers shared an equal faith in the power of the school. In fact, in response to the issue of why a person without children should pay for the education of other people's children, workingmen's groups often advanced the argument that education increased the security of all people from criminal activities.

Common school reformers and workingmen's groups also shared a belief that equal education for all was necessary to reduce distinctions among economic classes, but again their reasons were different. The reason common school reformers wanted a common education was to reduce friction between capital and labor. Workingmen's groups wanted equal education as a means of ensuring that capital did not maintain a monopoly over knowledge and as a means of protecting their economic interests. As an editorial in the *Workingmen's Advocate* of 1834 states, education would provide workers with "a correct knowledge of their value as producers . . . [and of their] general interest as productive laborers." This knowledge, it was hoped, would destroy the causes of the dependency of workers on owners and the unjust accumulation of capital.²⁶

Because knowledge was viewed as power and as a means by which capital maintained its grip over labor, it was logical for workingmen's groups to support equal education as a means of providing equal economic opportunity. The relationship between equality of educational opportunity and equality of economic opportunity was stressed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The most extreme, but logical, linkage between equal education and equal economic opportunity was made by the New York Workingmen's Party in its state guardianship plan. The basic argument behind this plan was that equality of educational opportunity could not be achieved if one child went from school to an impoverished home life and another child went home to a life that was rich and offered many advantages. To achieve true equality of educational opportunity, the state guardianship plan argued, all children must be taken from their families and placed

in state boarding schools, where they would receive equal treatment, equal clothes, equal food, and an equal education. Although the radicalism of this proposal split the party, it did highlight the extreme importance workingmen's groups gave to the connection between equality of educational opportunity and equality of economic opportunity.²⁷

The question remains as to whether or not workingmen, as represented by these early labor parties, gained the type of education they wanted through the establishment of a common school system. Tension existed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries between organized labor and the public school system over the content of instruction. Labor often claimed that public school instruction was conservative and taught principles opposed to the organization of workers into unions. Whether or not this was the case does not detract from the very important effect workingmen's parties had on spreading ideas favoring common school education and on winning support for the establishment of common schools. In fact, when one considers the dates of the activities of the workingmen's parties and the common school reformers, it is clear that the workingmen's parties paved the way for reformers such as Barnard and Mann.

The differences between the common school reformers and the workingmen's parties highlight the differences in meaning that can exist over commonly used words. One cannot assume that if all people say they favor education, they all favor the same thing. The word *education* has meant different things to different people. This is particularly true of the way the word was used in the different arguments given in support of the establishment of common schools.

HOW MUCH GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS? THE WHIGS AND THE DEMOCRATS

Since the founding of public schools there has been a debate about the degree of government control of schools. The common school movement was born during a period of intense political change and rivalry. Of primary political importance in the 1820s was the ending of property qualifications for voting and the establishment of universal male suffrage. In addition, modern political parties were born in 1828, when the Jacksonian Democrats competed against the National Republican Party (which died in the early 1830s and was replaced by the Whigs). The Whigs and the Democrats had almost equal shares of the nation's voters.

These political changes were related to the common school movement in several ways. First, universal suffrage created a concern with the education of the future voter. Many supporters of the common school movement stressed the importance of education in ensuring the maintenance of political order as democratic rights were extended. Second,

political affiliation was the most important difference between groups advocating different forms of school organization. Most leaders of the common school movement were Whigs, who believed that government should intervene to maintain social order through a centrally managed school system designed to educate moral and responsible citizens. In contrast, members of the Democratic Party believed that social order would occur naturally, and therefore they believed in minimal government intervention and local control of the schools.

In their analysis of voting patterns in six states, Herbert Ershkowitz and William Shade found that between 1833 and 1843 the voting patterns of the members of each party were clearly different. By 1840, 80 to 100 percent of both Whigs and Democrats adhered to the point of view of their party. With regard to educational legislation, in most cases there were significant differences in party voting patterns.²⁸

The differences between each party's political philosophy highlight important aspects of the common school and the continuing controversy over the political structure of schooling. Both political groups believed that education was a necessity but differed over the goals and structure of the educational system. In general, Whigs were concerned with morality, duty, and the reduction of social conflict and thus wanted an educational system that would shape moral character, teach social and political duties, and reduce conflict among social classes and political groups. Whigs believed these goals could best be achieved through centralized supervision by state governments. Democrats resisted the trend toward centralization of government control and talked mainly about rights and a society of conflicting interests.

In *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case*, Lee Benson describes the differences between these two political groups as positive versus negative liberalism. Within this framework, Whigs were advocates of a positive liberalism that called for government intervention to assure the workings of a free-market economy. Therefore, Whigs believed that government should provide money for education and for internal improvements to guarantee the establishment and functioning of institutions and economic organizations essential to the development of the country. For instance, Whigs argued that because private capital was not available for the development of canals and railroads essential for economic growth, the government should supply the needed capital. Benson quotes New York governor William Seward's 1839 message as a summary of the Whig position on internal improvements and education. Seward argued that government action and spending were necessary "to enlarge . . . national prosperity, while we equalize its enjoyments and direct it to the universal diffusion of knowledge."²⁹

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The Democrats represented negative liberalism and argued that government governed too much. They believed that the economy should function without any state intervention and that state monies should not be used to support a common school system. Benson states that John Bigelow, a leading writer for the Democrats in New York, "believed that the common school fund should be applied to the present crippling state debt and that thereafter the state should cease to propagate any science, art, trade, or religion among any class of people."³⁰

In *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*, Daniel Howe argues that faculty psychology had the strongest influence on the moral philosophy of the Whigs, who believed that the balancing and regulating of the moral faculties were essential to the maintenance of social order. From this perspective, schools were necessary for ensuring harmony within the individual. Whigs believed that if moral faculties were left to themselves, the lower powers would escape control and wreak havoc. An unregulated faculty—whether pride, licentiousness, or some other appetite or emotion—was called a "passion." The good life entailed continual self-discipline as one sought to "suppress his passions" or "cultivate and improve his virtues."³¹

As Howe indicates, this philosophical perspective ruled out the idea of a laissez-faire society completely free of some form of regulation and "implied an active, purposeful central government, 'administering the affairs of the nation according to its best judgment for the good of the whole, and all parts of the whole.'"³² According to this political ideology, the government should play an active role in maintaining the economy, regulating morality, and ensuring political and social order. Consequently, Whigs supported not only government funding of internal improvements (such as canals) but also the passage of laws to regulate morality. For instance, the temperance movement received strong support from Whigs.

For Whigs, schooling was the key to an ordered society. Howe summarizes the Whig political campaigns as being part of "a cultural struggle to impose on the United States the standards of morality we usually term Victorian. They were standards of self-control and restraint, which dovetailed well with the economic program of the party, for they emphasized thrift, sobriety, and public responsibility."³³ Whigs believed these values were necessary to bring discipline to voters.

The Whig idea that society requires a consciously arranged order and the Democratic free-market ideas reflected two different concepts of freedom. In turn, these differing concepts of freedom were reflected in attitudes about the political and social role of the school. For Whigs, true freedom occurred only when the balance of mental faculties within an individual ensured that passion did not reign over reason. In addition, Whigs contended, social conditions must be organized so that the

individual was not tempted into activity that would disrupt the harmony of the mind. In other words, the Whig position was that true freedom was possible only if individuals received a proper education and social temptations were removed. This explains why many common school reformers were active in the temperance movement while working for greater centralization and uniformity in the school system.³⁴ Democrats, in contrast, believed that true freedom was possible only in a society in which there was a minimum of government interference in the social order. Democrats viewed government attempts to order society as attempts to promote and protect the special privileges of the upper class.

Not all members of American society in the 1830s and 1840s complacently accepted the moral reform efforts of the Whigs. For example, Howe reports that many thought the Whig assumption of moral responsibility for others meddlesome. He tells the story of the burning of the church of Lyman Beecher, who was a Whig, temperance advocate, and minister. When Lyman Beecher's church on Hanover Street in Boston burned down, the volunteer fire companies, who hated his temperance crusading, refused to fight the flames. Instead, it is reported, they watched and sang: "While Beecher's church holds out to burn/The vilest sinner may return"—a parody of a hymn.³⁵

The best study of the differences in educational philosophy between the Democrats and the Whigs was conducted by Carl Kaestle and Maris Vinovskis for their book *Education and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts*.³⁶ They studied the attempt in 1840 to abolish the Massachusetts State Board of Education and, of course, Horace Mann's position as its secretary. This action was considered a direct attack on the common school movement. Kaestle and Vinovskis report that in the year preceding the attempt to abolish the board, a leading Massachusetts Democrat, Orestes Brownson, attacked the board for trying to "Prussianize" education by centralizing control over the schools. Brownson contended that the board was a vehicle for Whig ideas about education and maintained that control should remain at the local level.

In 1840, a legislative committee composed of three Whigs and two Democrats was established to investigate the work of the Board of Education. Surprisingly, given the majority of Whigs on the committee, its report attacked the board as an unnecessary expense and, to quote Kaestle and Vinovskis, as "a danger to political and religious freedoms." The committee report argues: "District schools, in a republican government need no police regulations, no systems of state censorship, no checks of moral, religious, or political conservatism, to preserve either the morals, the religion, or the politics of the state. 'Let them ever be kept free and pure.'"³⁷ Obviously, this reasoning was almost the exact opposite of that given by Mann for establishing a common school system.

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The committee's report provoked a series of other investigations that eventually led to a vote by the members of the state legislature on the abolition of the board. The attempt to abolish the board failed by a vote of 182 to 245. The legislative vote provided Kaestle and Vinovskis with data by which they could analyze the nature of the supporters and opponents of the common school system in Massachusetts.

Kaestle and Vinovskis classified the members of the legislature according to religion, occupation, the geographical area they represented, and party affiliation. They hoped to determine which factors were most important in determining support or nonsupport of the board. The assumption was made that a legislator's position on this issue reflected that individual's support or nonsupport of the common school movement. After analyzing the data, Kaestle and Vinovskis concluded that party affiliation was the most important factor in determining a legislator's support or nonsupport of the board. They also found that religion was not an important factor in legislative action. Of course, the legislature did not include a large Catholic faction, so the rift between Catholics and Protestants was not represented in their findings. They did find that legislators from manufacturing areas tended to support the board, unlike those from rural areas.

The fact that party affiliation was the most important factor does not mean that all Whigs supported the existence of the board and that all Democrats stood in opposition. One-fifth of Whigs and one-third of Democrats did not follow the general voting pattern of their respective parties. But even with these defections from the positions of both political parties, political ideology was the most important factor in differentiating between supporters and nonsupporters of the Board of Education.

The differences between the political parties in Massachusetts reflected more general differences between the two political groups throughout the nation. According to Kaestle and Vinovskis, "the Whigs argued that positive government intervention was a necessary and useful means of improving the quality of public schools throughout the commonwealth." Democrats, however, felt "that any increased state interference in local educational matters created the potential, if not the reality, of a centralized state school system that would dictate how children were to be educated."³⁸

The struggle between Whigs and Democrats over the common school reflected a more general concern about how schools should be controlled and whose values should be taught in a school's curriculum. This debate, which has continued into the twenty-first century, reflects in varying degrees the tension between those wanting popular control of the schools and little government intervention and those believing that government

should work actively to ensure that the schools serve general social, political, and economic goals.



THE BIRTH OF THE HIGH SCHOOL

In 1821, the Boston town meeting approved the opening of the first high school. Despite its early beginnings, the high school did not become a mass institution until the 1920s and 1930s. In the most authoritative source for the early history of the high school, *The Origins of the American High School*, William Reese argues that there was no clear definition of the meaning of high school in the 1820s and 1830s.³⁹ Reflecting the uncertainty of the meaning of high school, school activist Henry Barnard provided in 1838 a vague and almost meaningless definition that a “Public or Common High School, is intended . . . [to be] a public or common school for the older and more advanced scholars of the community . . . [with] a course of instruction adapted to their age, and intellectual and moral wants and, to some extent, to their future pursuits in life.”⁴⁰ These are nice words without any meaningful specificity about goals or content.

Regardless of the confusion about the exact meaning of high school, high schools were justified with arguments similar to those given in support of common schools. According to Reese, arguments supporting the establishment of high schools included the following:

- Like common school reformers, high school advocates argued that well-educated people would be taught to believe that equal opportunity through schooling justified the existence of social differences based on income and wealth.
- High schools would promote the idea that achievement depends on individual responsibility.
- A high school education would lead to obedience to the law.
- A high school education would undercut the potential for political revolution by instilling basic republican values.
- High schools would contribute to reduction of crime by instilling basic moral values.⁴¹

Reese found that from the 1820s through 1880s, those arguments were presented to local communities as reasons for building a high school.

Many of the early high schools were architectural masterpieces and could be described, according to Reese, as “Cathedrals of Learning.” Within the walls of these cathedrals of learning was a continuing debate about whether the emphasis should be on practical preparation for life and occupations or on formal instruction to form a well-disciplined mind and wisdom to ponder the larger questions about the meaning of life

and happiness. In the end, the high school curriculum centered on the teaching of advanced sciences, mathematics, English studies, history, and political economy. The actual content of these courses was most often determined by available textbooks. Textbooks determined the content of instruction. Reese asserts, "Textbooks thus served many crucial functions in the nineteenth century. They set common academic expectations for advanced pupils . . . [and] helped create a common curriculum."⁴²

As the high school became a universal institution in the twentieth century, the concerns with formal learning for the discipline of the mind would be displaced by concerns for preparation for occupations. A dramatic shift in the curriculum would occur as a result of this emphasis on a practical education for life and jobs.

THE CONTINUING DEBATE ABOUT THE COMMON SCHOOL IDEAL

Differing historical interpretations reflect the conflicts of the common school period. Also, these differences in interpretation reflect modern concerns about the role of education in American society. On the one hand, there are those who see the common school period as a battle between liberals and conservatives for the establishment of a school system that would be of great benefit to all members of society. On the other hand, some historians argue that common schools were established to protect dominant economic and cultural elites. These broad differences in historical interpretation contain elements of the debate that continues to this day about whose interests are served by the public schools. Therefore, understanding the differences in historical interpretation of the common school period is important to understanding both the common school reforms and the current debates about schooling.

The following represent the major interpretations of the common school movement.

Ellwood Cubberley: Cubberley portrayed the common school as a battle between liberals and conservatives. In his 1919 publication, *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History*,⁴³ Cubberley describes liberals as good people who struggle for education for all people against avarice-minded conservatives.

Cubberley created a list of differing reasons for the support or nonsupport of common schools. The arguments he lists as being given in support of the common school movement include prevention and reduction of poverty and crime, increased workforce productivity, elimination of "wrong ideas as to the distribution of wealth," reduction of tensions among social classes, elimination of charity schools because they stigmatized a certain class in society, assimilation of immigrants, and preparation of the citizenry for the exercise of the right to vote.

Of course, these arguments became the traditional arguments for the support of public schooling in the United States.

Cubberley also lists arguments for the expansion of state control over education. In one sense, these arguments can be viewed as part of the continuing debate about the rights of parents versus the rights of the state over the education of children. In Cubberley's words, the major arguments were as follows: "That a State which has the right to hang has the right to educate"; that "the taking over of education by the State is not based on considerations of economy, but is the exercise of the State's inherent right to self-preservation and improvement"; and finally, as a reflection of the common school emphasis on education serving government policies, "that only a system of state-controlled schools can be free to teach whatever the welfare of the State may demand."⁴⁴ Cubberley's list of the arguments favoring state control of education describes the actual political divisions that occurred during the 1830s and 1840s over the degree of government intervention in social and economic issues.

He lists the following as arguments given in opposition to the expansion of state power: "That taxes would be so increased that no state could long meet such a lavish drain" and "that there was a priestcraft in the scheme, the purpose being first to establish a State School, and then a State Church." Cubberley's list greatly oversimplifies the political debate about the extension of state control.⁴⁵

Cubberley lists the arguments of those opposed to the social and economic reform arguments for the common school, which, according to his interpretations, centered around aristocratic ideas of social class: Fear that common schools would destroy desirable social-class differences and educate people out of their proper place in society; fear that the industrious would be taxed to pay for the education of the indolent; fear that people without children would be forced to pay for the education of other people's children; fear that native-language instruction of non-English-speaking students would supplant English-language instruction in the schools; concerns of religious groups that the common school would hinder their advancement; and fear that private schools would be forced to close.

In general, Cubberley's interpretation is one that depicts the common school movement as the correct historical route to the development of an educational system that would benefit the majority of people by solving economic, political, and social problems. This vision of the common school movement received added support in Merle Curti's *Social Ideas of American Educators*, first published in 1935. Curti's history of education was written during the Depression, when there was a great deal of concern over the historical struggle between the haves and have-nots.

Merle Curti: For Curti, the common school movement was a major democratic movement designed to extend social benefits to lower social classes. His description of the period is given in large part in chapters devoted to Horace Mann. He portrays Horace Mann as a great egalitarian and reformer. For Curti, Mann's primary motivation was a desire to ensure that all classes of society had equal access to knowledge. Curti states: "[Mann's] social vision remained undimmed to the end, and all his work in the educational field was an effort to introduce into that field a more humane and democratic spirit."⁴⁶ But, unlike Cubberley, Curti is highly critical of the conservative economic and social ideas held by Mann, an attitude that puts a critical edge on Curti's praise of the common school movement.

Michael Katz: Katz's 1968 book, *Irony of Early School Reform*, dealt with the 1860 decision by voters in Beverly, Massachusetts, to abolish the local high school.⁴⁷ Katz used his discovery of resistance to the establishment of a high school in Beverly as a vehicle for providing a new interpretation of common school reforms. In the opening statement of his introductory chapter, "Educational Reform: The Cloud of Sentiment and Historiography," he states: "For the most part historians have helped to perpetuate this essentially noble story, which portrays a rational, enlightened working class, led by idealistic and humanitarian intellectuals, triumphantly wresting free public education from . . . selfish, wealthy elite and from the bigoted proponents of orthodox religions."⁴⁸ This, of course, is the interpretation given to the period by Ellwood Cubberley.

But, Katz argues, one should immediately begin to question this historical interpretation when one considers that by the end of the nineteenth century most urban schools were "cold, rigid, and somewhat sterile bureaucracies." He goes on to ask, "Could a truly humanitarian urge to help realize widely diffused aspirations have turned so quickly into the dispassionate ethos of red tape and drill?"⁴⁹ In answering this question, Katz paints an entirely different picture of the evolution of the common school.

For Katz, the most important factors in explaining the common school movement are the social and economic changes associated with the building of factories, the increase in immigration, and the growth of cities. Within the context of these events, upper-class reformers were seeking to ensure that they would benefit from these changes by imposing a common school system that would train workers for the new factories, educate immigrants into acceptance of values supportive of the ruling elite, and provide order and stability among the expanding populations of the cities.

From this perspective, the rigid, bureaucratic schools that Katz claims existed by the end of the nineteenth century were not accidental but were the logical result of a school system designed to discipline a population to serve the needs of an urban and industrial society. The emphasis on attendance, disciplined study, and order was designed to socialize the student, particularly the immigrant child, to the requirements of the new factory systems. Learning to behave in school was a preparation for learning to work in the factory. Also, Katz argues, the bureaucratic structure of education, which evolved from common school reforms, was designed to ensure upper-class control of schooling. In his conclusion, Katz states that the common school movement was "a coalition of the social leaders, status-anxious parents, and status-hungry educators to impose educational innovation, each for their own reasons, upon a reluctant community."⁵⁰

Katz's interpretation does not change the identity of the leaders of the common school movement, but it does change their motivations. According to Katz, their actions were not the result of disinterested humanitarian impulses but were caused by a desire to protect their social positions and to provide the new industrial system with disciplined workers.

What became the most controversial aspect of this interpretation is the argument that common school reforms were imposed on an unwilling working class—an argument that posed an important challenge to traditional ways of viewing American schools. This interpretation suggests that the vast majority of people in the nineteenth century did not want the type of organization of schooling that became standard in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is important to understand that this attitude did not reflect a general opposition among the populace to education and schooling but represented a rejection of common school reforms that sought to organize schools under central state control for the purposes of serving the social, political, and economic goals of government.

Katz's interpretation challenges not only Cubberley's benign view of the reformers but also interpretations that emphasize the importance of working-class support of the common school movement. Traditional labor history, beginning with the work of John R. Commons at the University of Wisconsin in 1918, stresses the key role of workingmen's parties in the late 1820s and 1830s in fighting for common school reforms. This interpretation places the American worker at the forefront of the battle for common schools. Of particular importance in this interpretation is the opposition of workers to the existence of charity schools, which they felt reinforced social-class distinctions. According to Commons's interpretation, members of the workingmen's parties supported the

common school because it provided the children of the poor with equal educational opportunity by mixing the rich and poor. Equality of educational opportunity, it was believed, would provide the children of the poor and the working class with an equal opportunity to compete with the children of the more affluent classes.

Rush Welter: Welter emphasizes the role of workingmen's parties in *Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America* (1962), but his discussion minimizes their contribution to common school reform and stresses their contribution to later thinking about the democratic role of education. Welter, discussing the organized workingmen of the late 1820s and early 1830s, states, "Their numbers were few and their direct political influence was slight, but they first spelled out the educational perspective in which several generations of American democrats would see their society and their politics."⁵¹

A more complicated picture of common school reform emerges from Welter's interpretation of the workingmen's contribution to democratic educational theory: Although the workingmen's parties accepted the common school ideal of eliminating social-class distinctions and providing equality of opportunity, they also supported public schooling as a means of providing the working class with knowledge to protect itself against the interests and power of the privileged in society. This concept of political education in the common school, according to Welter, was different from the concept of education as a means of maintaining order in a free society. On the contrary, the workingmen's parties saw political education as a means of arming the working class against the authority and power of the upper class. In Welter's words, "In their [workingmen's] eyes political knowledge was useful, not because it supported the exercise of governmental authority, but because it provided an intellectual resource against authority."⁵²

The importance of Welter's interpretation is his emphasis on the workingmen's support of school reform and his argument that the workingmen supported the common school for reasons different from those of other members of society. Within Welter's framework, the common school did not arise from a consensus of values about what the common school should accomplish but arose from the ideas of different social groups, each hoping that the common school would fulfill particular educational goals.

Carl Kaestle: In *Pillars of the Republic*,⁵³ Kaestle emphasizes the role of the common school in assuring the dominance of Protestant Anglo-American culture over other cultures in the United States. From Kaestle's point of view, common school reformers were primarily concerned that the United States did not become a multicultural society. Kaestle identifies ten major tenets of Protestant Anglo-American culture that the common

school was designed to protect. These ten principles can be divided into four groups. The first group includes the belief in the fragility of the republican form of government, the importance of developing individual character to achieve social morality, and the role of personal effort in defining merit. This group of beliefs can be traced back to the early proponents of republican education, who believed that order could be maintained in a free republican society only through the education of responsible citizens. Kaestle argues that by the 1830s a certain confidence had developed that the experiment in republican government would survive, but there was still concern that action had to be taken to ensure its survival. In the common school movement, stress was placed on protecting the fragility of the republican form of government by providing a political education that taught a common set of political beliefs, emphasized the exercise of intelligence, and promoted a respect for laws. Or, as Kaestle states, the implication of native Protestant ideology was that "schooling should stress unity, obedience, restraint, self-sacrifice, and the careful exercise of intelligence."⁵⁴

The belief that social morality was achieved through improving the quality of individual morality was a central theme of the charity school movement. As part of Protestant ideology and the common school movement, Kaestle argues, it resulted in a belief that a good moral education would produce a moral society. In addition, this aspect of Protestant ideology stressed that poverty could be eliminated if the children of the poor were taught that they could advance in society through their own individual effort.

The second group of factors in Kaestle's discussion is the role of women in society and the importance of the family and social environment in building character. According to Kaestle, Protestant ideology defined three central roles for women in middle-class families: to provide a sanctuary for the hardworking husband, to manage the household intelligently, and to nurture children. Of crucial importance was the role of women in child rearing, because this role involved education for the political and moral well-being of the nation. The arguments given for the importance of this social role for women provided a justification for recruiting women as teachers in common schools—an important aspect of common school reforms—because of their supposed skills in nurturing and developing morality. Another important factor is the fact that women were cheaper to employ as teachers than men were.

In the third group of themes characterizing Protestant ideology, Kaestle includes a belief in the virtue of property and the availability of economic opportunity in the United States. Both Protestant ideology and the common school ideology contain the belief, according to Kaestle, that "property was to be respected because it taught virtue. Everyone should

be taught to desire property and to respect property.”⁵⁵ Related to this belief was a vision of America as the land of economic opportunity: The availability of property and education would make it possible for all people to achieve economic success.

The last group of themes Kaestle identifies includes a belief in the superiority of American Protestant culture, in the manifest destiny of American society, and in the necessity of unifying America’s population. In the context of these beliefs, American Protestants believed that their religious values were the core of the American experiment with republicanism. Educational writers after the Revolutionary War, such as Noah Webster, equated Protestant Christian values with republican values. Kaestle argues that this same theme appears in the Protestant ideology associated with the common school movement. Kaestle also argues that the belief in the superiority of Protestantism merged with a belief in America’s unique destiny to “suggest to Americans that their nation was destined to reach the peak of human civilization.”⁵⁶ The assumption of the superiority of Protestantism logically led to the belief that all people should be united by being educated into a Protestant culture.

These different interpretations highlight the complex factors involved in the common school movement. No single interpretation provides an adequate explanation. Rather, the common school appears to have been a result of a complicated set of often conflicting social and economic factors that included a humanitarian impulse to create the good society, a desire of the working class to enhance its political and economic position in society, a desire of manufacturers to have a disciplined and well-trained workforce, a desire of the upper classes to protect their economic and social privileges, and a desire of a Protestant majority to maintain an American Protestant culture.

CONCLUSION

The common school movement provided the basic ideology and structure of the modern American school system. No single set of reasons or social forces brought the common school movement into existence. Rather, the movement was a product of a combination of political, economic, and social concerns that existed in the early part of the nineteenth century.

Politically, the success of the common school movement represents the victory of one political philosophy over another. Most individuals who supported and worked for a common school system believed that government should play an active role in ensuring the success of the economic and social system and that this was best achieved by centralizing and standardizing governmental processes. Many who opposed the

development of the common school system believed that the government that governed best governed least, that the success of the economic and social system depended on the absence of government intervention, and that the free actions of the marketplace guaranteed the most equitable distribution of economic benefits. They opposed the centralizing tendencies of government and hoped to maximize popular control of the political process by maintaining local control.

In the 1830s, these differences in political philosophy separated the Whigs from the Democrats: Most Whigs favored the centralization of control over education and the intervention of government, while most Democrats resisted the expansion of government power and fought to retain democratic localism. The tension and struggle between these two different political philosophies have continued into the twenty-first century under different political labels and represent one of the major areas of disagreement in American political thought. By the middle of the twentieth century, conflict over this issue was expressed as a concern with centralization of educational control at the federal level. The Democratic Party supported this trend because of the promise it held for a more just and equitable school system, whereas the Republican Party resisted continued federal intervention and argued for local control and the benefits of the free marketplace. Throughout the history of the modern American school, differences in political philosophies have had a major impact on the development and organization of education.

Culturally, the common school movement attempted to ensure that Protestant Anglo-American culture would remain dominant as large groups of immigrants with differing religious and cultural values entered American life. During the early period of common school reforms, this primarily meant protecting a Protestant ideology against an influx of Irish Catholics, African Americans, and Native Americans. In the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, Americanization programs for immigrants in the public schools served the same function.

The protection of a particular set of cultural and religious values was made possible by the way in which control of the school system was organized. The growth of centralized and bureaucratic control, as opposed to democratic localism, ensured that the dominant values of the school system would be Protestant and middle class. Beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, the shifting patterns of control usually reflected the desire of one or more groups in society to ensure that the schools served particular political, social, and economic interests.

The development of the common school also reflected changing economic conditions. The early growth of industrialism placed a premium

on education as preparation for work. From the standpoint of employers, common schooling could serve the useful function of socializing and training workers for the factory. From the workers' perspective, as reflected in the workingmen's parties, common schooling was a means of ensuring that employers did not maintain a monopoly over knowledge. Knowledge was power in the evolving modern industrial setting, and workers did not want to be kept from that source of power.

Also, the promise of American life was improved economic opportunity for all people. In fact, one could argue that the concept of equality of economic opportunity is a theme that has united all American people. For the worker, equality of economic opportunity was a means of improving one's personal economic condition. For the school reformer, such as Horace Mann, equality of economic opportunity was a means of reducing friction among social classes. For the employer, equality of economic opportunity was a means of ensuring a supply of the best possible workers by creating competition among workers in the labor market. For most members of society, the common school became the hope for providing and maintaining a society based on equality of economic opportunity.

Most social groups believed that the common school was the best means of controlling crime, social unrest, and political disruptions. In the early nineteenth century, workingmen, Protestants, Catholics, reformers, urban dwellers, and others shared a belief that the school was the key to social control and social stability. This belief became a standard fixture in the rhetoric surrounding the American school in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In summary, by the middle of the nineteenth century most of the major themes of the modern American school had emerged. Persistent political divisions over schooling would occur, and dissent would continue in certain areas. Also, hope would continue that common schooling would bring forth the good society by improving economic conditions, providing equality of opportunity, eliminating crime, maintaining political and social order, and protecting the domination of Protestant Anglo-American culture.

NOTES

1. Carl F. Kaestle and Maris Vinovskis, *Education and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 9-46.
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3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

7. Ibid., pp. 72-73.
8. Ibid., pp. 74-75.
9. Ibid., pp. 80-81.
10. Ibid., p. 83.
11. Edited copies of Horace Mann's reports can be found in Lawrence Cremin, ed., *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1958), p. 98.
12. Ibid., p. 100; italics in original.
13. Ibid., p. 106.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., pp. 94-97.
16. Ibid., p. 97.
17. Ibid., p. 93.
18. Ibid., p. 86.
19. Ibid., p. 87.
20. Ibid.
21. Quoted in William Russell, "Education and the Working Class: The Expansion of Public Education during the Transition to Capitalism" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1981), pp. 274-275.
22. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 276-277.
23. Ibid., p. 291.
24. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 294; italics in original.
25. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 295.
26. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 300.
27. Rush Welter, *Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 51-52.
28. Herbert Ershkowitz and William G. Shade, "Consensus or Conflict? Political Behavior in the State Legislatures during the Jacksonian Era," in *The Many-Faceted Jacksonian Era: New Interpretations*, ed. Edward Pessen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), pp. 212-231.
29. Quoted in Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. 107.
30. Ibid.
31. Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 29.
32. Ibid., pp. 29-30.
33. Ibid., p. 33.
34. Major L. Wilson, "What Whigs and Jacksonian Democrats Meant by Freedom," in Pessen, *Many-Faceted Jacksonian Era*, pp. 192-212; Howe, *Political Culture*, pp. 23-43.
35. Howe, *ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
36. Kaestle and Vinovskis, *Education and Social Change* (see note 1).
37. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 215.
38. Ibid., p. 230.
39. William Reese, *The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
40. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 35.
41. Ibid., pp. 38-58.
42. Ibid., p. 121.
43. Ellwood Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), pp. 164-165.
44. Ibid., pp. 165-166.
45. Ibid., p. 166.
46. Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (Paterson, NJ: Pageant Books, 1959), p. 138.
47. Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).
48. Ibid., p. 1.
49. Ibid., p. 2.
50. Ibid., p. 218.

51. Welter, *Popular Education*, p. 45.
52. Ibid., p. 48.
53. Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 103.
54. Ibid., p. 81.
55. Ibid., p. 90.
56. Ibid., p. 94.