DOCUMENT RESUME

EA 002 432

ED 031 791

By-Allen, Jack

The Colonial Inheritance.

Pub Date 69

Note-12p.; Part One, Chapter 1 in THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL, Grass Roots Guidebook Series, sponsored by the Center for Information on America.

Available from-McGraw-Hill Book Company, 330 West 42nd Street, New York, New York 10036 ($2.75).

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.70

Descriptors-*Acculturation, *Colonial History (United States), *Educational History, Educational Legislation, *Public Education, *Religious Education, Universal Education

Identifiers-Puritans

As the American nation developed through periods of rapid change and great cultural diversity, the American public school system served as a primary souce of national unity. The roots of comprehensive public education in America can be traced to the educational system developed by 17th century Puritan colonials. Although one of the central objectives of the Puritan schools, religious education, represents a basic contradiction to the American tradition in public education, this system establish a precedent for the use of public funds for the education of all of the nation's children. (JH)

Grass Roots Guidebook Series

Sponsored by the CENTER FOR INFORMATION ON AMERICA

the American Public School

by Jack Allen

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

$2.75

McGRAW-HILL BOOK COMPANY
St. Louis, New York, San Francisco, Dallas, Toronto

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Preface

by Henry Steele Commager

From the beginning, education in America has had very special, and very heavy, tasks to perform. Democracy could not work without an enlightened electorate. The various states and regions could not achieve unity without a sentiment of nationalism. The nation could not have absorbed tens of millions of immigrants from all parts of the globe without rapid and effective Americanization. Economic and social distinctions and privileges, severe enough to corrode democracy itself, had to be fought. To our schools went the momentous responsibility of inspiring a people to pledge and hold allegiance to these historical principles of democracy, nationalism, Americanism, and egalitarianism.

Because we are a "new" nation we sometimes forget how very old are some of our institutions and practices. As Mr. Allen points out, the United States — today the oldest democracy in the world and the oldest republic — also has the oldest public school system in the world. The famous Old Deluder Satan law of 1647, quoted on page 60 of this Guidebook, which set up a system of community supported schools in Massachusetts Bay Colony was, in its day, something new under the sun. "As a fact," wrote Horace Mann, himself one of its later products, "it had no precedent in world history, and as a theory it could have been refuted and silenced by a . . . formidable array of arguments and experience. . . ."

Quite aside from the interest it should have for adult readers, the history of the public education movement which the 1647 law gave rise to is set forth by Mr. Allen in *The American Public School* in such a fashion as to give today's students in the nation's schools an opportunity to examine and think about the educational process through which they are passing. The book should help cultivate a better understanding of the American public school on the part of its products after they become voting members of society and in turn are responsible for development of the schools to meet future needs. Study of *The American Public School* in the schools themselves deserves hearty encouragement.

Let us look at the specific tasks which our faith in education has imposed on our schools. The first and greatest task was to provide an enlightened citizenry in order that self-government might work.

The second great task imposed upon education and on the schools was to create national unity. Difficult to do, yet we created unity

out of diversity, nationalism out of particularism. Powerful material forces — the westward movement, canals and railroads, a liberal land policy — sped this achievement.

But just as important were intellectual and emotional factors — what Lincoln called those "mystic cords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone." These were the contributions of poets and novelists, editors and naturalists, historians and jurists, orators and painters — and the medium through which they worked was the school.

The third task imposed on education, and particularly on the public schools, was that which we call Americanization. Each decade after 1840 saw from 2,000,000 to 8,000,000 immigrants pour into America. No other people had ever absorbed such large or varied racial and ethnic stocks so rapidly.

There is a fourth and final service the schools have rendered the cause of American democracy. This most heterogenous of modern societies — profoundly varied in racial and ethnic backgrounds, religious faith, social and economic interest — has ever seemed the most easy prey to forces of riotous privilege and ruinous division. These forces have not prevailed; they have been routed, above all, in the school rooms and in the playgrounds of America. An informed awareness of the role of the school should become part of the education of every American.

Editors' Foreword

The American Public School, by Dr. Jack Allen, is the second paperback in the Center for Information on America's Grass Roots Guidebooks series, produced in cooperation with the McGraw-Hill Book Company. Professor Allen is Chairman of the Division of Social Science at George Peabody College for Teachers, and an authority on the subject of this guidebook.

In accordance with the general pattern of the series, Part I of *The American Public School* presents the history and development of the movement for universal free education, an all-important component of the concept and practice of American democracy. Each chapter in Part I has at its conclusion several "discussion starters" to stimulate student participation. The section concludes with a descriptive bibliography.

In Part II, Professor Allen has assembled readings on the American public school which range from present times to such beginnings as the ordinance of 1647, passed by the Representatives of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, ordering each township of 50 or more householders to support a teacher to teach all children ". . . as shall resort to him to write and read." Included among recent comments are some of Dr. James B. Conant's reflections on contemporary American education.

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TOWNSEND SCUDDER
EDITOR, AND PRESIDENT OF THE CENTER

PART ONE

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THE COLONIAL INHERITANCE

In 1753 William Smith, a recent arrival from Scotland, directed his thoughts to the educational problems of the province of New York. Smith, later selected by Benjamin Franklin as the first provost of the University of Pennsylvania, argued that conditions in New York demanded daring innovations. He presented his case in a utopian writing entitled *The College of Mirania.* Mirania was an imaginary province much like New York.

The Miranians, like New Yorkers, possessed great natural resources and practiced a form of government that assured basic rights to those inhabitants who were loyal to the British constitutional system. Also like New Yorkers, the Miranians were faced with the problem of adapting and molding the most desirable Old World institutions, chiefly English institutions, to uniquely American circumstances.

To accomplish the task, the Miranians had to deal with a population very diverse in its origins. In addition to Dutch and English, there were Swedes, Jews, Germans, and others. What sources of consensus could be found among so many different groups? How were the attitudes necessary for compromise and agreement to be engendered? How was the principle of unity within diversity to be established? Fortunately, wrote Smith, the Miranians found an answer to these questions. They discovered by experiment that a system of common schools resolved the problems of ethnic and cultural diversity.

Smith argued that the people of New York need look no further than Mirania for the solution of their problems. Accordingly, he

fashioned the blueprint for a set of elementary common schools for all the children in the province of New York. The schools would be common because the education of all elementary children would be the same. They would provide a source of unity and strength to enable the people of New York to realize their full potential. To carry his visionary scheme even further, Smith designed a system of secondary schools and placed a university at the top of the educational ladder.

The people of New York in the middle of the eighteenth century did not have the frame of mind, the wealth, or the village unit of settlement to make possible the realization of William Smith's proposal for a system of common schools. However, exactly one hundred years later, in 1853, the essence of his plan came to fruition with the merger of a private educational agency, the Public School Society of New York, with the regular public schools of the state.

In a more general sense, Smith's utopian scheme emphasizes one of the more important historical threads in the history of American public education. Americans have lived in a world replete with change, which has often come with great rapidity. In such a world Americans have come to regard their schools as a source of the unity and concord that are necessary if political processes are to prove capable of solving new problems.

The pages of the American past are filled with evidence of the unifying role of the public schools. Take, for instance, the poignant account of the Russian immigrant girl, Mary Antin, whose father called for his family to follow him from the Old World to Massachusetts in the 1890s. "On our second day [in America]," she wrote, "a little girl from across the alley . . . offered to conduct us to school. . . . This child who had never seen us until yesterday, who could not pronounce our names, who was not much better dressed than we, was able to offer us the freedom of the schools of Boston. . . . The doors stood open."

It was such open doors that helped to mold an American citizenry and an American unity. As historian Henry Steele Commager has observed, in our most heterogeneous of modern societies common schools open to all have transformed the apparent weakness of diversity into a source of strength and pride.

The Early Colonists Turn to Education

Education as a source of strength was in the minds of those Europeans who first settled along the Atlantic seaboard in North

America. These colonists thought it only natural that here in the New World schools should be used to serve the needs of their society.

EDUCATION IN THE SERVICE OF RELIGION. The social needs of the time were heavily vested with a religious purpose. This was evident at Jamestown in 1619, when the English settlers created Henrico College. The main objective of the school was religious, to bring the teachings of Christianity to the Indians. The situation was similar with the Dutch in New Netherlands, who were commanded by their charter to maintain public schools. In the educational thought of the Dutch strong religious overtones were present. The chief religious body, the Dutch Reformed Church in Amsterdam, had the power to hire and fire any teacher who could be persuaded to come to the New World.

Then there were the Quakers in Pennsylvania. This religious group showed praiseworthy interest in education by requiring all parents to provide their children with instruction in reading and writing. As a result of the Dutch and Quaker efforts there were few significant towns in New Netherlands or Pennsylvania that did not boast of a public school. To be sure, the schools in both areas were closely associated with the dominant church.

The real center of education in the service of religion, however, was New England, chiefly in Massachusetts. This colony provides an excellent case study of the strengths and weaknesses of educational programs in an era of religious visions, an era that dominated the American educational scene until the Revolution.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE MASSACHUSETTS PURITANS. Massachusetts was settled, beginning in 1629, by an English Protestant sect called the Puritans. They were called Puritans because they wished to "purify" the Anglican church, the state church of England, of what they considered vestiges of Roman Catholicism. While they insisted that they were not an independent body, but still a part of the Anglican church, they rejected the Anglican leadership and the ritual of the church. Within the first decade of the Puritan migration to Massachusetts, more than 10,000 settlers entered the colony.

Bringing with them the Protestant concept that every man was his own priest, the Puritans demanded both scholarly ministers and a literate people. Accordingly, the Puritan colony turned to education. Village public schools were soon provided in a number of localities: Boston (1635), Dorchester (1639), Roxbury (1641), and Cambridge (1642). In 1635 public secondary education was

begun with the establishment of the Boston Latin School, and the following year the colony passed legislation creating Harvard College.

In 1642 Massachusetts passed a comprehensive school law that established a minimum level of education for all children. The legislation held parents responsible for instructing their children "in learning and labor . . . profitable to the Commonwealth." While the law proved ineffective, it had historical significance. According to the educational historian Ellwood P. Cubberley, the act was important as an indication of the Puritan commitment to education. Cubberley maintained that the 1642 law contained two vital principles: (1) that education was necessary for the welfare of the colony and (2) that, where necessary, parents might be compelled by public officials to grant children an opportunity to receive an education.

Of even greater import for American public education was the "Old Deluder Satan Act," passed by the Massachusetts General Court in 1647. This law has been cited as the most important legislative act concerning education ever to come from a political body. Frankly religious in aim, it was designed to defeat "Satan, the Old Deluder." It provided a system of education for the young. Combined with the Harvard Act of 1636, it created a comprehensive public educational system from the elementary grades through college.

The provisions of the Old Deluder law were based on population. Every village with fifty families or more was required to provide a school and a master for instruction in reading and writing. Towns of 100 families or more were required to establish grammar schools, where boys learned Latin and Greek in preparation for entrance into Harvard.

With modifications and additions, the 1647 legislation became the basic educational law of Massachusetts. Through the cultural influence of Massachusetts, its effects were felt in much of New England and other English colonies. Under its influence the villages of New England maintained a notable system of schools.

The Massachusetts School Laws and the American Tradition of Public Education

How do we assess the practicality of the Puritan commitment to education as embodied in the school laws of 1642 and 1647? To what extent is legislation, largely religious in its motivation, central to the American tradition in public education?

The historian can deal with these questions in a variety of ways. If he accepts the principle that "all history is contemporary," he can agree with the actions of those educational reformers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who employed the seventeenth-century Puritan laws to prove that the use of public funds and political coercion in educational endeavors was a traditional and respectable part of the American way of life. The historian who assumes this posture is saying, in effect, that these were the first basic laws that created an American climate of opinion favorable to the ideals of public education. This, he could argue, remains true, whether the idea that the Puritans created a system of public education is myth or reality.

But there is another way of dealing with the questions. The historian as a scholar endeavors to be as accurate as possible in his reconstruction of the past. A good illustration of this, as it relates to the Puritan school laws, has been provided by historian Bernard Bailyn in his book, *Education in the Forming of American Society*. After careful study of the legislation, Bailyn determined that the Puritans did not purposely create a public system of education. He regarded the laws of 1642 and 1647 as a reflection of the failure of the family and the church to fulfill their functions under new American conditions. As the family and church failed, according to Bailyn, the state was forced to rely on the schools to maintain the values, attitudes, and skills which the Puritans had carried from England. The Puritans in the New World, he maintained, continued to regard education as a proper function of the family and church. They placed schooling under the aegis of public agencies only where new American conditions made state involvement mandatory. Bailyn was not dogmatic in his conclusions; his book suggested the need for more research.

Further insight into the issue was subsequently provided by Robert Middlekauf in *Ancients and Axioms: Secondary Education in Eighteenth-Century New England*. As the title indicates, Middlekauf was concerned primarily with eighteenth-century developments. In his intensive study of school and town records, however, he did delve into the preceding century. His conclusion was that colonial New Englanders believed in public education, although they failed to conceive of the possibility of publicly supported vocational education. To make men literate was a public matter, Middlekauf argued. Schools supported by public moneys and subject to the control of elected officials were indeed public.

A Merger of Religious and Political Ideals

Regardless of the ultimate impact of educational developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, education was strongly motivated at the time by religious ideals. As the eighteenth century progressed, however, these ideals gradually were merged with a developing set of political goals. To the religious intent of education to maintain the true faith, was added another broad purpose: to teach the political principles worked out in the New World. Incorporated into a religious framework, these political principles were soon given the sanctions of religious truth. To survive, the Puritans had said, America must be religious. To survive as a free society, Americans of the eighteenth century began to argue that Americans must religiously follow the principles of republican government.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. The point is made that a system of common schools open to all has served as a source of unity and concord in the heterogeneous society of the United States. Is this a completely valid generalization? What significant exceptions might be made to it?

2. If education in Colonial America functioned in the service of religion, how can such schooling be regarded as central to the American tradition in public education, since a fundamental element in this tradition is the separation of church and state?