

PUBLIC OR PRIVATE



The era from the 1830s until the Civil War produced intense reform movements, especially in the Northeast. "In the history of the world," exclaimed Ralph Waldo Emerson, "the doctrine of Reform had never such a scope as at the present hour." Some reformers were religious; they took seriously Christianity's emphasis on spiritual equality and Jesus's concern for the lowly and humble. Some drew inspiration from the Declaration of Independence, with its insistence on natural rights, and were eager to make its social and political ideas a reality. Many believed that human nature was perfectible and that with better social arrangements men and women would be able to live more fully and freely than they ever had before. Hence the struggle for temperance, women's rights, humane prisons and asylums, better working conditions, and a host of communitarian schemes such as Mormonism.

Reformers also focused on education. Believing that the foundation of democracy was an educated citizenry, they were shocked by the disparity between that ideal and the sorry state of schooling. In most mid-Atlantic states paupers were educated at public expense; in the South, public schools were almost nonexistent; in the West, the sparse population was simply unable to establish adequate schools. Even in New England, where an educational tradition stretched back to the Puritan insistence that as many people as possible should read the Bible, school systems were largely dysfunctional.

The signs were everywhere. Essayist Bronson Alcott taught eighty students in one tiny room. Buildings were usually frigid and joyless, on sites selected with less regard to comfort "than if the children were animals." Anything would do, especially if it was "so useless for everything else as to be given to the district." Teachers were unavailable and untrained. Supplies were minimal. Common (public) school "revivalists" therefore went to work to persuade towns and villages to build more and better schools; to fill them with comfortable desks, blackboards, books, maps, blocks, and writing materials; to establish standards and train professional (mostly female) teachers; and to make elementary education compulsory.

No one was more devoted to the cause than Horace Mann. A Boston lawyer and politician from Franklin, Massachusetts, Mann had suffered through a miserable childhood and a wretched education. In 1837 he stunned his friends by quitting, at age forty-one, both the law and the presidency of the Massachusetts senate to become secretary of the state's fledgling board of education. There, with little formal power save persuasion, Mann worked a revolution in the state's school system. Largely as a result of his efforts, Massachusetts became a model for common schools across the North.

But there were powerful opposing forces. Prosperous families, in particular, liked to send their children to private schools. One of Mann's greatest challenges was therefore to convince parents to send their children to public schools, as his 1838 *Report on the Common Schools* (excerpted below) makes clear. The report also reflected Mann's view that the common school experience would promote the opportunity, social unity, and compassion that would make students good future citizens: "If we do not prepare children to become good citizens—if we do not . . . enrich their minds with knowledge, imbue their hearts with the love of truth and duty . . . then our republic must go down to destruction."

Mann's devotion to educational reform never faltered. After serving twelve years as secretary of the Massachusetts board of education, he served a term in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he supported efforts to halt the expansion of slavery. In 1853 Mann became the first president of Antioch College in Ohio, where he died in 1859.

Questions to Consider. According to Horace Mann, what was the main purpose of the common school system? To what extent did Mann's enthusiasm for public schools reflect his view of human nature? Why did some people value private education more than public? What did Mann think would be the social consequences of this preference? What did Mann seem to value most, opportunity for individuals or well-being for the society? Do you find his arguments persuasive? Some say they are especially relevant today. Do you agree?



Report on the Common Schools (1838)

HORACE MANN

The object of the common school system of Massachusetts was to give to every child in the Commonwealth a free, straight, solid path-way, by which he could walk directly up from the ignorance of an infant to a knowledge of the primary duties of a man; and could acquire a power and an invincible will to discharge them. Have our children such a way? Are they walking in it? Why do so many, who enter it, falter therein? Are there not many, who miss it altogether? What can be done to reclaim them? What can be done to rescue faculties, powers, divine endowments, graciously designed for individual and social good, from being perverted to individual and social calamity? These are the questions of deep and intense interest, which I have proposed to myself, and upon which I have sought for information and counsel. . . .

An . . . [important] topic . . . is the apathy of the people themselves towards our common schools. The wide usefulness of which this institution is capable is shorn away on both sides, by two causes diametrically opposite. On one side there is a portion of the community who do not attach sufficient value to the system to do the things necessary to its healthful and energetic working. They may say excellent things about it, they may have a conviction of its general utility; but they do not understand, that the wisest conversation not embodied in action, that convictions too gentle and quiet to coerce performance, are little better than worthless. The prosperity of the system always requires some labor. It requires a conciliatory disposition, and oftentimes a little sacrifice of personal preferences. . . .

Through remissness or ignorance on the part of parent and teacher, the minds of children may never be awakened to a consciousness of having, within themselves, blessed treasures of innate and noble faculties, far richer than any outward possessions can be; they may never be supplied with any foretaste of the enduring satisfactions of knowledge; and hence, they may attend school for the allotted period, merely as so many male and female automata, between four and sixteen years of age. As the progenitor of the human race, after being perfectly fashioned in every limb and organ and feature, might have lain till this time, a motionless body in the midst of the beautiful garden of Eden, had not the Creator breathed into him a living soul; so children, without some favoring influences to woo out and cheer their faculties, may remain mere inanimate forms, while surrounded by the paradise of knowledge. It is generally believed, that there is an increasing class of people



New England schoolroom, 1857. Horace Mann's reform efforts succeeded to an astonishing degree in the towns and villages of the Northern states. By modern standards, however, even the new and newly refurbished schools were sometimes stark and gloomy, as this photograph of a girls' class suggests. Even when teachers were better trained and paid, they relied on strict discipline and drill to educate their students. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of I. N. Phelps Stokes, Edward S. Hawes, Alice Mary Hawes, Marion Augusta Hawes, 1937)

amongst us, who are losing sight of the necessity of securing ample opportunities for the education of their children. And thus, on one side, the institution of common schools is losing its natural support, if it be not incurring actual opposition.

Opposite to this class, who tolerate, from apathy, a depression in the common schools, there is another class who affix so high a value upon the culture of their children, and understand so well the necessity of a skillful preparation of means for its bestowment, that they turn away from the common schools, in their depressed state, and seek, elsewhere, the helps of a more enlarged and thorough education. Thus the standard, in descending to a point corresponding with the views and wants of one portion of society, falls below the demands and the regards of another. Out of different feelings grow

different plans; and while one remains fully content with the common school, the other builds up the private school or the academy.

The education fund is thus divided into two parts. Neither of the halves does a quarter of the good which might be accomplished by a union of the whole. One party pays an adequate price, but has a poor school; the other has a good school, but at more than four-fold cost. Were their funds and their interest combined, the poorer school might be as good as the best; and the dearest almost as low as the cheapest. This last mentioned class embraces a considerable portion, perhaps a majority of the wealthy persons in the state; but it also includes another portion, numerically much greater, who, whether rich or poor, have a true perception of the sources of their children's individual and domestic well-being, and who consider the common necessities of their life, their food and fuel and clothes, and all their bodily comforts as superfluities, compared with the paramount necessity of a proper mental and moral culture of their offspring.

The maintenance of free schools rests wholly upon the social principle. It is emphatically a case where men, individually powerless, are collectively strong. The population of Massachusetts, being more than *eighty* to the square mile, gives it the power of maintaining common schools. Take the whole range of the western and south-western states, and their population, probably, does not exceed a dozen or fifteen to the square mile. Hence, except in favorable localities, common schools are impossible; as the population upon a territory of convenient size for a district, is too small to sustain a school. Here, nothing is easier. But by dividing our funds, we cast away our natural advantages. We voluntarily reduce ourselves to the feebleness of a state, having but half our density of population.

It is generally supposed, that this severance of interests, and consequent diminution of power, have increased much of late, and are now increasing in an accelerated ratio. This is probable, for it is a self-aggravating evil. Its origin and progress are simple and uniform. Some few persons . . . finding the advantages of the common school inadequate to their wants, unite to establish a private one. They transfer their children from the former to the latter. The heart goes with the treasure. The common school ceases to be visited by those whose children are in the private. Such parents . . . have now no personal motive to vote for or advocate any increase of the town's annual appropriation for schools; to say nothing of the temptation to discourage such increase in indirect ways, or even to vote directly against it. If, by this means, some of the best scholars happen to be taken from the common school, the standard of that school is lowered. The lower classes in a school have no abstract standard of excellence, and seldom aim at higher attainments than such as they daily witness. All children, like all men, rise easily to the common level. There, the mass stop; strong minds only ascend higher. But raise the standard, and, by a spontaneous movement, the mass will rise again and reach it. Hence the removal of the most forward scholars from a school is not

a small misfortune.

The refusal of a town to maintain the free town school drives a portion of its inhabitants to establish the private school or academy. When established, these institutions tend strongly to diminish the annual appropriations of the town; they draw their ablest recruits from the common schools; and, by being able to offer higher compensation, they have a pre-emptive right to the best qualified teachers; while, simultaneously, the district schools are reduced in length, deteriorated in quality, and, to some extent, bereft of talents competent for instruction. . . .

. . . The patrons of the private school plead the moral necessity of sustaining it, because, they say, some of the children in the public school are so addicted to profanity or obscenity, so prone to trickishness or to vulgar and mischievous habits, as to render a removal of their own children from such contaminating influences an obligatory precaution. But would such objectors bestow that guardian care, that parental watchfulness upon the common schools, which an institution, so wide and deep-reaching in its influences, demands of all intelligent men, might not these repellent causes be mainly abolished? Reforms ought to be originated and carried forward by the intelligent portion of society; by those who can see most links in the chain of causes and effects; and that intelligence is false to its high trusts, which stands aloof from the labor of enlightening the ignorant and ameliorating the condition of the unfortunate. And what a vision must rise before the minds of all men, endued with the least glimmer of foresight, in the reflection, that, after a few swift years, those children, whose welfare they now discard, and whose associations they deprecate, will constitute more than *five sixths* of the whole body of that community, of which their own children will be only a feeble minority, vulnerable at every point, and utterly incapable of finding a hiding-place for any earthly treasure, where the witness, the juror and the voter cannot reach and annihilate it!

The theory of our laws and institutions undoubtedly is, *first*, that in every district of every town in the Commonwealth, there should be a free district school, sufficiently safe, and sufficiently good, for all the children within its territory, where they may be well instructed in the rudiments of knowledge, formed to propriety of demeanor, and imbued with the principles of duty: and, *secondly*, in regard to every town, having such an increased population as implies the possession of sufficient wealth, that there should be a school of an advanced character, offering an equal welcome to each one of the same children, whom a peculiar destination, or an impelling spirit of genius, shall send to its open doors,—especially to the children of the poor. . . .

After the state shall have secured to all its children, that basis of knowledge and morality, which is indispensable to its own security; after it shall have supplied them with the instruments of that individual prosperity, whose aggregate will constitute its own social prosperity; then they may be emancipated from its tutelage, each one to go whithersoever his well-instructed mind shall determine.