



## Education in the Common School Period (ca. 1830s–1860s)

**Abstract** This chapter examines the perennialist tradition behind Horace Mann and the Common School Movement. It details the rise of normal schools and the development of a common pedagogy and curriculum. It questions exactly how common was common in the public schools, opening up questions regarding the treatment of historically marginalized populations. It concludes with a discussion on the educational legacies of this period and recommendations for further reading.

**Keywords** Nativist • Infrastructure • Curriculum • Committee of Ten • Civic religion • Pedagogy • Classroom management • Normal schools • Horace Mann • WASPs • Gradualism • Talented tenth • American Dream • Booker T. Washington • W.E.B. DuBois • McGuffey Readers • Messianic

When the word “common” is used, the rightful belief is that what is meant is, in fact, common—something shared by the majority, if not all. When it comes to the use of the term “common” in regards to education, the intent was to establish a system of schooling that would bring together all the children of the nation into one American belief system. As stated by one Illinois Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1842: “The chief end [of public schools] is to make good citizens. Not to make precocious scholars ... not to impart the secret of acquiring wealth ... not to qualify directly for

professional success ... but simply to make good citizens.” However, one of the greatest misnomers in American history was the era known as the Common School Movement. While, in theory, the schools were developing a common pedagogy to be used covering a common curriculum based upon common public support, all too often, students from marginalized cultures were in schools that were more uncommon than common.

### WHO WAS HORACE MANN? WHAT IS THE COMMON SCHOOL MOVEMENT?

- **Key terms:** nativist, infrastructure, curriculum, Committee of Ten, civic religion, pedagogy, classroom management, normal schools
- **Key figures:** Horace Mann, WASPs

American society was beginning to change as the nation entered the nineteenth century. One of the largest challenges facing the **White Anglo-Saxon Protestants** (WASPs) that comprised the nation’s founders were two questions: who are all these people showing up who don’t look like us, speak like us, or worship like us ... and what do we do about them? Immigration was on the rise on both coasts of North America. On the east coast, a wide variety of predominantly European émigrés were making their way in through the large port cities (such as New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Charleston), finding neighborhoods of those who were like them in which to settle down or, in the absence of such, migrating their way inland.

When one says “nineteenth century immigrant” images of white Euro families in peasant garb standing under the Statue of Liberty’s torch as they wended their ways through the halls of Ellis Island come immediately to mind. While these immigrants at least looked like those who had settled here previously when viewed through a racial lens, they were mainly not Protestant—those who practiced Catholicism from Ireland and Italy, those who practiced Judaism throughout Eastern Europe—and brought an incredible array of religious customs, foods, languages, and traditions. Between 1840 and 1860, four million non-English, non-Protestant immigrants arrived.

It cannot be forgotten that we were developing *two* coasts at this time, though. On the west coast, émigrés from Pacific Rim Asian countries such as China and Japan were making their way to the new world as well. Contemporary readers must also have images of Asian families in peasant

garb standing with the Coit Tower in the background as they wended their ways through the halls of Angel Island before moving on to find communities of people with whom they shared culture.

The influx of immigrants gave rise to a reactionary group known as the **nativists**. The nativists (depicted in the film *Gangs of New York*) believed in protecting the interests of native-born citizens over immigrants at all costs (not to be confused with Native Americans who were, by this time, all but relegated away from the coasts into the horrific conditions of the reservation system). Nativists viewed immigrants as comically underprepared at best, animalistic heathens to be loathed and feared at worst. At least slaves were property and thus were given some consideration—as the most expensive possession of a landowner, slaves were often treated similarly to a prize horse or family pet. This dehumanizing treatment should never be considered positive; however, many Irish and Polish immigrants would remind contemporary readers that the groups shared many of the same challenges. Both were considered inhuman, closer to apes than man; both were considered outside the protection of the laws; both could be used up in manual labor and discarded when broken without the slightest twinge of conscience.

What separated the two groups, African slave and European worker, was perceived potential. By the early decades, a lawyer from Massachusetts began to think that it was not beatings or jails that were the solution to the “Catholic threat” or the “Irish problem” facing Boston; instead, it was the schools. The lawyer, **Horace Mann** was appointed State Superintendent of Education and, once assuming office, became one of the most eloquent and influential thinkers in American educational history. Indeed, if Webster and Jefferson are the grandfathers of schooling in the United States, it is Mann who is one of the fathers.

Mann’s vision was simple: create a common school system in which all students could attend, become instilled with the American tradition and American spirit, and all the problem members of society would be displaced by proper citizens of the Republic. In his *Common School Journal*, Mann wrote (italics in the original):

*The common school is the greatest discovery ever made by man ... Let the common school be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine-tenths of the crime in the penal code would become obsolete; the long catalog of human ills would be abridged; men would walk more safely by day; every pillow would be more*

inviolable by night; property, life, and character held by a stronger tenure; all rational hopes respecting the future brightened.<sup>1</sup>

What do we mean by common schools? To begin, they must have a common **infrastructure**—physical facilities and grounds. School buildings should be instantly recognizable, separate facilities, not things housed in church basements or rolling sheds. By centuries' end, many states adopted a common set of blueprints dictating how schoolhouses should be built. Details included what direction they should face, what should be kept on the grounds, how many windows in each room, how many rooms they should have, even where the stove should be placed inside.

Within these walls would be shared a common **curriculum**, defined largely as what is taught explicitly and implicitly in the classroom. The common curriculum emerged as a good example of top-down reform taking place. The work of the common school advocates paved the way for a more top-down approach to curriculum reform.

Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University, was frustrated with having such radically different preparation standards amongst potential enrollees. He called together a group known as the **Committee of Ten** who, in 1892, set forth a set of rigid course requirements. Students could take one of four majors in high school; within each major, each of the four year's coursework was proscribed. This was schooling for schooling, not schooling for life: these were academic courses, lacking vocational arts, visual/performing arts, or life courses such as health/physical education. Soon after Harvard adopted this standard, so too did most other major universities; once the universities were on board, the high schools followed suit. Once the high schools were on board, the elementary schools began preparing students accordingly.

The common schools were called upon to socialize all the youth of the country—to bring them all together and make good citizens out of them. The definition of what was a good citizen was someone who, of course, fit the WASP mold in beliefs, language, and actions, if not in looks. To this end there developed a public school creed that fostered a **civic religion**. Schools began tapping into the same feelings of profound reverence the population held toward their respective places of faith and turned those toward the government in an attempt at building a national character to be shared by all. Schoolchildren were taught to revere aspects of the nation in which they lived with the same reverence and devotion experienced Sunday mornings (Table 3.1):

**Table 3.1** The civic religion in the United States

Faith-based religion has...	Which became in the secular, civic religion...
Holy book <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Torah, Koran, Bible, etc.</li> </ul>	Sacred documents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constitution, Declaration of Independence, etc.</li> </ul>
Saints/revered figures	Founding fathers
Formalized hierarchy/clerics	System of federal, state, local political leaders
Global headquarters for the faith <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vatican, Canterbury, Mecca, Bodh Gaya, Puri, etc.</li> </ul>	Washington, DC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smithsonian Institutes, etc.</li> </ul>
Houses of worship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Temple, mosque, church, synagogue, cathedral, etc.</li> </ul>	Governmental buildings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Courthouses, state legislatures, Congress, White House, etc.</li> </ul>
Tithing	Taxation
Holy War <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jihad, Crusades, etc.</li> </ul>	“Spreading democracy” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vietnam War, Persian Gulf War I</li> </ul>
Holy days	Holidays
Formal prayers and hymns	Pledge of allegiance, national anthem
Pilgrimage, formal or informal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mecca, Jerusalem, etc.</li> </ul>	Pilgrimage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Washington, DC; field trips to state government, etc.</li> </ul>
Shrines	Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson Monuments, etc.

To get this common curriculum across to students, common school teachers must be trained into common **pedagogy** and **classroom management** techniques. Pedagogy is how teachers choose to get information across to their students; previously, students were given books, memorized material, and performed recitations which the teacher, more disciplinarian than educator, listened to and corrected as need be. Now, however, teachers were being taught using skills applied from the newly emerging science of psychology to get information across to students in ways that would do the most good. Discipline became classroom management, one part of pedagogy rather than the end in and of itself. Today, classroom management has expanded to not only include handling discipline but all the day-to-day operations within a classroom including taking attendance, dispersing and collecting materials, transitioning between lessons, handling parents, and juggling the behemoth of often meaningless paperwork demanded to hold a public school teaching position.

In order to achieve this common pedagogy and management, **normal schools** were developed. At first, these institutions exclusively devoted to training teachers were one-year add-on programs that students, increasingly women, elected to take after high school graduation. However, by the period’s end, normal schools became two-year independent institutions,

the forebears to many small, liberal arts colleges that still exist across the country today.

The emerging normal schools began to make teaching recognized as a career in and of itself. However, due to pay differentials between men and women, the idea that teachers should be nurturers instead of disciplinarians, and socially accepted definitions of what was “women’s work” versus what was “men’s work,” teaching was rapidly becoming a feminized career.

Sex wasn’t the only line of segregation affecting teacher training: as normal schools developed, the white power structure was even able to differentiate along racial lines. Teachers at white normal schools were trained to cover a wide variety of academic material, while teachers at Black normal schools were trained to cover a wide variety of vocational and occupational tasks.

### HOW COMMON WAS COMMON?

- **Key terms:** Gradualism, talented tenth, American Dream
- **Key figures:** Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois

Interestingly enough, while Mann and those who followed his beliefs were trying to create one system of schooling to unite a nation growing in diversity both visible and invisible, the nation was also taking significant steps backward when educating those who were visibly “other.” For example, it was very common up until the mid-1800s for southern plantations to have schools set aside for the children of slaves. Many plantation owners felt the same missionary zeal as the Jesuit forebears in the field in terms of educating the children of “heathen” peoples to become good Christians. Children of slaves were taught to read and write in the Puritan traditions of hard work and devotion to God. However, after slave revolts began occurring, schooling stopped across the south; as northern protestant missionaries continued their southern migrations to open clandestine schools, white southern politicians quickly passed laws in most states that would become the Confederacy prohibiting the education of Blacks. This became particularly problematic as the definition of “Black” quickly expanded to include “anyone who is not white” regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

When, after Southern Reconstruction, all students were allowed back into public schools, the damage had been done. The segregated schooling that emerged by decade’s end was extraordinarily caustic to nonwhite

students. Unfortunately, this was often perpetuated within marginalized communities themselves. For example, **Booker T. Washington**, an African-American who was a staunch educational advocate and founder of Tuskegee University, believed in the notion of **gradualism**—that racial equality was to be a long, slow process over generations, not years. He announced his vision, what would become known as the Atlanta Compromise, at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition. In Washington’s view, Blacks must know what their proper role in society of the time was: “Better to earn a dollar in the field than spend a dollar in the opera house.”

Washington was bitterly opposed by African-American philosopher and co-founder of the NAACP, **W.E.B. DuBois**. Educated at Harvard University, not the vocational-preparation Hampton University as was Washington, DuBois shared the Jeffersonian, idealist’s belief that all people had the right to a free academic education. DuBois argued that the best way to achieve racial uplift was a notion he called the **talented tenth**—something almost identical to Jefferson’s *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*. DuBois argued all children should have the right to attend school—during which they should be assessed, with the most talented moving on at taxpayer expense. The top 10% should receive university educations, then return to their neighborhoods to serve as teachers, role models, and good businesspersons, inspiring more from the following generation to succeed.

Another example of the common schools not being common was the treatment of students with disabilities—or rather the lack thereof. At this time, the dominant way of thinking about people with disabilities fell under what some call the “moral model”—people were disabled due to some flaw in themselves, or their parents. As such, people with disabilities were seen as a menace, subhuman, or object of dread. Public schools were entirely allowed to exclude students with disabilities in favor of those who were abled. In some cases, states built residential institutions that served as schools to cater to certain groups of disabilities—blind and deaf institutes, for example—though the education received in these was often subpar and focused on life skills exclusively.

As the above debate exemplifies, the answer to the question “how common was common?” ultimately depended on who you were. If you were white, protestant, at least second generation, and upper working to middle class, the common schools were quite common. They were very

effective at creating and perpetuating the notion of the “American Dream”—work hard, follow the rules, and you can rise as high as you want.

There is some debate about the efficacy of the common schools over those who deviated from this WASP-y norm. One school of thought is that, as historian Carl Kaestle described, the common schools were the very “pillars of the republic” without which we would have never coalesced as a nation, let alone become the superpower we were. There is middle ground that argues that too many populations were in fact marginalized, not lifted, by the public schools for them to truly be called common and that the public schools were not successful at socializing all the diverse European groups, let alone the various racial groups, as evidenced by the rise in private schools. A more extreme critique is that the common schools were just the latest chain of deculturalization agents; the price of assimilation was far too high for most groups to pay.

### WHAT WERE THE SOURCES AND PURPOSES OF SCHOOLING?

- **Key terms:** McGuffey Readers, messianic

Thanks in large part to the efforts of Horace Mann and his ilk, it was during this period that we truly began to see a unified system of common schools that crafted, for better or for worse, a marked separation between public and private schools. First, due to an 1874 Michigan State Supreme Court case that centered in Kalamazoo, Michigan, school districts across the country could now use their tax dollars devoted to the public schools specifically to address public secondary schools. In the case, a group of local taxpayers sued the state, saying state taxes could not be used to support high schools. The Michigan Supreme Court disagreed, and the precedent to divert tax money into secondary and postsecondary education was established. Accordingly, the popularity of public high schools grew immeasurably, and private academies declined. Schools became truly public—fully taxpayer supported and publicly owned and funded facilities that were administered by county and/or district officials at public expense. Compulsory attendance laws spread across the nation.

The more publicly supported and compulsory the common schools became, the more that the private schools that continued to exist did so in resistance to the common schools, rather than as another aspect of them. Catholics, tired of the fundamental religious differences that played out in



the public schools, began opening their own—and winning cases that earned them public financial support.

The previously established purposes of schooling continued, if not expanded, during this period. Politically, widespread public education became ever more important as the need for an educated populace increased: universal suffrage passed in 1830 (and, by universal, it meant literate white male citizens). Economically, there was a greater need to make happy, docile workers out of the undereducated immigrants arriving on US soil, north and south. Morally, WASPs in the United States were terrified of what they perceived to be a “Catholic threat” and were still striving to create the perfect, Protestant “kingdom of God” on American soil.

One new purpose of schooling came again in resistance to the increasing tide of immigrants sweeping into the country: a social purpose of schooling. The common schools were now expected to form and perpetuate American society and culture. The notion of a great, happy assimilationist melting pot was spread through the schools (and would last through the 1980s, when displaced by another food metaphor, America as tossed salad). The idea was that émigrés would give a little (surrender their language, many customs, etc.) to get a lot (citizenship in the United States). A fundamental aspect of this assimilation was along character lines: all faiths were welcome, so long as they were Protestant.

Perpetuating this pan-Protestant system of schooling was the dominant text used by the public schools: the *McGuffey Readers*. Started in Cincinnati, Ohio, by William Holmes McGuffey, the readers focused on simplicity of structure. One series could now move a child from almost infancy through almost secondary levels. The readers used a series of parable-like passages, which increased in length and difficulty, for students to read. Rather than memorize and recite, students were provided a series of questions at the end of each passage directing their thinking. Dominant republican, Protestant themes included patriotism, self-sacrifice, intelligence, the importance of liberty, and the need for a balanced government. The same messages echoed from the *New England Primer* through Webster’s *Bluebacks*; now, instead of memorizing “the idle fool is whipped at school,” students read passages about “The Little Idle Boy”<sup>2</sup> and were questioned about the foolishness of his ways.

## WHAT ARE THE EDUCATIONAL LEGACIES OF THIS PERIOD?

If the blueprint of the public school system as we know it today was provided in the Early National Period by thinkers such as Jefferson, Mann's vision of common schools provided the foundation. During this period, schooling moved much closer to the public school system as we know it today. Buildings were standardized, the curriculum was formalized, and pedagogy was detailed. The normal school movement began the idea of a formal teacher training process, which eventually gave rise to colleges of education. The pedagogy was softened, appearing much more similar to what is still used in elementary schools across the United States today rather than the "spare the rod, spoil the child" mentality of previous generations.

With the rise of normal schools and the formalization of teacher preparation, so too came the origins of making teaching a legitimate profession—something that's still debatable today. In 1857, the National Teacher's Association formed (which eventually morphed into the National Education Association, or NEA). However, with men lost on the battlefield and those remaining filling other jobs, teaching became a highly feminized field. The legacy of this feminization lives on as male teachers are still critically underrepresented in many fields and, due to the discriminatory notion of "women's work," teachers are underpaid for the amount of education and post-graduation training expected.

Thanks directly to Horace Mann's rhetoric, schools formalized a **messianic** purpose. Continuing the political purpose of schooling, the United States wanted to create a national unity, so the schools were put squarely in charge of doing so. Leaders—politicians and educators—wanted to establish faith in our government, so the civil religion in the classroom came about via the public school creed. We added a social purpose to schooling; there was an increasingly diverse group of people flooding into the United States, so the schools became the primary instrument of social control. We wanted to reduce strife between these peoples, many of whom were mixing for the first time, so the schools were called upon to create one culture. Of course, this one culture was based almost exclusively in pan-protestant notions, perpetuating the religious purpose of schooling. This messianic legacy would increase exponentially with the passage of time—particularly when the group of progressive reformers swept into political, social, and educational power.

### “GOING OLD SCHOOL”: FOR FURTHER READING

There are a great number of works that helped shape the information shared in this chapter that came together over years of teaching and reading. Many of these works are worth reading in their own right. What follows is a list of recommended works that both shaped the content of this chapter and extended it.

James Carper is one of the preeminent voices in exploring the role religion has played in support and defiance of the public schools in the United States. *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education*,<sup>3</sup> co-authored with Thomas C. Hunt, focuses most heavily on the dissent during the so-called Common School period. The authors argue that the schools have become the nation’s established church complete with its own orthodoxy; however, there have always been dissenters to this orthodoxy for reasons ranging from freedom of conscience, parental liberty, and educational justice.

Not just because no chapter in the history of education is complete without a Lawrence Cremin reference, *Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Man*<sup>4</sup> is Cremin’s editing of excerpts from Mann’s writings that pertain to a variety of educational issues. Selected to become the first volume in the *Classics in Education* series, reading the volume shows readers how focused on reform was Mann and how instrumental he and the public schools were in establishing an “American dream.”

Counterpoint to Booker T. Washington, DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*<sup>5</sup> has long been cited as one of the preeminent first-person accounts of the racism inherent in American life in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Each chapter in the book is an essay in and of itself taking on a wide variety of topics. In one chapter, DuBois thoroughly critiques Washington, and his educational ideas; in another, he levies his criticisms on many of the schools serving the African-American population, particularly in the South, calling for instead an education of the Classics.

A counternarrative to much of what has been written about schooling during the Common School Era, Charles Glenn’s *The Myth of the Common School*<sup>6</sup> argues that contrary to popular opinion and their name, the common schools weren’t in fact, as common as we like to think. Glenn takes a deeper look at the diversity that existed in this nation and presents analyses of resisters as well as a critical examination of Horace Mann and common school reformers of his ilk. Like Carper and Hunt, Glenn argues that the

common schools have formed a kind of religion in this nation; the book includes chapters devoted to both opposition and alternatives to the common schools, and concludes by calling the very notion of common schools into question.

An example of the radical revisionist school of educational history, Colin Greer's *The Great School Legend: A Revisionist Interpretation of American Public Education*<sup>7</sup> makes the argument that not only were the common schools never common, they were designed to fail certain groups in society (specifically the urban, African-American poor) to enforce a class-based system of control. Greer argues that throughout history, those who succeeded in the United States did so despite, not because of, the schools, often returning to their traditional ways of life.

Another article dating back to the early days of the history of education field, Floyd P. Jorgenson encapsulates the origins of the messianic purpose that public schooling developed in the minds of many Americans in his brief article "The American Faith in Education."<sup>8</sup> It lays out a case for the religious evangelism that marked the early days of the Common School Movement, referring to "the missionary concept of teaching" (p. 17). The article notes the unfortunate side effect of this spiritualism: low pay for teachers, quoting that "One who teaches merely for money does not deserve the name of teacher," for example (p. 16).

Making a case for the common schools, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society 1780–1860*<sup>9</sup> is Carl Kaestle's argument that the common schools were indeed common enough to become the pillars upon which America has been built. Kaestle examines both urban and rural schools in some detail throughout the work to present his case. Kaestle does describe the regional differences in the common schools and resistance to the model; however, the legacies of this period on the public schools of the nation cannot be dismissed.

For those interested in the history of teacher education, Christine Ogren's *The American State Normal School: "An Instrument of Great Good"*<sup>10</sup> presents an excellent overview of the development of normal schools in the United States. Beginning in the 1840s, the work examines normal schools through the 1900s and their legacy today. Ogren uses a variety of lenses (race, class, gender) to examine who became teachers and how they were prepared. The work ends with a discussion of the evolution many normal schools made into liberal arts colleges.

Sometimes, something widely accepted as fact in society isn't always true. This is demonstrated in David Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness:*

*How America's Immigrants Became White, The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*,<sup>11</sup> which demonstrates that many of the same arguments regarding immigration in which we're currently engaged as a nation were also used against most European immigrants as well throughout history. Roediger's account provides an interesting counterpoint to much of the common school discussions found in this work and many of the others cited here; it provides an exploration of what was taking place in the greater society outside of school to the nation's working poor. Ultimately, the treatment of these newly emigrated working poor mirrored that of the discrimination facing other groups who were emigrated forcefully to the nation in the past.

Counterpoint to DuBois, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*<sup>12</sup>—part autobiography, part social critique—sheds light on the reality of American life of African-American citizens during Washington's time. Collected from a series of articles published in the *Outlook* magazine, Washington presents his life story including the text of his Atlanta Exposition address in which he explained his belief system regarding education of African-Americans, later described as “gradualism.”

## NOTES

1. Horace Mann, “Introduction”, *Common School Journal* 3, no. 1 (January 1841), 15.
2. William H. McGuffey, *The Eclectic Second Reader* (Cincinnati: Truman and Smith, 1836), 4–5.
3. James Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).
4. Lawrence Cremin, *Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Man* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1957).
5. W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (New York: Dover Books, 1994).
6. Charles Glenn, *The Myth of the Common School* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
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9. Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

10. Christine A. Ogren, *The American State Normal School: "An Instrument of Great Good"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
11. David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White, The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
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