

Part I: A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN AND NEW HAMPSHIRE PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Introduction: Why do American public schools exist?

American public education was born of fear. Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and many other founders of our nation saw republics as “the least stable forms of government and were always collapsing from their internal antagonisms and self-seeking citizens.”¹ But what is a republic and how does one confront this fear of its collapse?

A republic is a “government in which supreme power resides in a body of citizens entitled to vote and is exercised by elected officers and representatives responsible to them and governing according to law.”² In 1776, the proposed United States of America, as described by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, was essentially just a tremendously exciting Enlightenment era *idea*. Our revolution against rule by King George III was a courageous and dangerous effort to replace the dominant conviction that nations must be governed by “divinely” appointed monarchs with a revolutionary idea: the belief that ordinary human beings could become citizens responsible for and capable of determining the shape and direction of their own governance.

Our founders were sensitive to the sad lessons of history and full of fear that our experiment in democracy would suffer a fate similar to the republics of Greece and Rome. James Madison in Federalist Paper No. 10, published in 1787, speaks frankly about “factions,” a key cause of the failure of republican governments. “By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”³

In 1779 Thomas Jefferson, anticipating the challenges of “factions,” proposed a solution, “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge.” Jefferson believed that the most effective means of insuring that each citizen be able to exercise and protect his/her natural rights was “to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large...” Universal public education would insure that citizens “may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes.”⁴ The word “public” is derived from Latin and it means “of the people.” Jefferson’s bill instituting a system of public primary education in Virginia failed because taxpayers did not wish to pay for local public schools, but Jefferson remained convinced of the critical necessity of educating all the citizens of the republic because all citizens of the new democracy would by right have a hand in its development.

Jefferson advocated dividing the Virginia counties into wards responsible for the establishment of public schools administered locally and paid for by local taxes. Jefferson believed that “These wards, called townships in New England, are the vital principle of their governments, and have proved themselves the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government, and for its preservation.”⁵

Jefferson was convinced that “locally controlled public schools were key democratic institutions” because they provided fundamental political principles and an understanding of our political system to the young, and they provided adult citizens with an opportunity to actively exercise self-rule by shaping and administering their local school systems.⁶

Jefferson’s attempt to establish public schools as a means to instill a common national purpose failed, so until about 1890 most U.S. children attended a wide variety of schools. The nation could have maintained this diversity of educational pathways. Instead, it freely chose to establish a universal public education system which, though locally directed, was amazingly similar across the nation because its founders, Horace Mann among them, saw the “development of good character,” without sectarian or political bias, as its common purpose. “Individuals did benefit from schooling, yes, but even more important, civic society depended on instilling common values.”⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century, nine out of ten students were enrolled in public schools. In fact, Adlai Stevenson (1900-1965) remarked that “The free public school system” is “the most American thing about America,”⁸ though not all students enjoyed equal opportunities. It required sustained effort to ensure that black students were afforded equal educational opportunities. In 1855 Massachusetts abolished segregation in its schools. In 1954, with its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate schools were not equal and initiated the integration of American public schools. This decision actually provided the impetus for the current “voucher movement” as white opposition to school desegregation led many state and local governments to provide white children with vouchers for private schools called “segregation academies.”

Public education experienced another significant change in the twentieth century. Education experts came to the fore bringing their expertise to school organization and curriculum, while local school boards were charged with providing more general oversight. There was a distinct trend toward larger school districts with a more centralized administrative structure, as well as the introduction of a more differentiated curriculum, tracking using I.Q. tests, and electives. There were also a number of key events which shaped American education. In the 1940’s social engineering efforts were undertaken through the “life adjustment movement,” an initiative that advised testing, then directing students to appropriate occupational pathways. This effort was met with serious resistance and led to widespread criticism of public education. In 1957 came the launch of the U.S.S.R.’s Sputnik. This event inspired the National Education Defense Act which was designed to encourage U.S. students to excel in mathematics and science to counter the Soviets’ potential domination of the Space Race. The evolution of American education continued in the sixties which witnessed a movement back toward smaller schools.

From 1980 to the present, a central aim of U.S. public education has been to prepare a literate workforce for successful competition in the global marketplace. In 1983, “A Nation at Risk,” a report prepared by a presidential commission, reflected these goals and recommended steps to make schools operate more like businesses with curriculum standards and standardized tests. Just as in the business sphere, marketplace competition is now being encouraged. Today, parents can choose among public, private, or charter schools, or homeschooling with some states offering vouchers for use at parents’ discretion.

...and how did New Hampshire's Public Schools Develop?

New Hampshire began its existence as an English fishermen's settlement in 1623. It was "blended" with Massachusetts for thirty eight years. In 1647, the legislature authorized towns with fifty families or more to establish schools throughout its jurisdiction.⁹ In 1679 King Charles II separated New Hampshire from Massachusetts, and in 1827 the New Hampshire State Legislature passed a law requiring a school committee in every town.¹⁰

In 1930, Columbia Teachers College published Development of a State School System: New Hampshire by Eugene Alfred Bishop. Bishop noted four distinct periods in the development of our state's education system. During the Colonial Period (1623-1805) local private and town schools served largely independent communities. The state only required that "some kind of school be maintained in some way." [p. 147] During the District Period (1805-1885) growing towns were subdivided into smaller local districts. The Industrial Revolution and the opening of the West "depopulated" many New Hampshire towns. Many towns became unable to support their "district" school systems. After a period of keen resistance, a law was passed in 1895 which made each town the administrative and financial center for the support of its own schools. The Period of Increasing State Influence (1885-1919) saw the passage of state laws which encouraged the development of "Supervisory Unions" and state funds were used to support school superintendents. During these years the idea that the state should be intrinsically involved in the administration and financial support of schools was gradually accepted. Poor towns were usually too poor and isolated to become members and beneficiaries of Supervisory Unions and state support.

After World War I, recognizing that the state's schools were not performing as well as they might, the School Law of 1919 was passed which established a state board of education with laymen as members. A professional educator was appointed as Commissioner of Education and executive officer of the state board. This period, beginning in 1919, is recognized as The Period of a State School System and was marked by keen concern about underperforming schools and the impact they might have on the overall economic health of the state. "The schools are no longer the small localities' schools. All have become a matter of concern for the wider community." (p. 152) The author then asks,

How can one justify a strong state department of education, bringing necessary administrative, financial, and pedagogical assistance to the unprogressive and educationally incapable parts of a state, and at the same time find no possible justification for a strong national department of education doing a like service for the retarded portions of the nation?

A 1998 report, "Lessons from New Hampshire: What We Can Learn From the History of the State's Role in School Finance: 1642-1998" by Douglas E. Hall in association with the Institute for Policy and Social Science Research at the University of New Hampshire, provides an analysis of the development of New Hampshire's educational system as it is reflected in the state's funding of education. (This document is available on the NH League of Women Voters website.) The report makes a striking observation on page one: "The originally perceived purpose of education was transmitting moral ideas and practices. As stated in the preamble of seventeenth and eighteenth century laws, education was perceived as a

community good, not as an individual good.” The enactment of a law in 1789 entitled “An Act for the Better Regulation of Schools within the State; and for Repealing the Laws Now in Force Respecting Them,” established a formula for taxation in support of local public schools relying on local taxes.

In 1993 New Hampshire’s Supreme Court ruled that the provision of an adequate education is the constitutional responsibility of the state and the state must guarantee its funding. In 1997, the Claremont II decision stated that “the present system [of funding public education] is unconstitutional. While the State may delegate its obligation to provide an adequate public education it may not do so in a form underscored by unreasonable and inequitable tax burdens.” Response to these decisions continues to unfold.

Nine out of ten children in the United States attend public school. In 2017, with contrasting opinions being voiced in the public square, we must ask ourselves, just as Thomas Jefferson did, what role should public schools play in American civic life? New York Times staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones writing in the Sunday Magazine on February 26, 2017 offered this observation:

Democracy works only if those who have the money or the power to opt out of public things choose instead to opt in for the common good. It’s called a social contract, and we’ve seen what happens in cities where the social contract is broken: White residents vote against tax hikes to fund schools where they don’t send their children, parks go untended and libraries shutter because affluent people feel no obligation to help pay for things they don’t need. ¹¹

New Hampshire’s State Constitution in Article 83 states “Knowledge and Learning, generally diffused through a community, being essential to the preservation of a free government...” echoes Thomas Jefferson’s proposed “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” of 1779. Given the original inspiration for the founding of public education and its historically wide variety of forms and goals, it seems timely and reasonable to ask ourselves this question: “Is education primarily a consumer good or a public good?” ¹² Are tax dollars supposed to be used simply to fulfill parental preferences by being redirected toward homeschooling or private schools? How would a significant redirection of public tax dollars toward private educational efforts affect our ability to satisfy our constitutional responsibility to provide an adequate public education to **all** of our state’s children? Is our current public education system addressing the compelling reason which inspired Thomas Jefferson to propose the establishment of a public education system: the preservation of our republic by the preparation of our citizens for enlightened self-governance?

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Notes

1 Hirsch, E. D., Jr., The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 4

2 Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Tenth Edition) (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1994), p. 994

3 Rossiter, Clinton, editor, The Federalist Papers (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 78

4 Gordon-Reed, Annette and Peter S. Onuf, Most Blessed of the Patriarchs: Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), p. 53

5 ibid., p. 293

6 School: The Story of American Public Education, Companion Volume to the 2001 four-part Public Television Series. Introduction by David Tyack with contributions from James D. Anderson, Larry Cuban, Carl FG. Kaestle; Narrative by Sheila Curran Bernard and Sarah Mondale; Foreword by Meryl Streep. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), pp. 1-2

7 ibid., p. 4

8 ibid., p. 1

9 Bush, George Gary, Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University, Washington Printing Office, p. 7

10 ibid., p. 55

11 Hannah-Jones, Nikole, "Have We Lost Sight of the Promise of Public Schools?" New York Times Magazine. (February 26, 2017), p. 13

12 School: The Story of American Public Education, Companion Volume to the 2001 four-part Public Television Series. Introduction by David Tyack with contributions from James D. Anderson, Larry Cuban, Carl FG. Kaestle; Narrative by Sheila Curran Bernard and Sarah Mondale; Foreword by Meryl Streep. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 8

Eugene Alfred Bishop, Development of a State School System: New Hampshire (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1930) is available from the New Hampshire Public Library.