

## SOME HISTORICAL ADVOCATES OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Robert E. Potter  
University of Florida

Throughout the history of our nation there has been a conflict over the meaning of the word "public" in our concept of public schools. However, until the past four or five years, few, if any, observers of American institutions would have doubted that this conflict had been settled and that the free, tax-supported, state-controlled school with compulsory attendance laws for all children was permanently a part of American culture. Now there are strong forces which attempt to undo the progress of three hundred years.

Even in the South, where a planter aristocracy used its political, social, and economic power to block the development of free schools for all children, the fight for public education is older than the nation itself. Twice Thomas Jefferson presented to the legislature of Virginia a proposal for free, universal education under the control and supervision of the state. His proposal would have granted a minimum of three years of free education to all children, with scholarships for a few brilliant boys who would have gone all the way through the College of William and Mary with full state support. This bill was far too radical for aristocratic, Anglican Virginia, and the legislature both times, in 1779 and 1817, reaffirmed the stand taken by Sir William Berkeley, Governor of Virginia, who, in his report in 1671, wrote: "I thank God there are no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have them these hundred years." Jefferson had learned his lessons from Plato much better than had some of his contemporary aristocrats and he recognized that genius may come from all levels of society. In defending his proposal, he wrote to John Adams that he had hoped "to defeat the competition of wealth and birth for public positions."

Much is sometimes made of what our founding fathers believed about education, particularly with reference to the lack of mention of schools or education in the Constitution. This absence may be explained by the political theories of the two major groups who wrote that document. The Federalists feared the "mob" and doubted their "educability" and hence had no concern about public education. As wealthy men, they could pay for the schooling of their own boys. The anti-Federalists, Jefferson and his radical followers, believed in education, but they feared a central government which would have been strong enough to support a public school system. Consequently, they did not see education as a proper function of federal government. This silence in the Constitution does not mean that none of the founding fathers had considered the question of schools for a democracy. During the first decades of our national period, many public figures proposed plans for a national system of education.

Even George Washington lent his support to this movement, for his name is listed as a subscriber to more than one of the published proposals. Washington also attempted to finance a federal university, bequeathing to the nation for the endowment of the university his shares in the company which was building a canal between the Potomac and Ohio Rivers. These grand dreams faded together as the canal builders failed to get beyond Cumberland and the railroad eventually did.

Among the public figures urging the foundation of public schools was a Delaware editor and publisher named Robert Coram. In 1791, he wrote:

"Education of children should be provided for in the constitution of every state.... Education should not be left to the caprice, or negligence of parents, to chance, or confined to the children of wealthy parents.... It is a shame, a scandal to civilized society, that part only of the citizens should be sent to colleges and universities to learn to cheat the rest of their liberties (1)."

Coram pointed out that the revolutionary ideal of equal representation could never be achieved without an "equal mode of education for all citizens, " for the better educated would cheat the poorer, even if the latter could succeed in being elected to public office (2).

In 1795, the American Philosophical Society published two prize essays concerning "the best system of liberal Education...adapted to the genius of the Government." One winner was Samuel Knox, Maryland minister, teacher, and physician. In his scheme he objected to private schools because the inequality of opportunity would deprive the nation of much talent, divide rather than unite the nation, and restrict the stimulation of competition of the able from all parts of society. "Surely we should witness no patridic exertions more zealously or generously called forth; or more munificently supported than a well-digested system of public education(3) "

The other prize essay was authored by Samuel Harrison Smith, Philadelphia editor and publisher. Comparing private with public education, Smith wrote that the public was much to be preferred because of the narrowness of parental solicitude, the general weakness of parents, the lack of competition in private education, and the overwhelming biases of parents; private schools limited the equalization of opportunities, developed class distinctions, built up antagonisms, and subordinated "one part of mankind in order that it might be exploited the more successfully (4)."

Noah Webster, author of the famed dictionary and "blueback speller," criticized private schools for their "demoralizing tend-

encies," for they did not "instill the principles of 'service' needed in a democracy (5).

"It is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued, which may not diffuse a knowledge of the sciences, but may implant, in the minds of American youth, the principles of virtue and liberty (6)."

As the cities grew and workingmen joined the forerunners of labor unions, one of the great concerns of these Workingmen's Societies was free public schools where children of all classes would attend without any distinction. A mass meeting in Philadelphia in 1830 passed a resolution containing these words: "The time has come to promote a system of education that shall equally embrace all the children of the state, of every rank and condition." In a series of articles in the New York Daily Sentinel, the newspaper of the workingmen's movement, these statements were expanded.

Nothing will so fully elevate the character of the American people, as an equal distribution of the benefits of intellectual instruction. Nothing will so completely place us upon an equality, and impart to us power of mind calculated to enhance our national importance (7).

The workingmen's proposals went considerably beyond demanding the same schooling for all children. They contended that no education could be equal when children went home to unequal homes; consequently, they argued that education should be conducted in boarding schools where all children, rich and poor, lived together, shared the same food, dressed alike, and possessed the same opportunities for social and intellectual enrichment. This suggestion was much too radical for its inclusion in any practical political program, and most reformers concentrated on establishing schools where all children might be free to attend without distinctions made in tuition.

During the fight to establish these free schools one hurdle to conquer was the rate-bill. The rate-bill was a form of tuition charged parents according to the number of children enrolled in school and the number of days they had attended. At the end of the term, the trustees pro-rated unpaid expenses, billing each family. For those parents who were too poor to pay the rate-bill, they could take a pauper's oath, swearing they could not pay the bill and their children would be educated free. This carried the stigma of charity, and many proud parents chose to keep their children home rather than send them to school as "free" students. This stigma clung to the "free" schools even after the rate-bill was no longer existing. The aristocratic South was particularly slow to abolish this discriminatory practice, but after the Civil War, rate-bills were gradually abolished. Ironically, the precedent, even for Southern states, was set in Pennsylvania, with the leading role played by a legislator who later became the object of intense hatred in the South, Thaddeus Stevens.

In 1834, Pennsylvania passed a law permitting districts the local option of establishing public schools free for all, but the next year, a reactionary bill was submitted to the legislature to repeal this permissive legislation and establish the old pauper school with rate-bills. Stevens attacked the bill in a speech which turned the tide and secured for Pennsylvania the right of school taxation, a principle even more liberal than the 1834 law. This firm legal precedent was the basis of later action in other states of the East and South where the rate-bill had become a part of the system of school finance. In the democratic frontier West, the rate-bill had never gained a foothold. In the spirit of this democracy, Stevens said in his speech:

Hereditary distinctions of rank are sufficiently odious; but that which is founded on poverty is infinitely more so. Such a law should be entitled "An act for branding and marking the poor, so that they may be known from the rich and the proud."

Many complain of this tax, not so much on account of its amount, as because it is for the benefit of others and not themselves. This is a mistake. It is for their own benefit, inasmuch as it perpetuates the government and ensures the due administration of the laws under which they live, and by which their lives are protected. Why do they not urge the same objection against all their taxes? The industrious, thrifty, rich farmer pays a heavy county tax to support criminal courts, build jails, and pay sheriffs and jail keepers, and yet probably he never has, and never will have, any direct personal use of either. He never gets the worth of his money by being tried for a crime before the court, ... or receiving an equivalent from the sheriff or the hangman's officers! He cheerfully pays the tax which is necessary to support and punish convicts, but loudly complains of that which goes to prevent his fellow being from becoming a criminal, and to obviate the necessity of those humiliating institutions (8).

During this period, many political leaders joined with educators like Horace Mann and Henry Barnard to promote the cause of public education. In March, 1831, the American Annals of Education published some of the statements of these leaders, and among the governors was one Southern leader, Governor Hamilton of South Carolina. Even in the area which was most hostile to any form of social program which would be of benefit to the general population, Hamilton was reported as saying: "The only safe and effective Agrarian system is the scheme of public education. This alone will secure to the poor their just rights (9)." Jefferson's ideal was not dead, even in the aristocratic South which was so desperately disowning many of his equalitarian concepts.

The legal battles for public elementary schools and for state universities were won before the outbreak of the Civil War, but until a Kalamazoo, Michigan, taxpayer brought suit to prevent collection of taxes for the support of a high school, the status of secondary education was in doubt. In 1874, the Michigan Supreme Court decided that public education should be provided for all rungs of the educational ladder. This was expressed very forcefully in the opinion written by Chief Justice Thomas M. Cooley:

We supposed it had always been understood in this state that education, not merely in the rudiments, but in an enlarged sense, was regarded as an important practical advantage to be supplied at their option to rich and poor alike, and not as something pertaining merely to culture and accomplishment to be brought as such within the reach of those whose accumulated wealth enabled them to pay for it (10).

As with Pennsylvania's Free School Law, this decision was a legal precedent followed in many other states.

Because of the aristocratic attitude and the rural organization of the South, little gain in public education had been made before 1860 and much of what had been begun was destroyed in the war. Not only were schools and endowments destroyed, but so was most of the taxable wealth, leaving the South with a terrible up-hill fight in its efforts to build a public school system, or more accurately, two public school systems, for early Reconstruction attempts at integrated schools soon indicated that few Southerners were ready to support a universal school system. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, Southern leaders, supported financially by federal funds and Northern philanthropy, labored to produce universal education in the South which would approach the systems of the North and West. Teachers, professors, and college presidents were not alone in this effort. Political leaders joined in the cause and so did many newspapers. An editorial which appeared in the Gainesville, Florida, Sun was endorsed in an editorial in the Starke Florida Telegraph on October 25, 1879. This paper, which proclaimed on its masthead that it was "Conservative in Politics," agreed that:

It is the part of wisdom and public conscience to make the system of [education by the state] perform the work of fitting the children of the people with a thorough common school education.... Nothing compensates the citizen for the duties of citizenship he is compelled to perform so adequately and advantageously as the education of the offspring he is rearing for the state, by the state.... The capacity of the elector to understand the questions of policy or principle on which he is called to vote, depends on the breadth and culture of his mind.... Good government and liberal education are correlatives (11).

A leading figure in the move to develop Southern education was Charles Francis Dabney, president of the University of Tennessee and member of the Southern Education Board. He has written a two-volume history of this period entitled Universal Education in the South, which describes the tremendous effort the South made to move away from the pre-war ineffective, class-based system of private schools to free, tax-supported, public schools. Philanthropy had primed the pump, and to keep it going, educational leaders and public spirited citizens, mostly Southern, joined to form the Southern Education Board. It grew out of a number of Conferences for Education in the South. At the fourth annual meeting of these conferences, held in 1901 in Winston-Salem, a resolution was passed which reaffirmed the

conviction that the overshadowing and supreme public need of our time, as we pass the threshold of a new century, is the education of the children of all the people.... With the expansion of our population and the growth of industry and economic resources, we recognize in fitting and universal education and training for the home, for the farm and the workshop, and for the exercise of the duties of citizenship, the only salvation for our American standards of family and social life and the only hope for the perpetuity of our institutions (12).

The Southern Education Board, which grew out of these conferences, existed from 1901 to 1914, and included in its total of twenty-seven members seven men from the North and twenty Southern-born leaders. All of these men were influential figures. Dabney writes:

The aim of the association was definite. It was universal education, the education of every child in the South, rich or poor, native or foreign born, white or black. Ever since the days of Thomas Jefferson, patriotic men had been struggling to make this ideal an actuality, but it had not been possible to do so. Now, however, the southern people were awakening to the realization that the training of all the people furnished the only hope of the restoration of their land (13).

One agency of the Board was the Bureau of Information and Advice on Legislation and School Organization, established to aid in carrying on a "campaign of education for free schools for all the people." This Bureau published pamphlets, circulars, and bulletins for two years with headquarters at the University of Tennessee. Dabney himself wrote one in 1901 entitled A World Wide Law: Ratio of Education to Production. Using statistics to compare Tennessee with Massachusetts on per capita annual production and average number of years schooling, he argued that "the power of a people to earn money is in direct proportion to the length of the period the average

citizen has attended school." Perhaps modern statisticians would be critical of his sample and his measurement and analysis techniques, but it does not take sophisticated mathematics to arrive at Dabney's conclusions:

"If the people of the South would compete in production with those of other states and of the world--and they must do so whether they will or not--they must educate all their children.... Our great resources in the South are useless in the hands of an untrained people. Moreover, if we do not educate our own people to use these resources intelligently the trained men of other States will come in and do so, and make us 'the hewers of wood and drawers of water' in their industries.(14)."

At the 1902 Conference at Athens, Georgia, Governor Hoke Smith of Georgia and Governor Charles B. Aycock of North Carolina emphasized the need of selling public education in the rural areas. In Governor Aycock's words, "'When a man is hungry he will come to you for bread, but the ignorant man will not come. We have to go to him and insist that he educate his children (15).'"

The Southern Education Board was paralleled by the General Education Board, which was organized in 1902 as a result of Rockefeller philanthropies and which also concentrated on improving education in the South. One of the members of the General Education Board was Walter Hines Page, native of North Carolina and famed editor and journalist. In a speech in 1897 in North Carolina he had coined the term "The Forgotten Man," the poor rural white of the South.

"A community is not rich because it contains a few rich men, it is not healthful because it contains a few strong men, it is not intelligent because it contains a few men of learning ... if the rest of the population also be not well-to-do, or healthful, or intelligent.... The forgotten man became not only a dead weight, but a definite opponent of social progress.

"A public school system ... is the only effective means to develop the forgotten man, and even more surely the only means to develop the forgotten woman (16)."

These leaders soon became aware that it was not enough to have free schools available at the "option of the parents." At the Eleventh Conference for Education in the South, held in Memphis in 1908, one of the main discussions was on compulsory education. Dr. Wycliffe Rose, of the University of Tennessee, led the discussion. He argued that if man is a part of society, society has the right to educate him.

"If the State is fundamentally interested in social progress ... it must establish and maintain systems of schools.... If social development be the chief concern of the State, then its most valuable asset is the educated citizen. Every neglected class represents a waste of assets; every individual left in ignorance is a possibility thrown away. The State will inevitably reap the results of such neglect in the form of arrested social development.

"... If the state would elevate and enrich the life of the citizen, it must elevate and enrich the social environment in which he lives and moves and has his being. The neglected individual or the neglected group in any society is the dead body to which the favored individual is tied and from which there is no escape.

"... From this organic relation and interaction of the individual and society in the development of life springs the necessity of universal education. So far we have found no means of making education universal save through... the enforcement of compulsory education law (17)."

In summarizing his two-volume history of the efforts to develop a public school system in the South, Dabney remarked that we had at last realized this dream of universal education.

The Southland which so long had wandered in the wilderness ... was at last coming into its own. ... People, who were indifferent and antagonistic toward public education at public cost, have now (1936) come to look upon the education of all the children as the first duty of the people and the highest function of the democratic state (18)."

#### Footnotes

1. Allen Oscar Hansen, Liberalism and American Education in the Eighteenth Century (New York. The Macmillan Company, 1926), p. 71. Quoting Robert Coram, Plan for the general establishment of Schools throughout the United States, 1791. Preface, pp. 56-57.
2. Ibid., p. 75. Quoting Coram, p. 93.
3. Ibid., p. 120. Quoting Samuel Knox, Essay on Education, 1799, p. 26.
4. Ibid., p. 163. Paraphrasing Samuel H. Smith, Remarks on Education, 1798, pp. 66-72.
5. Ibid., p. 229.

6. Ibid., p. 237. Quoting Noah Webster, On the Education of the Youth in America., 1788, p. 3.
7. Paul Monroe, Founding of the American Public School System, Vol. II. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1940), p. 851.
8. Ibid., pp. 802-803.
9. Newton Edwards and Hermann Richey, The School in the American Social Order (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), p. 333. Quoting from American Annals of Education I (March, 1831), p. 125.
10. Ellwood P. Cubberley, Readings in the History of Education (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), p. 588.
11. The Florida Telegraph, Starke, Florida, Vol. 1, No. 14 (October 25, 1879), p. 2.
12. Charles William Dabney, Universal Education in the South, Vol. II (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936), pp. 41-42. Quoting from the Proceedings of the Fourth Conference for Education in the South, Winston-Salem, N. C., 1901, pp. 11-12.
13. Ibid., p. 66.
14. Ibid., pp. 79-80. Quoting from Charles Wm. Dabney, A World Wide Law: Ratio of Education to Production, University of Tennessee Index, Series II No. 10, Jan. 1901.
15. Ibid., p. 93.
16. Ibid., pp. 238-240. Quoting from Walter Hines Page, The Rebuilding of Old Commonwealths, pp. 2-35.
17. Ibid., pp. 268-269. Quoting from the Proceedings of the Eleventh Conference Education in the South, Memphis, Tenn., 1908, pp. 150-151.
18. Ibid., pp. 512-513.