Why Americans Love to Reform the Public Schools

by William J. Reese

Americans from all walks of life espouse the cause of school reform. The past generation has witnessed the rise of education governors and education presidents. The CEOs of major corporations, big-city mayors, private-sector entrepreneurs, inner-city parents, heads of teacher unions, and every politician under the sun have often found the mantra of school reform irresistible. Public Broadcasting System documentaries, B movies starring heroic teachers (sometimes armed with clubs) battling ignorance and the streets, and editorials in local newspapers about this or that educational crisis have kept the problems and promise of public schools visible, though the public's attention span is often about as long-lived as morning glories.

Over the past century, schools have become multi-purpose institutions, which is why they are so easy to criticize and forever in need of reform. Schools are expected to feed the hungry, discipline the wayward, identify and encourage the talented, treat everyone alike yet not forget that everyone is an individual, raise not only test scores but also feelings of self-worth, ensure winning sports teams without demeaning academics, improve not only standards but also graduation rates, provide for differing learning styles and capacities while administering common tests, and counter the crass materialism of the larger society while they provide the young with the skills and sensibilities to thrive in it as future workers. No other institution in American society carries this weight on its shoulders. No other institution is so public, familiar, and exposed to such scrutiny. The current penchant for equating a school's worth with its test scores makes sense in a sports-saturated world of winners and losers, but does it really reflect society's full range of expectations for the schools?[1]

The bewildering, often-contradictory range of expectations ensures that some people are perpetually unhappy with public education, so school reform remains a very hardy perennial. In good times and bad, teachers enjoy relatively low status as professionals and are routinely

ridiculed in the press, yet they always have tall orders to fill from the public's wish list: to strengthen children's character, morals, manners, work ethic, civic consciousness, racial and multicultural sensitivities, and anything else needing improvement. Nothing in the preceding sentence deals directly with academic achievement. Unlike test results, those familiar goals may be important but difficult to measure, quantify, and verify. Moreover, the uncertainty begs the question of why teachers, so often accused of teaching the basics poorly, should be entrusted with other grave responsibilities.[2]

Future historians will have their hands full trying to explain why the public and countless policymakers in the past half-century regarded every social, economic, and political ill as an educational problem. Why were schools, as in previous generations, supposed to compensate for the deficiencies of parents, religious leaders, or high-placed government officials? When Sputnik was launched in the late 1950s, critics found the schools especially wanting, even if scientists working in the defense establishment and politicians in Washington received negative comments as well. Similarly, when Japan's economy boomed in the early 1980s and America's sputtered, many people principally blamed the schools, not Detroit. The nation was at risk because of an inferior school system, said the Reagan administration. When the economy improved, teachers hardly shared in the credit; indeed, criticisms of the schools continued unabated.[3]

After Japan's economy precipitously declined, American admirers of that nation's schools were notable for their silence. Changing circumstances should have lessened the number of seat-of-the-pants judgments about school quality and cause-and-effect relationships between schools and the economy. The schools, however, still suffered a largely negative press and remained an endless field of dreams for assorted reformers. Accountability in all its permutations lost none of its appeal. By the late 1980s, national education goals, targeted for the year 2000, attracted bipartisan support, including that of a young governor from Arkansas, Bill Clinton. Both the Clinton presidency and Goals 2000 are now history. Today the Bush administration has directed the schools to leave no child behind, or at least untested, even in cash-strapped districts that often spend much less per capita on instruction than do their affluent neighbors. Obviously, those who think only Democrats endorse unfunded mandates have not been paying attention. Over the past generation, Republicans have tended to promote school reform, with Democrats trailing behind.[4]

For all the easy talk about educational improvement, reformers closer to the trenches than to a pundit's mighty pen have long despaired of effecting comprehensive changes in the schools. All institutions may be complicated places, but it's particularly difficult to change the inner life of the typical school. That has not stopped anyone from trying, or at least

from writing or talking about it. Various reformers typically aim their sights on different problems—bureaucracy, poorly trained teachers, low reading scores, low graduation rates, uninspired pedagogy, an outmoded or impractical curriculum, poor achievement in math and science, and everything else that negatively affects eighteen-year-olds. The job of improvement is rarely comprehensive, despite occasional rhetorical spin, and (as in any war on elusive, sometimes-multiple targets) victory proves nearly impossible. Schools affect so many different aspects of the lives of children and youth that the playing field for constructive change has neither clear boundaries nor universally accepted ground rules.

Many-splendored things, school reforms sometimes resemble, at least superficially, those of yesteryear. The discovery that poor children start life with educational and social disadvantages caused some reformers in the nineteenth century to champion kindergartens; a century later, Head Start, while hardly a new version of the child's garden, shared similar assumptions about poverty and the need for early intervention. Some reforms seem timeless. That schools can teach vocational skills, especially to those who are not prize scholars, remains popular even though study after study reveals little economic payoff for the academically challenged. Still other reforms try to eliminate earlier ones. For many decades, for example, the educational establishment shared the view that what was good for General Motors was good for education; nearly unanimously, it championed the consolidation of school districts and the construction of big schools. Small was not beautiful. Bigger schools promised to save money through economies of scale; bigness also allowed the spread of more courses and electives. But in the 1960s and 1970s critics began saying that large, impersonal schools bred anomie and spawned curricular chaos. Another reform, perhaps—such as "schools within schools"—would help save the day. Other reformers applauded the concept of multi-age classrooms, once the mainstay of one-room schools, which had taken more than a century for reformers to eliminate. One generation's improvement had become another's source of complaint.[5]

Why do Americans love to reform the schools? My answer has three parts. First, there is an old and persistent cultural strain in American history, derived from many sources, that seeks human perfection and sees education and schooling as essential to that perfectibility. That goal is high enough to guarantee that most people will not reach it. And this means that numerous citizens at any point bemoan the quality of the public schools, which cannot simultaneously achieve laudable but mutually contradictory goals, such as high standards and equality. Second, many Americans believe that our nation uniquely respects the individual and, as a corollary to that belief, has a remarkably fluid social order. Individuals are so highly regarded that they are held personally responsible for their

school performance. In the modern world, schools can decisively help determine which individuals will or will not attend college, who will rise into the professions, and who will sink into the service economy. When schools cannot produce success for everyone, citizens often blame teachers, not the more powerful folks in charge of the economy. Third, as alluded to earlier, over the past two centuries America's public schools have assumed so many responsibilities for the care, discipline, and education of the young that they inevitably disappoint many people. The current mania for standardized testing hardly means that schools have shed their various social functions, many unrelated directly to academic achievement. The dream of perfection, the supreme faith in the individual and social mobility through appropriate schooling, and the unexamined assumption that schools should cure whatever ails the nation make educational reform a constant concern in American society.

One primal factor, then, in America's fascination with school reform is an enduring popular faith in social improvement and human perfectibility, despite abundant contrary evidence about the behavior of real people. Some of the most famous original white settlers in America grappled with the ancient problem of free will and the question of human improvement. Readers may recall from history class that the Puritans settled in the Massachusetts Bay colony in the 1630s and 1640s. The nation's leading satirist of the 1920s, H. L. Mencken, defined "puritanism" as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." Living in the age of Freud, Mencken blamed the Puritans for every repressive contemporary movement, from the Ku Klux Klan to Prohibition. They are also often stereotyped as dour individuals, and their penchant for hanging witches in Salem and Quakers in Boston has not helped their reputation. Fundamentally, however, the Puritans who came to America, unlike those who stayed in England, were reformers, not revolutionaries. They did not behead kings but they did found schools, despite their insistence that parents and the ministry were essential in children's education. They hardly intended to build a comprehensive or inclusive system of education in any modern sense, yet their cultural attitudes about the young and about schools certainly resonate still.[6]

The Puritans were part of the larger Protestant Reformation that began in the German states in the early sixteenth century thanks to the labors of Martin Luther. As part of a multi-pronged assault on the authority of the Church of Rome, Protestant reformers throughout Europe stressed the importance of individual conscience in matters of faith. Access to the word of God and divine wisdom, they said, should derive not from the teaching of priests but through individual access to the Bible. That required a widening of literacy and greater emphasis on education in general and schools in particular. Arising in the late 1500s dur-

ing Elizabeth's reign, English Puritanism shared this larger Protestant faith in the individual and in the importance of literacy; the movement sought to purge the Anglican Church, set up by Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, of its popish trappings. By the 1620s, however, as the economy soured and religious repression by the Stuarts intensified, some Puritans concluded that New rather than Old England might be a better place to build a model society and reform their world.[7]

One of the Puritan leaders, John Winthrop, reminded his brethren that they did not wish to break away from England but to serve as an example to it. In what became a famous sermon delivered to the faithful as they departed for New England, Winthrop urged the establishment of a "city upon a hill," a beacon of Christian light so powerful that it would illuminate and reform their sinful homeland. This idea of creating a model commonwealth was shared by such rivals as the Quakers of the Middle Colonies. Like other Protestant reformers, Puritan leaders held high standards of personal probity and achievement, and their theology and everyday experience taught them that humans, especially the young, were morally frail and imperfect. Many of these little sinners were destined to fail on earth and suffer an eternal winter below.[8]

By the second generation of settlement, many Puritans were loudly bemoaning the failures of their society: the young, they claimed, were using too much foul language, and long-haired young men were insolent and disrespectful of their elders. In numerous sermons and published tracts, ministers denounced these evil tendencies, including the horrible reality that second- and third-generation Puritans increasingly failed to have a born-again experience, or religious conversion. Technically, they were not Christians. The American Jeremiad—named for the gloomy prophet of the Old Testament—was born. Cultural decline, it seemed, was the order of the day. For many, saintly perfection was unattainable, though Puritan striving helped counter this declension and led some to worldly success, which became a visible sign of the elect. According to Max Weber, this strain of Protestantism nurtured the famous work ethic that midwifed early capitalism and a more secular culture.[9]

By setting the standard high for right living, economic success, and intellectual achievement (which included founding Harvard College in 1636), the Puritans encouraged a level of attainment beyond the reach of many. Standardized tests to measure academic success lay far in the future, and no one had yet devised national educational goals or timetables, but the Puritan dream of a city upon a hill was the first of many utopian aspirations of what was possible in America. Realizing that parents and churches alone could not lead the young toward literacy and decency, the Puritans (like Luther and his followers in Germany) established tax-supported elementary and grammar schools. These schools

helped make New England one of the most literate parts of the world by the time of the American Revolution.[10]

The Puritans not only contributed to the notion of community responsibility for establishing schools; they also provided later generations, even those that grew more secular, with a ritualized way of thinking about society and young people. They frequently contrasted the failings of the young with the achievements of their elders. As the *New England Primer* taught generations of children in the Colonial era, "In Adam's Fall, we sinn'd all." But the young seemed to sin and falter the most. Periodic waves of evangelical revivalism in the coming centuries reminded many citizens of the sins of society, and the measurable results of schooling later showed how far up the achievement ladder the young still needed to climb. Most never reached the top, though a mediocre report card seemed less onerous than a long stretch in hell.[11]

The heavily Protestant culture of early American society has strongly helped influence how citizens view their schools. The idea of America as a "city on a hill" recurs in political oratory. Adults who have never heard of the *New England Primer* or a Puritan jeremiad often claim that the younger generation is for whatever reasons less hard working, achievement oriented, and disciplined. Test scores seem to fall more than rise, bad manners are too common, teen crimes more vicious. And the schools—the embodiment of hope followed by despair—seem unable to restore an imagined past of high achievement befitting a nation presumably founded on lofty ideals. The humorist Garrison Keillor understandably gets a laugh whenever he describes all the children of Lake Wobegon as "above average," which occurs in real exams only if enough people cheat or if the books are cooked.[12]

The second animating force that generates enthusiasm for school reform is the idea that society should respect and help each worthy individual, who has unparalleled opportunities to rise in the social order. These twinned ideals also have a relatively old lineage in America. More than a century after the first Puritans arrived in the New World, Thomas Jefferson—a Southern aristocrat and revolutionary—presented seminal ideas about the individual, schools, and the social order in his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in 1781 and first published in France. Recall that Jefferson endorsed free elementary schools for all white children, including girls, funded by the state; the most talented boys would progress upward to grammar schools and a smaller number afterward to the state university. Individual geniuses, he said in the indelicate language of the day, would "be raked from the rubbish," or common lot. The class system, closed in Europe, was permeable in America.[13]

Like other Founding Fathers, Jefferson in his many writings often contrasted the values of the new republic with the corruptions of Europe, where birth determined everything. In America, he said, the abundance of land, access to schools, and willingness to work hard would allow talent to rise. The rise of Benjamin Franklin, born into a poor family of Puritans, to wealth and international prominence was recounted in innumerable schoolbooks in the coming century, the most famous example of what the virtues of Poor Richard yielded. As Jefferson and countless writers noted in the early national period, schools and other educational institutions would also popularize learning, nurturing the intelligence necessary for political leaders and voters alike to sustain the new republic. In contrast to Europeans, Americans could enjoy greater economic mobility and political freedom and share in the pursuit of happiness.[14]

Critics then as now exposed the hypocrisy of Jefferson's meritocratic schemes, since girls (except for access to primary classes) and especially slaves and free blacks were denied opportunities initially reserved for white males. The revisionist views, however, have not gone unchallenged. In a recent history of the American Revolution, Gordon S. Wood places the Founders in their own eighteenth-century context and urges readers not to judge them by today's standards. After all, the revolutionaries lived in a world of monarchs and class systems with intricate and mutually reinforcing forms of political dependency. Ideals such as democracy, individual freedom, and human equality that became enshrined in documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were revolutionary in their day, and they ultimately provided oppressed groups with the tools to fight for human rights and social justice. Scholars such as Joseph Ellis similarly acknowledge that the Founders were not demigods but flawed individuals living in another age. They were unwilling to end slavery, which they knew was

immoral and surely contradicted the natural rights of man the Revolution claimed to secure. Knowing that the South would secede if abolition triumphed, the Founders preserved the fragile republic at the expense of black slaves.[15]

Jefferson's views on state-assisted schooling were advanced and enlightened in their day. They contradicted the traditional belief that education largely confirmed one's place in the social order; not surprisingly, his plans for schools never came to fruition in his lifetime. Virginia's legislators repeatedly ignored his endorsement of a state system of schools, even for white children. But Jeffersonian ideals influenced those who guided the creation of free public schools during the nineteenth century, first in the antebellum North and then, after the Civil War, in the former slave states. As the historian Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., emphasizes, Jefferson was the original "education president," always emphasizing the integral bonds that united literacy and learning with freedom, opportunity, and the training of leaders and citizens. Jefferson's support for the concept of a fluid social order and his belief that talent inheres in all social classes remain a guiding ideology for many Americans. Every time pupils compete for the best grades, it reinforces the notions that individuals strongly determine their own destinies and that schools are central to the struggle for economic survival and preferment.[16]

Whether such claims are true and desirable or honored more in theory than in practice has long been debated. But that is beside the point. The ideals are commonly espoused, if never fully realized. The Puritans and other Protestants emphasized the central role of the individual in learning, principally at first to read the Bible; Jefferson—an architect of the radical principle of the separation of church and state—reinforced this emphasis upon the individual by predicting that schoolchildren with the most individual talent would excel in school and might later advance in society. The blending of two basic ideas—human striving toward perfection as the ideal, and the responsibility of state-educated individuals for the survival of the republic and perpetuation of an open social system—was, for those who built public school systems in the nineteenth century, an intoxicating drink.

The establishment of state-funded public school systems in New England in the pre–Civil War era reflected an evangelical faith in the power of schools, literacy, and broadly acknowledged Christian values. The greatest school reformer of the age was Horace Mann, born in 1796. Raised in a Puritan household in Massachusetts and later converted to a more liberal Unitarianism, Mann popularized the utopian possibilities of schooling. Schools, he said, would help assimilate the millions of immigrants arriving from Germany and Ireland, teaching them American values, Christian (Protestant) morals, and the values of Poor Richard. As his

rhetoric reached fever pitch, he promised that schools could end poverty, crime, and social strife. The prospects of human perfection, social harmony, and the safety of the republic were soon tied up with the fate of the emerging public school system.[17]

In an editorial in the *Common School Journal* in 1841, Mann asserted that both Protestant Sunday schools and common schools were "*the great leveling institutions of this age*. What is the secret of aristocracy? It is that *knowledge* is *power*" [italics in original]. Although a Whig, not a Jacksonian Democrat (the political descendants of Jefferson's Republicans), Mann applauded the Jeffersonian view that schools exist to diffuse knowledge and reward excellence and should teach rich and poor alike in a common system. In a famous report in 1848, Mann described the schools as "the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery." Helping the poor, protecting the rich, ensuring a stable social order: was there anything schools could not do?[18]

We may seem far removed from the worlds of Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, but American faith in the ability of schools to address innumerable social, economic, and political ills seems unshakable. Indeed, the third reason Americans love to reform their schools is their inability to imagine that many everyday problems lack a clear educational source and educational solution. That is, since at least the mid-nineteenth century, virtually every social group, including those once excluded from the system, has appealed to the schools to address the shortcomings of families, churches, and the workplace.

Historically, public schools have never made the life of the mind, or mastery of academic subjects, their central or only mission. Consider the multiple roles that have accrued to schools over time. In the 1880s, the typical white child in the Northern states, the most favored region, received only a few years of schooling, mostly in ungraded one-room buildings. By the early twentieth century, however, even high school enrollments were booming; secondary enrollments doubled every decade between 1890 and 1930, and the South, too, began investing more heavily in (albeit racially segregated) high schools. Everywhere the role of schooling expanded so dramatically overall that leading school officials wondered if there was a central purpose to modern education.[19]

The growing social functions of the schools certainly worried some educators, many of whom nevertheless realized that society often sloughed off responsibilities better suited to parents, churches, employers, or other institutions. Citizens seemed to turn naturally to the schools when children's morals were in question, wrote B. A. Hinsdale, a well-known educationist at the University of Michigan, in 1896. He pointed to the experiences of children in America's large cities: "[W]here else do tens of thousands of them learn such valuable lessons in punctuality, regularity, obedience, industry, cleanliness, decency of appearance and behavior, regard for the rights and feelings of others, and respect for law and order as in the public schools?"[20]

Over the course of the twentieth century, schools assumed a multitude of new responsibilities. Increasingly, schools would be called upon to feed the hungry and malnourished. Since private corporations lacked any strong system of apprenticeships, Americans would periodically demand better vocational programs to aid young people in the transition from school to work. School curricula diversified to try to find something at which every individual could succeed. The non-academic features of the schools noticeably expanded, catching the attention of many foreign visitors and blurring the purposes of modern education. The historian Lawrence A. Cremin noted in 1965 that, despite the hullabaloo over the academic failures of the schools in the wake of Sputnik, enrollments rose not in the hard sciences but in driver's education! Too many deaths on the nation's highways was now a concern of the schools. "It is a curious solution," Cremin remarked, "requiring courses instead of seat belts, but typically American." Even today, while academic subjects leave many students cold, student activities from service learning to Bible study continue to engage some student interest. Competitive sports—hockey in Minnesota, basketball in Indiana, and football in Texas—draw more adults to sports arenas than ever show up for Parent Teacher Organization meetings statewide. So much transpires in school simultaneously that it necessarily lacks a coherent purpose or rationale.[21]

Parents want schools to help improve the life chances of their children, to ensure social order and stability, and to teach responsibility, hard work, delayed gratification, and any other values deemed in short supply in the larger society. Social ills in other nations might lead to revolution, but Americans often respond by establishing a new course or curriculum or program. Where in Europe, for example, can one find a secondary school that on any given day teaches not only calculus but also driver's education, that sponsors the computer club as well as a student rally before the big game, and that provides both job counseling and tryouts for the cheerleading squad?

In recent decades, federal laws have also required greater educational access for children whose disabilities had once routinely barred them.[22] Federal legislation such as "No Child Left Behind" mandates increasingly heavy doses of standardized testing to measure student progress in academic subjects, but it hardly limits what Americans routinely want from their schools. According to a 1990 Gallup poll, 90 percent wanted schools to offer drug-abuse education, 84 percent alcohol-abuse education, and more than 70 percent sex education and information about AIDS. Well over half wanted instruction on environmental issues as well as in "character education." Nearly half thought schools should teach parenting skills. Another poll found that more than 90 percent wanted schools to teach honesty, the golden rule, democracy, tolerance, patriotism, and "caring for friends and family members." The vast majority of those polled in 1993 wanted schools to provide free meals, eye and ear exams, and inoculations against communicable illnesses; some adults even wanted condoms distributed to whoever requested them.[23]

The multiple purposes of modern public schools ensure that they are forever, from someone's point of view, doing a poor job, and in need of reform. Families and churches have hardly retreated as influential forces in the lives of children and youth, but the growth and reach of public schools in the twentieth century have been nothing short of phenomenal. In the past two generations, expectations have grown dramatically. Rising expectations that emanated from the civil rights movement and the Great Society led many citizens to demand better and more equal treatment for their children to enable them to share in the American dream. As educational credentials have risen in importance, the price of failure in the classroom has correspondingly accelerated, intensifying anxieties among parents and the public about the prospects of the young. To secure high academic standards for everyone is nevertheless to dream of something that has never existed in our society. What the larger society cannot seem to create—a more just democracy and an economically fairer world—has often been laid as a problem at the

schoolhouse door. Can schools solve fundamental problems of economic and social injustice not principally of their creation?[24]

When the schools fail to attain the highest standards, or the young seem far from perfect compared to their elders, the old lament of declension, shorn of its religious roots, sprouts anew. When the economy falters and good jobs become scarce, public complaints about the failures of teachers and the schools intensify. That schools try to serve so many competing interests testifies to a broad public faith in the possibilities of social and individual improvement, but it guarantees that the current fascination with standardized test scores on academic subjects will only scratch the surface of what Americans routinely expect of the schools. In 1999, 71 percent of those polled by Gallup favored "reforming the existing public school system" over scuttling it, somewhat surprising given widespread criticisms of schools during the previous few decades. It mattered not that the pollsters left "reform" undefined. Like the pursuit of happiness, reform is elusive yet never loses its popular appeal.[25]

Jefferson's famous claim in the Declaration of Independence that citizens have natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness remains part of a hallowed American tradition. Like any ideal, his words are still easier to extol than define or act upon to everyone's satisfaction. Like other revolutionary thinkers of his day, Jefferson knew that tradition often stood in the way of progress and that education in its broadest sense offered the best path to human enlightenment. One could not be ignorant and hope to be civilized and free. In a letter written in 1816, he insisted:

> Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him as a boy, as [to expect] civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.[26]

Enlightened people no longer speak of their ancestors as barbarous, and the idea of progress is not universally shared in our postmodern world. But Jefferson's claims nicely capture the central argument of my recent book, *History, Education, and the Schools*. What is history has ever been contested, and changing interpretations of history, education, and the schools remain the norm, not the exception. The issues that concern us today shape the questions we ask about earlier moments in history. We can study only a fragment of past human experiences, most of which have vanished without a trace. We strive to understand the past in its own context while guided by the multiple needs that historical understanding has

always tried to serve. "All historians," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., recently noted, "are prisoners of their own experience and servitors to their own prepossessions. We are all entrapped in the egocentric predicament. We bring to history the preconceptions of our personality and the preoccupations of our age. We cannot seize on ultimate and absolute truths."[27]

And yet most historians, including Schlesinger, have agreed that their labors remain different from those of the novelist or poet. While each generation of historians will continue to ask questions that matter in the here-and-now, the perennial challenge is to retain one's humility about the parameters of human knowledge, to avoid confusing the past and present, and to apply the most rigorous means available to understand people and events in another time and place. Whether written by amateurs or professionals, history will always try to fulfill the deep human need to know what came before, to document what human beings have been capable of. Written history will continue to amuse or infuriate, confuse or enlighten, and serve many ends. As Thomas Jefferson realized, education, too, will always assume different forms, from the public systems he advocated to the private alternatives common during his lifetime and which for some families still remain so vital. No generation writes history once and for all, and each generation draws on the past, however selectively, to help chart its future course.

Notes

1. The best single volume on the history of contemporary school reform is *Learning from the Past: What History Teaches Us about School Reform*, ed. Diane Ravitch and Maris A. Vinovskis (Baltimore, 1995).

2. On how teachers translate reforms into practice, especially see David B. Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, 1995). Also read Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890–1980* (New York, 1984).

3. Joel Spring, *The Sorting Machine: National Educational Policy since 1945* (New York, 1976), 38; and various essays in Ravitch and Vinovskis, *Learning from the Past*.

4. The themes developed in this essay are elaborated upon in William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to "No Child Left Behind"* (Baltimore, 2005), which contains a lengthy bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and earlier in the author's *Public School Reform in America*, a PDK Fastback (Bloomington, 2000).

5. On the innumerable ways in which reformers reinvent the wheel, recycle old ideas, and try to undo past reforms, see David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, 1974); David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York, 1982); and David Tyack, "Reinventing Schooling," in Ravitch and Vinovkis, *Learning from the Past*, 191–216. For the example of the kindergarten, see Selwyn K. Troen, *The Public and the Schools: Shaping the St. Louis System, 1838–1920* (Columbia, Mo., 1975), chapter 5.

6. Of the vast historiography on the Puritans, see especially John Morgan, *Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes towards Reason, Learning, and Education, 1560–1640* (Cambridge, 1986); James Axtell, *The School Upon a Hill: Education and Society in Colonial New England* (New York, 1974); Darrett B. Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston: A Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630–1649* (New York, 1965); and the marvelous synthesis by Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York, 2001), chapters 8–9. On Mencken, Terry Teachout, *The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken* (New York, 2002), 125.

7. Taylor, *American Colonies*, chapter 8.

8. See Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston*, chapters 1–2, on the multiple meanings of the phrase "city upon a hill" as well as the detailed exploration of the subject by Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (New York, 2003), 173–84.

9. Axtell, *School Upon a Hill*, chapter 1; and Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston*, chapter 6. Alan Taylor argues that the Jeremiad should be viewed as a sign that idealism remained a guiding ideal of Puritan New England. As he writes in *American Colonies*, 185: "Finding the present generation wanting, a jeremiad exhorted listeners to reclaim the lofty standards and pure morality ascribed to the founders of New England. Paradoxically, the popularity of the genre attested to the persistence, rather than the decline, of Puritan ideals in New England." Also read Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, c. 1958).

10. Wayne Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., *American Education: A History* (New York, 1996), 41; Morgan, *Godly Learning*; and Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore, 1978). Also read James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, 2003), which underscores many of the themes in this section of my essay. See especially chapters 1–3.

11. On the *New England Primer*, see Axtell, *School Upon a Hill*, 36–37, 143–44.

12. Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (New York, 1985).

13. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (New York, c. 1954), 146; Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., *Jefferson and Education* (Monticello, 2004), 37, 42–43, 131, 143; Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (Totowa, N.J., c. 1935), 40–49; Urban and Wagoner, *American Education*, 75; Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York, 1983), 6–9, 61, 198–99. Joseph J. Ellis explains that Jefferson's book was written in 1781 and first appeared in France; see *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997), 85.

14. On Franklin's influence and presence in school texts, see, for example, Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln, Neb., 1964), 191–92; and William J. Reese, *The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven, 1995), 39, 97–98, 115, 167, 175, 184, 201.

15. Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York, 2003), xxxiv–xxxv, 113–35; and also *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991). On the slavery question and the Founders, see Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York, 2000), chapter 3; and the overall reassessment of Jefferson by Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005), 135–40.

16. Kaestle, *Pillars*, 61, 198–99; and Wagoner, *Jefferson and Education*, 28–29, 128, 145.

17. The best biography of Mann is by Jonathan Messerli, *Horace Mann: A Biography* (New York, 1972). Other references on Mann are cited in earlier chapters of this book.

18. Untitled editorial, *Common School Journal* 3 (February 15, 1841): 63; *Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Together with the Twelfth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board of Education* (Boston, 1849), 59; and Curti, *Social Ideas*, 131–32, 138, 199.

19. Tyack, *One Best System*, 66, on elementary school attendance; Edward A. Krug, *The Shaping of the American High School, 1880–1920* (New York, 1964) and Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Education Research* (Chicago, 2000), 8, on the boom in secondary enrollments; and Nathan C. Schaeffer, "Educational Interests of the State," *The School Journal* 63 (October 1914): 148.

20. B. A. Hinsdale, *Studies in Education: Science, Art, History* (Chicago, 1896), 148–49.

21. Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Genius of American Education* (New York, 1965), 11. Numerous writers have commented on the social lives of teenagers and the influential role of sports in American secondary schools; see, for example, James S. Coleman, *Adolescents and Schools* (New York, 1965); and Reese, *America's Public Schools*.

22. In *The Genius of American Education*, 11, Cremin noted: "One of my friends likes to remark that in other countries, when there is a profound social problem there is an uprising; in the United States, we organize a course!"

23. Stanley M. Elam, "The 22nd Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 72 (September 1990): 49–50; and Stanley M. Elam, Lowell C. Rose, and Alex M. Gallup, "The 25th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 75 (October 1993): 144–45.

24. David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York, 1994), 113; and James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York, 1996), 637– 38.

25. Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 31st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 81 (September 1999): 44.

26. Jefferson's letter is quoted in Wagoner, *Jefferson and Education*, 146.

27. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "History and National Stupidity," *The New York Review of Books* 53.

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