Carl Kaestle, Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860. NY: Hill & Wang, 1983

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# *The Common-School Reform Program*

AT a banquet in Gettysburg in 1826, a young councilman named Thaddeus Stevens raised his glass and toasted: "Education. May the film be removed from the eyes of Pennsylvania and she learn to dread ignorance more than taxation." In the next decade, as Stevens rose in Pennsylvania politics, he and others worked to fulfill that hope. Spurred by examples from Europe, where "the hitherto pent up sluices of knowledge" were being thrown open, Pennsylvania legislative leaders embarked upon the development of state-sponsored schools. In 1838, despite evidence that many Pennsylvanians still opposed taxation for education, the Superintendent of Common Schools declared optimistically that the state's policy was now to make education "as general and as unbought as liberty." During the late 1830s the same question was decided more or less in the affirmative in other northern states. Calvin Stowe, in his widely reprinted *Report on Elementary Public Instruction in Europe,* told the Ohio legislature that "the whole world seems to be awake and combining in one simultaneous effort for the spread of education, and sad indeed will be the condition of that community which lags behind in this universal march." In 1840, Governor William Seward of New York, riding a crest of Whig victories, told the legislature that "the improvability of our race is without limit" and that a reform of the educational system had been too long "postponed, omitted, and forgotten." He proceeded to introduce legislation to establish a state superintendent of instruction, county superintendents to carry out the





state's programs, state-aided district libraries, improved education for black children, and other changes.[1]

These free-school advocates, as well as Mann of Massachusetts, Pierce of Michigan, and others, were born in the Northeast around the turn of the century. They were from families of modest resources, and they rose in the world through education and hard work. They believed firmly in the major tenets of native Protestant ideology. Along with kindred workers throughout antebellum America, these men were the "fathers" of public common schooling. They aimed at more schooling for each child, more state involvement, more uniformity, and a more pervasive public purpose for schooling.

As members of a self-conscious reform movement, common-school leaders in the various states communicated frequently, sought the support of other public figures, imitated the latest educational innovations of fellow reformers elsewhere, and devised means for the popular dissemination of their ideas. Like other antebellum reformers, common-school advocates called their efforts a "crusade." They built upon the strong tradition of school-going in America, and they justified their pleas for more organization and expenditure with appeals to the central propositions of their ideology. The program of common-school reform was remarkably similar across the country. Although the innovations and the leading spokesmen were often associated with New England, the Middle Atlantic and midwestern school advocates simultaneously developed similar programs, often with an eye on Europe rather than on New England. In the South there were many voices for common-school reform, pleading the same causes—free schooling, improved facilities, better classification, longer school years, better teacher training, and other improvements. In the 1840s, southerners consulted Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and other northern educational leaders, while they also produced their own reports on European education, staged their own education conventions, and fought for common-school funding in their legislatures. Advocates and opponents existed in all regions. On balance, the systematization of state-sponsored common schooling prevailed in the Northeast and the Midwest, while in the antebellum South, the reformers never quite mustered the politi-

cal and economic support necessary to establish free common schools.

The agenda for reform in the North can be read in state school reports of the 1840s and 1850s, which contain a litany of complaints about local school conditions. Short terms, irregular attendance, bad facilities, shortsighted and penurious district control, poor teachers, insufficient supervision, lack of uniformity, and indifferent parental support were among the chief complaints. Enrollment itself was already high in many areas of the North, but educators periodically expressed concern about children who were not enrolled. Data from Massachusetts and New York suggest that by 1840 the percentage of children annually attending school was equal to about half of all persons under age twenty and that it changed very little during the succeeding twenty years. The figures are crude, however, indicating only that a child was listed on the school rolls at some point in the year; also, such data are not very comparable from state to state. Furthermore, the rise in enrollment rates may have been partly due to better reporting by local officials. Nonetheless, attempts to construct parallel time series on enrollments in other states suggest that the New York and Massachusetts pattern of high, stable enrollments was also true by 1850 for the northernmost of the midwestern states, Michigan and Wisconsin, while in Iowa, Illinois, and Ohio, the 1850s witnessed substantial increases, bringing them up to levels (around 50 percent of all children aged 0–19) comparable to Michigan, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and New York by 1860. Communities in Pennsylvania and New Jersey appear to have been slower to provide widespread local schooling before state intervention. Rates in these states rose from around 20 percent in 1840 to 40 percent in 1860, still somewhat below the level that had become roughly consistent across the upper North. These data support what is apparent from the reformers' own statements—that enrollment was not the central concern of the common-school movement. An enrollment level of 50 percent, the northern norm by 1850, meant that half of all children under twenty years of age attended school sometime during the year. Since many under five and many over fifteen did not attend, the enrollment rate must have been considerably over 50 percent among the children from age five to



age fifteen. Indeed, investigation of enrollments for eight towns in Massachusetts in 1860, for Washtenaw County, Michigan, in 1850, and Chicago in 1860 reveal rates of 85 to 90 percent at the prime common-school ages, seven to thirteen, for all ethnic and occupational groups.[2]

Concern for nonattenders was focused on particular pockets like urban slums and factory tenements, and on particular groups, like the children of freed blacks. In 1830, Charles Andrews, head of New York's African Free School, estimated that there were 1,800 school-age black children, not counting those already in domestic service. Of these 1,800 children, 620 were enrolled at the African Free School and about 100 at private schools, leaving 1,080 to "prowl the streets . . . growing up in habits of idleness and its attendant vices." By midcentury, poor immigrant youth had replaced blacks as the most worrisome of the nonattenders. In the 1860s, urban charity workers took a survey of New York City's horrid Five Points district. Concentrating on 382 families who lived in the tenements of a single block, they discovered that only about ten of the 600 children of the block attended any school. Two-thirds of the adults could neither read nor write. The children, they said, "are too dirty, too ragged, and carry too much vermin about them, to be admitted to the public school."[3]

In factory towns, children often followed their parents to the mills as early as age ten, and legislation making education for factory youths compulsory was generally unenforced before the Civil War. Some of these children, then, were among the small percentage who did not attend school even at the usual common-school ages. Educators warned about these factory children and about the untended younger siblings of families in which both parents worked. The Peltz Committee reported in 1837 on the conditions of child labor in Philadelphia's cotton mills. The working day for children and adults alike ranged from eleven to fourteen hours. One-fifth of the employees were under age twelve, and no provision was made for their education. Of all the employees under eighteen, only one-third could read or write. Manufacturers complained that a shorter work day would harm business, but the committee argued that "in a republic, where so much

depends upon the virtue and intelligence of the people, it is far better that we should forego pecuniary advantages, rather than permit large masses of children to become the miserable victims of an oppressive system." But dreary conditions of industrial child labor persisted into the second half of the century.

A mule spinner in Fall River, Massachusetts, testified in the early 1870s that his schedule was typical of English immigrant families who worked in textile mills. He rose at 5:00 a.m., made breakfast for his family, and then went to the mill with his wife and twelve-year-old daughter. They got back home about 7:30 at night. His ten-year-old daughter got herself dressed in the morning, ate leftovers from the table, and went to school. Her father joined her at home for the noon meal. In the afternoon, after school, she went to the mill, got the key from her father, and went home to await the arrival of the rest of the family for supper. On Sunday the children went to Sunday school, while the father did chores and his wife took in washing. When asked why he did not go to church, he said, "I really have not time, because if I went to church, my woman would have all the work to do, and it would take her all the day Sunday, and that would be seven days' work."[4]

Investigations led to legislation requiring a few months of education for young children working in factories in several states, including Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. But later inquiries found all such laws to be without teeth. A Massachusetts legislative committee of 1866 heard the following testimony from millworker John Wild:

Q.: Do you know that your children are working contrary to the law?
A.: I didn't know there was any law.
Q.: Did you know that if I should go to Fall River and prosecute their employer, he could be compelled to pay a fine for employing your children?
A.: No, sir, being no scholar.[5]

Such were the protections of early child labor laws. Employers were divided; some rejected employment of very young children and abided by the schooling provisions, while others ignored the



laws altogether. Nor was it only ignorance of the laws that made parents violate restrictions on child labor. Factory workers needed the additional income. Finally, school reformers like Horace Mann knew that the proportion of young children in factory labor was small. They were more concerned about youths wandering around city streets than those occupied in the mills, and they were reluctant to advocate compulsory schooling for either group. Instead they exhorted employers to comply voluntarily with labor laws and encouraged local school committees to find ways to increase enrollment among truant youth. The continued availability of jobs for teenagers helped keep school enrollments level rather than rising in industrial areas.

If school reformers were not willing to compel teenage attendance, neither were they on a campaign to recruit toddlers into the public schools. Indeed, they actively worked against the enrollment of very young children. In the 1830s and 1840s, educators throughout the country came to believe that the practice of allowing three- and four-year-olds to attend common schools was wrong. For the sake of their health and the good order of the school, these toddlers belonged at home. As we have seen, very young children had traditionally attended rural district schools with their older siblings, and in urban areas a flurry of enthusiasm for separate infant schools had developed in the 1820s and early 1830s. During the antebellum school-reform period, these practices fell into disfavor. There were several reasons for the gradual exclusion of young children from schooling. Domestic writers argued that young children belonged at home with a real mother, not a surrogate. A rising interest in the causes and possible prevention of insanity led to further speculation about the harmful effects of early schooling. "I am forced to believe the danger is indeed great," wrote physician Amariah Brigham in his influential book, *Remarks on the Influence of Mental Excitement upon Health* (1832). "Very often in attempting to call forth and cultivate the intellectual faculties of children before they are six or seven years of age, serious and lasting injury has been done both to the body and the mind." Finally, professional education journals of the day publicized the naturalistic theories of Pestalozzi and Fellenberg, who argued the need for balanced and unforced development of

mind and body. These theories also pointed in the direction of a later entry age for schoolchildren.[6]

Toddlers in ungraded district schools had been a feature of a more casual world, in which the school and the family were not sharply demarcated. Reformers, with much support from teachers, saw the arrangement as not only casual but also ineffective and inappropriate. The arrangement had been largely custodial anyway; it fit neither the ideology nor the structure of the reformed common school. Mothers were supposed to be at home, devoted to the education of their young children. Schools were supposed to classify children for more effective moral and intellectual instruction. Toddlers didn't fit in the new graded schools. School officials expressed this view at the simplest level through their complaints that little children were a nuisance. Jesse Miller, the state superintendent of Pennsylvania's schools, recommended in 1848 that communities raise the school entry age from four to six, saying that the younger pupils "necessarily incommode and retard the progress of the pupils who are more advanced." In some communities by persuasion, in some by regulation, younger children were gradually eliminated from the schools.

Probably only a small minority of children in the North missed going to school altogether. Enrollment says nothing, however, about the quality or quantity of education a child received. Reformers placed their emphasis on matters of quantity and quality. Their general goal was to increase regularity of attendance, that is, to increase average daily attendance among those enrolled, and to increase the length of the school year. They believed that coercive legislation on either issue would be an unacceptable incursion on the family and on local government. But through persuasion and publicity, both average attendance and length of school terms were increased. Both, of course, added to the number of days of schooling the average child received per year in this increasingly schooled society.

Teachers, school-committee members, and state officials complained of the disruptive effects of irregular attendance. "Next to the want of uniform text books of the proper kind," said Pennsylvania's superintendent of common schools, "the teacher meets with no greater obstacle." His counterpart in New York agreed:





"The loss of time, the loss of ambition, and the consequent relaxation of effort . . . which are the fruits of irregular attendance, may be a life-long injury to the pupil," but also "much of the time and labor of the teacher is lost; irregularity of attendances divides and distracts his attention." Different communities tried different tactics to get a higher percentage of enrolled children into school each day. In 1858 the Superintendent of Chicago's schools called irregular attendance "the most dangerous evil that exists in connection with the free school system." In addition to exhorting parents to send children more regularly, Chicago school administrators tried monthly attendance reports to be signed by parents and a rule threatening habitually absent children with expulsion.[7]

Reformers also placed great emphasis on increasing the length of the school year. Rural communities often operated school for eight to ten weeks in summer and a similar period in winter. Common-school reformers wanted longer sessions, both to increase the amount of schooling children received and to enhance the possibility of making teaching a regular profession. Pennsylvania's superintendent complained in 1848 that the average length of the school year was less than five months. "This is an evil of no trifling character," he said, for it was impossible to attract competent teachers unless longer-term employment could be offered. During the antebellum period, there was a gradual trend toward longer school sessions in the North, due to reformers' urgings, an expanding economy, and an increased popular acceptance of more schooling. Children in 1860 attended school longer and more regularly than their parents had in 1830.

The mere fact that more children were going to school more days per year did not satisfy common-school reformers. The quality of the schools did not measure up to their standards. Next on the reformers' agenda came the evils of the district system. They believed that expenditures, teacher training, and the organization of schools could not be improved without changing the tradition of small-scale local control. In fact, district control of schools was not as firmly rooted in history as some of its defenders claimed. Town-wide control of schools in New England had only given way to smaller district control in the eighteenth century as population scattered and neighborhoods pressed to have their own

schools closer to home. The same process of decentralization was repeated in some frontier states. In Michigan, official control of common schools rested from 1817 to 1827 with a state body, the university; control by district was enacted in 1827 and endorsed in the state constitution of 1835. Wisconsin entered statehood with a system dividing authority between districts, towns, and the state, but the school code of 1849 transferred most powers to the districts. The district system was obviously popular at the local level; the common-school reformers' challenge to it was the most controversial aspect of their program. Nonetheless, most state officials, writers on education, and school promoters in legislatures supported larger-scale school units and more supervision from above. The effort to centralize control thus proceeded along three parallel lines: consolidating districts into town systems, developing mechanisms for state supervision and regulation, and encouraging the transition from private to public control of schools. The evils of district control became a major theme of state school reports of the 1840s and 1850s. Reformers claimed that control by tiny districts led to the hiring of incompetent teachers because the examining committees were incompetent. The system also led to short school terms, dilapidated school buildings, and lack of equipment because small districts resisted taxing themselves or were indifferent to innovation and sound professional practice. Some also argued that district control perpetuated unequal common-school facilities because districts had unequal wealth and varying degrees of willingness to tax for schools. Consolidation, they said, would both raise and equalize school expenditures.

Vermont's first state superintendent, Horace Eaton, said in 1846 that small districts were the "paradise of ignorant teachers." He urged rural Vermont to follow the example of New York and Massachusetts, where districts were larger. If towns would not consolidate, he urged "at least that limits be set to the prevailing mischievous tendency to multiply school districts." The next year, John Pierce of Michigan lauded the "union school" made possible by town consolidation. Union schools brought together children from several districts, allowing grading of pupils, more advanced instruction, and larger, more homogeneous classes. Ohio's report of 1854 labelled district schools inefficient and ineffective and gave



thirteen reasons for the superiority of graded schools. In his 1861 report, the Illinois superintendent called for the consolidation of one-room schoolhouses in rural areas and estimated that switching to town control would reduce the number of districts in Illinois from 10,000 to under 2,000.

Cities, of course, had sufficient numbers of children and taxpayers to satisfy the demands of organizational reform; they pioneered in establishing graded schools and high schools, and in developing professional supervision. Consolidation was primarily a rural issue in this period. But there were different kinds of rural communities. Aside from the population size itself, there were different rural settlement patterns. Where a rural community already had a village population center, it was more likely to adopt school consolidation than a comparably sized township of scattered farms. Wisconsin education reports spoke optimistically about the cities and the rural villages but referred disparagingly to the scattered farming communities. Villages had the necessary concentration of population; they also had a smattering of nonfarm population, and with it usually an element of boosterism. Some people in these villages wanted their communities to grow, to be modern, and to link up with developing networks of commerce and other nonlocal institutions. This brought the dialogue about educational reform into the local scene. In dispersed rural areas, a strong countertrend still operated, especially in frontier states: as population continued to disperse, school districts multiplied and residents clung tenaciously to control of their nearby school.

Common-school reformers of the antebellum period also attempted to influence local education through the creation of state education agencies and the use of state funds. Among the early legislative accomplishments of reformers in all the northern states was the creation of the office of a chief school official, usually called the superintendent of common schools. Sometimes the office was joined with that of the already existing secretary of state. Historians have often focused on these spokesmen for educational reform, and many of the prominent common-school advocates, including Mann, Barnard, and Pierce, served terms as state school officers. The heroic view of Horace Mann was well summarized

by George Martin, a later state school superintendent. Mann, he said, was the "Puritan of the Puritans." He was "born to be a champion . . . the stuff that martyrs are made of. . . . He fought the battle of educational reform in Massachusetts through to the end and conquered."[8]

It is difficult to disentangle the unique contributions of these state leaders from general trends in pedagogy and educational systematization that would have prevailed anyway. There is no doubt that they were influential people in their time. They were consulted, quoted, and invited to speak. They shepherded education bills through legislatures and established the rudimentary administrative structures of nineteenth-century school systems. However, some skepticism about the decisive role of heroic state officers is warranted. Calvin Wiley of North Carolina helped persuade his legislature to create a state superintendent's office, to which he was appointed in 1853. He worked as liard as Mann and Barnard, exercised great talent, and mustered the same arguments; yet he came up with different results—less state influence, lower attendance levels, shorter school terms, and lower expenditures. North Carolina was not Massachusetts. The reformers pushed virtually the same program in every state, but the results were shaped by social structure, politics, demography, and resources. The office of state superintendent was not conducive to heroism, though historians have lionized some of its early occupants. Even in education-minded states like Michigan and Massachusetts, the position was weak and vulnerable. Educational improvement had the powerful sanction of native Protestant ideology, and responded to myriad problems of economic growth and population diversity; but centralized state power over such a reform program was not a foregone conclusion, and the attempt to hasten educational improvement through state action politicized the reform movement in its first blush. Legislative battles were waged in many states over the creation of state superintendencies, county superintendencies, and consolidated districts.

Between battles, the state superintendent's job was largely clerical and exhortatory. His task was to gather, summarize, and report annually the statistics on educational practices in the state. He was expected to write essays about good educational practice





and to recommend improvements. Most educational legislation in the period was limited to defining the relative roles of district, town, county, and state officers and providing for the maintenance and distribution of small state school funds. Some states experimented with county superintendencies to bolster the state officer's supervisory capacity, but this innovation was everywhere controversial, and local committees retained ultimate authority over expenditure levels, length of school terms, curriculum, texts, and the hiring and firing of teachers. State superintendents were more like preachers than bureaucrats. They traveled about their states, visiting schools, giving speeches, organizing teachers' institutes, gathering data, and spreading the common-school reform gospel. Some of them wanted more coercive authority, and they worked to create a rough hierarchy of professional supervision, but their regulatory power was more form than substance. The Wisconsin state superintendent was charged with hearing appeals in educational disputes, but he complained in 1859 that town superintendents refused to comply with his rulings. In 1857 the Illinois superintendent argued the "utter futility of attempting to operate a Free School System, without proper supervisory agents." School systems were like railroads, he said. They needed "head superintendents, with ample assistants, to attend to their general movements, and watchful agents stationed everywhere."

The history of the county superintendency in the 1840s and 1850s illustrates both the bureaucratic aspirations of the common-school reformers and the mixed results of their attempts to systematize local schooling. Ohio secretaries of state complained throughout the early 1840s that local school officials were so "ignorant" and "sluggish" that they could not "make a report with the form in front of them." They argued for county superintendents to interpret laws, explain procedures for reports, encourage uniformity of textbooks, and examine teachers applying for jobs. But when a state law made the hiring of superintendents a local option in 1848, only one county voted to do so. Legislators in both New York and Vermont established the position of county superintendent during the 1840s and then abolished it in response to the criticism that they were an unnecessary expense. In some states, the reformers met with success. In Pennsylvania, despite

some local hostility, the state superintendent reported in 1857 that county officers had improved teachers' qualifications, promoted teacher institutes, fostered uniformity of texts, generated parental interest, and prompted local officials to be more conscientious. Like the state superintendent, the county superintendent's role was more to persuade than to coerce.

The third element in the reformers' program for centralization of control was the campaign against private schooling. The goals of a common-school system—moral training, discipline, patriotism, mutual understanding, formal equality, and cultural assimilation—could not be achieved if substantial numbers of children were in independent schools. For the school reformers of the antebellum period, the phrase "common school" implied an effort to draw all children into public free schools, and they fought the old connotation of "common" schools as ordinary and undesirable. Horace Mann complained that private schooling drew off the support of "some of the most intelligent men," and Orville Taylor said of exclusive schooling, "this is not republican. This is not allowing all, as far as possible, a fair start in the world." Barnard argued that private schooling "classifies society at the root, by assorting children according to the wealth, education, or outward circumstances of their parents, into different schools; and educates children of the same neighborhood differently and unequally." Moreover, argued the reformers, private schools soaked up resources from the public schools. "In those towns where private seminaries have been located and well sustained," said John Pierce, "the free schools will be found, without exception, to be in a miserable condition."[9]

During the antebellum period there was a substantial shift from private to public schooling in the cities. Public school facilities improved and there was a general tendency of urban governments to extend public control of institutions as the population increased. In New York City the percentage of students in private schools dropped from 62 percent in 1829 to 18 percent in 1850. In Salem the percentage in private schools was 58 in 1827, and still 56 in 1837. By 1846, however, Salem's public schools enrolled all but 24 percent of the city's schoolchildren. In the newer cities of the West, the same process occurred. Milwaukee reported 61 percent





private enrollment in 1845, but by 1848, when they reported a much larger total enrollment, the private percentage was down to 46. The Illinois superintendent claimed in 1868 "that the public schools are steadily weakening and decimating private schools, and that they will ultimately crowd them almost wholly from the field." The only substantial countertrend against this gradual shift to public schooling in the cities was the development of Roman Catholic schools, but they were not numerous in most areas until after the Civil War.[10]

In the large cities, schools tended to be either entirely free or entirely supported by parental fees. By 1840 the categories corresponded roughly to our modern definitions of "public" and "private." The goal of the reformers, therefore, was to increase the public sector at the expense of the private. Rural areas and smaller towns had few entirely private schools, but their district schools commonly charged some form of tuition. This was done by charging parents "rate bills" for some part of a term, or by extending the regular public term with a "select" or "subscription" school, usually taught by the same teacher and open only to children whose parents would pay the cost. Most school reformers opposed any parental assessments for schooling, and they waged a campaign against the rate bill and the subscription schools from lecture podiums, in annual reports, and in legislatures. It was not simply a disagreement between those who supported more education and those who supported less, though there was that element in it. It was also an argument about whether the state should assume educational responsibilities previously reserved to parents. Eventually the school reformers prevailed. Most northern states abolished rate bills by law in the 1850s and 1860s, although some communities ignored the laws and continued assessing rates. Full tax support for southern public education, even in principle, was a phenomenon of the 1870s and later.

As the public schools of the North became wholly free, the cheaper independent pay schools, previously patronized by ordinary families, declined. A certain percentage of more wealthy families, however, could not be recruited to the cause. Samuel Galloway, in charge of Ohio's schools, complained in 1849 that the "better class of families" would not send their children to

public schools. A certain "better" class continued to evade the net of the reformers and support private schooling. Some less wealthy groups also persisted in supporting private schools for cultural and religious reasons, but in general, working-class and middle-class support of cheap pay schools gave way with the advent of improved and free public schools.

The same transition from private to public began in secondary education in the North in the mid-nineteenth century. Reformers' antagonism to independent academies and their enthusiasm for the creation of high schools were part and parcel of the common-school reform program. The public high-school cause paralleled the drive to make elementary education free and publicly supervised. Reformers argued that free public high schools were part of the democratization of education. High schools also fit the bureaucratic impulse in antebellum education reform, bringing the secondary level of schooling into a more coordinated system.

The image of elite military academies or New England boarding schools of the twentieth century tempts us to exaggerate the exclusive character of the academies of the early nineteenth century. Educational reformers contributed to that stereotype. In their campaign against these independent schools, they emphasized the social class bias of academies while ignoring the same selective character of the early public high schools. Even a free secondary school was bound to have a clientele skewed toward the middle class, both because informal class discrimination existed and because many working-class families could not afford to forgo the earnings of teenage labor. For blacks, of course, discrimination was often formal and absolute. Various obstacles to secondary education remained for women, but their opportunities were expanded by academies, and they gradually came to predominate in public high schools.

In their heyday, academies had offered an opportunity for secondary education to children of families with modest means. Ambitious youths, encouraged by common-school teachers, managed to attend academies with support from relatives or by working part of the year. For some native males, like Horace Mann and John Pierce, this path led to college and careers as lawyers or Protestant ministers. Some, including Mann and Pierce, later became critics of academies, but their complaints should be weighed





against the rosier picture of some contemporaries. Hiram Orcutt of Connecticut reminisced warmly: "Most of these institutions were unendowed and short-lived, but they were then a necessity. . . . The open door of the old academy, its economical arrangements, and its earnest and devoted teachers invited and encouraged the young men and women of the neighborhood to come up higher." Because a needy student could scrape through, because academies were dispersed in rural areas, and because many received charters and financial assistance from the states, some people argued that the academies were "public" schools. Certainly they fell between the modern categories "public" and "private." Communities sometimes voted subsidies to local academies, or provided a building; the composition of boards of incorporated academies often differed little from those that governed common schools. Indeed, in the 1820s the trustees of several incorporated academies in New York State were also the trustees of the common-school districts in which their academies were located. Erasmus Hall Academy in Brooklyn got local public aid in return for teaching some poor students without fee, and the Pennsylvania legislature gave several academies aid on the same condition in the 1820s. In New York a legislative committee declared in 1838 that academies were related to the common schools "as part of the same system of public and popular education."[11]

Some defenders of academies lived up to the aristocratic image. Edward Hitchcock, president of Amherst College, gave a speech in 1845 in which he lauded academies as perfectly suited to the genius of Protestant, "pure Saxon" Americans. He pointed out that by "Americans" he did not mean the "motley crew—annually disembogued upon our shores." As for the charge of elitism, said Hitchcock, "it is easy to get up a prejudice against men thus thoroughly educated, as if they were aristocratic; but when the people come to look around for those who are to maintain their highest interests, whether in church or state, they are very apt to select those very men." The haughty tone of men like Hitchcock may have lost the academies some popular support. But the establishment of high schools depended more upon the acceptance of full public funding for the education of middle-class children as well as those of poorer parents.[12]

High schools fit the reformers' program of a hierarchical, graded,

coordinated system of public schooling. In New York City, educators spoke of the need for a high school "as part of a perfect system," and when it was founded in 1849, they called it "the splendid crown of our Common School system," and "an integrant branch of the whole system for the enlightenment of the people." Connecticut's superintendent, Seth Beers, argued that a high school in a town would enable the teachers of the district schools to teach elementary subjects more thoroughly by relieving them of the smattering of advanced subjects forced upon them by the wide age range of district-school students. H. H. Barney, principal of Cincinnati's high school, loved the symmetry of a school system capped with a high school. The construction metaphor was continual. Independent academies and denominational schools made a "wretched, misshapen, loose-jointed system." Boston's schools, he said, were "so complete and symmetrical in structure that the human being there receives the first rudimental instructions, and is then led along and upward by gradations as simple and beautiful as its own growth, until it steps forth an American citizen complete."[13]

Urbanization, along with the reformers' arguments and the attractiveness of high schools to people in middling occupational groups, combined to create a gradual trend toward the provision of public high schools. Massachusetts, New York, and Ohio led the way, and within those states the innovation more or less followed urban lines. High schools were urban institutions; they required a sufficient concentration of taxable wealth as well as enough students who wanted secondary schooling. After Boston created its English High School in 1821, many Massachusetts cities followed in the 1820s and 1830s, including Worcester, Salem, Springfield, Lowell, and Newburyport. By 1865, 70 percent of the population of Massachusetts lived in towns with public high schools. In New York State the busiest period of high-school establishment was in the 1850s and 1860s. In the five years following the Civil War, the number of high schools in the state increased from twenty-two to fifty-nine, while the number of academies declined from 190 to 132. The state's high schools surpassed academies in number of institutions by 1875 and in number of students by 1880. In other northern states, the development was similar.[14]





Only a small minority of teenagers attended secondary schools of any kind in nineteenth-century America. The establishment of public high schools performed a largely symbolic function in the reform program. They established the opportunity for free local education through the secondary level, even though few used it, and they represented the upper levels of an increasingly graded and coordinated system of public education. These symbolic functions —both democratic and bureaucratic—are clear from the debates about the creation of high schools. Their actual functions are less clear. We are only beginning to understand the social origins and social destinations of high-school graduates. In 1851 Hiram Barney lauded Boston's English High School as "the perfect example of the poor and the rich meeting on common ground and on terms quite democratic," and the principal of that school said "about one-third of my pupils are sons of merchants; the remaining two-thirds are sons of mechanics, professional men and others. Some of our best scholars are sons of coopers, lamplighters, and day laborers." More precise studies of high schools in Chicago, New York, and Salem in the 1850s partially confirm that picture. Sons of clerks, merchants, proprietors, craftsmen, and professionals attended these high schools. A few factory workers' sons appear on the rolls, but the lower working class is severely underrepresented. The trend in graduates' careers was toward white-collar work, both clerical and professional, regardless of whether the boys' fathers worked in manual or nonmanual jobs. The New York graduates of 1858 included a brass turner's son who became a lawyer, a machinist's son who became a lawyer, and a wheelwright's son who became a bookkeeper. Some fathers with such artisan labels may have been substantial craftsmen or even proprietors of their own businesses; however, because of changes from craft to factory production, some members of this upper artisan group may have felt anxious about their positions and their sons' futures. In any case, the high-school graduates' career lines suggest that for a small, middling segment of the population, public secondary schooling fostered intergenerational change from manual to nonmanual occupations, and it may have helped confirm or improve white-collar status for those whose fathers were already in the white-collar ranks. Coeducational and separate girls' high schools

soon provided females with possibilities for secondary education in the cities.[15]

The common-school reform program put considerable financial strain on local school districts. In addition to longer school terms, the shift to more public schooling, the abolition of rate bills, and the addition of high schools to the system, antebellum school reformers campaigned for better equipment and better facilities. They ridiculed the crude and simple materials used in rural district schools, and they bemoaned the lack of solid, well-ventilated schoolhouses. New York State school reports charted a gradual increase in schools with decent privies, and Wisconsin reports recorded the increase in brick and stone construction over log or frame houses. Still, complained Wisconsin's Superintendent Barry in 1856, "ninety-nine out of every hundred of them should be torn down or greatly improved." In rural Trempeleau County, teachers complained about the overcrowded "shacks" in which they taught, most without the aid of blackboards, outline maps, or other innovations of the day.

Many rural residents responded to expensive reform demands simply by rejecting them, voting down increased school taxes, and sticking to their ramshackle schoolhouses, old-fashioned slates, short sessions, and tattered family textbooks. Other communities, however, did not wish to appear backward or uninterested in their children. It was hard to ignore a county superintendent like the one in Trempeleau County, who reminded residents that while they were spending $3.33 per pupil, the average town in Massachusetts was spending $22. Meanwhile, in Massachusetts, Horace Mann annually published a list of all the towns, ranked by per-pupil expenditures. In 1851 the school committee of Palmer, Massachusetts, called it a "mortification" that they were lowest of all 316 towns in per-pupil expenditures. "Mortification" was exactly what Mann had in mind.[16]

To some extent, school reform rode the back of economic expansion. In industrial or agricultural communities where productivity was rising, it was not necessary to raise the rate of school taxation on assessed wealth in order to increase the per-pupil expenditures for education. But sometimes school reformers were fighting fiscal retrenchment, declining farm prices, and traditional





resistance to school expenditures. Thus they emphasized that some innovations could actually save money. Their favorite example was the introduction of inexpensive female teachers. Samuel Lewis of Ohio said that counties employing females "are able to do twice as much with the same money as is done in the counties where female teachers are almost excluded." The ratio of female to male teachers' wages varied quite a bit from town to town and from state to state, but there was little movement toward equalization during the antebellum period. On the average, female teachers' wages were 44 percent of males' in Michigan in 1845, and the same in 1863. In Wisconsin the ratio was slightly more favorable: 53 percent in 1850, increasing to 62 percent in 1860. In Massachusetts the salary ratio remained around 40 percent throughout the period, while the proportion of females in the teaching force increased from 56 percent in 1834 to 78 percent in 1860.[17]

Opposition to female teachers centered on their alleged inability to teach higher subjects or to control rowdy older male pupils. "Where the mind in its maturing state and fuller development . . . is led onward to the higher departments of literature and science," said the Wisconsin state superintendent, "it is obviously better to employ male teachers." In rural areas the problem of disciplining older boys was limited mostly to the winter term, when there was little farm work to keep teenagers busy. In upstate New York, a county superintendent said in 1850 that "weaker districts" might benefit from hiring women, but that if they did, the more advanced students would need "the more extended advantages of a central town school." The entering wedge for female teachers, therefore, was the education of young children in common schools. The employment of female teachers for younger children was consistent with antebellum notions about domesticity and education. Advocates of female teachers could see the benefit of transferring the savings to other improvements, and they also wished to encourage the more tender, loving pedagogy they associated with female teachers. "Heaven has plainly appointed females as the natural instructors of young children, and endowed them with those qualities of mind and disposition, which pre-eminently fit them for such a task," said the Connecticut Board of Education in 1840. Indiana's first state superintendent exclaimed simply in 1853, "Blessed

be he who invented female teachers." The female has "patience and perseverance, quick sensibilities and sympathy with youthful minds," said a Pennsylvania state superintendent in 1857, illustrating the appeal of the domestic stereotype. "Except in the family, she nowhere so truly occupies her appropriate sphere, as in the school room." Barnas Sears, Horace Mann's successor, said in 1851 that the female teacher "paints to the imagination, where the male teacher defines and reasons. She can more easily bridge over the chasm between the natural life of infancy or childhood, and the artificial thing called a school."[18]

The two arguments in favor of female teachers—their cheapness and natural superiority as instructors of young children—appear together so often that it is difficult to determine which was the more important as a motive. Discussions of the issue by rural school committees suggest that women would not have been hired had they not been available more cheaply. Still, if economy and exploitation were the whole story, one might expect the poorest districts, or those that spent the lowest percentage of assessed wealth on education, to convert to women teachers soonest. This was not the case; the picture is more complicated. One factor, obviously, is that the poorest and most penny-pinching districts were often small, rural communities that clung to traditional practices. Ideas about proper female roles died hard; thus a purely economic explanation of the feminization of teaching is inaccurate. A second factor has to do with scale and organization. In the towns and cities, reformers advocated the employment of female teachers as part of the general program for improving and reorganizing the schools. In 1841 the mayor of Salem, Massachusetts, recommended "the system of placing a large number of scholars under the care of male principals with female assistants—the most economical as well as the effective mode of instruction—and of securing the advantages of a division of labor by converting what are now separate schools into co-ordinate departments, under teachers to whom separate duties shall be assigned." In 1853 the Phillips School in Salem had 343 students, with a staff of seven female assistants plus a male principal teacher. The city as a whole employed eight males and sixty females. The modern school principal was a byproduct of the shift to female teachers. The term



originally applied to the "principal teacher," who, in the twentieth century, shed his teaching function.

At first glance, it might seem that the feminization of teaching and the professionalization of teaching were in tension, since few people thought of women as having professional status. However, the two trends were compatible and reinforcing. Having created more bureaucratic and highly organized schools, reformers wished to soften the experience for younger children, to bridge the widening gap between family culture and school culture. Educational reformers decided that gender differences coincided with a proper division of labor in education. Having solved the female teacher's problem of discipline by providing a male overseer, they soon learned that supervision had many uses in large schools and that the prospect of such responsibilities might keep men in the profession. On all these grounds, hiring female teachers made sense. In cities and towns, the feminization of teaching was seen as one of several related organizational innovations, tied to grading, efficiency, and supervision. In the country districts, it was seen primarily as an economy move, first for the summer sessions and gradually, after women had proven themselves to skeptical school committees, for winter sessions as well.

In 1800 most teachers had been male, with the exception of the women who conducted neighborhood dame schools or private lessons in female accomplishments. By 1900, most teachers were women—about 70 percent of the precollegiate instructors nationwide. For the North, the period of fastest change in this momentous shift came in the antebellum period. It proceeded fastest in the cities but soon affected almost all districts. It was based on an argument of efficiency but was bolstered by other cultural and pedagogical arguments. It had important effects on the profession—fixing the subordinate role of the classroom teacher, reinforcing the hierarchical organization desired by professional male educators, and underscoring the new, softer approach to educating young children.

The feminization of teaching also had important effects on the lives of the women who taught. The number of women who had some experience in the classroom was quite large, for although the percentage of all women who were teachers at any given time was

small, their careers were brief, so it took a very substantial number of young women, each teaching for a few years, to fill the teaching positions of the expanding public schools. Horace Mann estimated that the average length of time in teaching was 2.6 years in Massachusetts in 1845. In southeastern Michigan in 1860, 77 percent of all female teachers were between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four, suggesting the short-term nature of teaching as an occupation for females. In Dane County, Wisconsin (which included Madison, the capital), 27 percent of the female teachers were eighteen or younger in 1860, though there were no male teachers that young. As a superintendent in another county said, female teaching candidates seemed to be just "emerging from a state of childhood." For a brief span, then, at a young age, teaching gave a large number of women a chance to work—for unequal pay and often in subordinate and difficult positions—but nonetheless, to have a daily, nonmanual occupation, outside the home, for wages. For some women it meant a chance to live away from home between parental dependence and marital dependence; however, most female teachers in fact lived with their parents while they taught. In Martha Coons's study of Dane County, Wisconsin, 82 percent of female teachers were single and living with their parents. About 7 percent were married; the remaining 11 percent were single and boarding away from home. In Ann Weingarten's similar study of southeastern Michigan, 67 percent were single women living with their parents, only 1 percent were married, and the remaining 32 percent lived independently. These data suggest that the short duration of female teaching careers was due to the fact that very few women taught after they married.[19]

It is difficult to estimate the impact of a brief term of teaching on the thousands of women who served in antebellum classrooms. Some women testified to its crucial importance in their lives, and some few, of course, made long careers of teaching. In her book *The Evolution of a Teacher,* Ella Gilbert Ives described what it was like to be a student in the 1860s at Mount Holyoke College, "the Mecca for school committees in quest of teachers." She quoted Frances Willard, the temperance crusader, who had declared "not to be at all, or else to be a teacher, was the alternative presented to aspiring young women of intellectual proclivities when I was



young." Perhaps this is why some women, starved to use their minds and their talents, were willing to make statements that seem so abject today. At a meeting in upstate New York in the 1840s, Emma Willard, the educator, proposed a resolution to be adopted by the men in the audience, to the effect that they would aid common schooling by asking women in their communities to take on educational activities "properly belonging to their own sphere in the social system." She then asked the ladies to resolve "that if the men, whom we recognize as by the laws of God and man, our directors, and to whose superior wisdom we naturally look for guidance, shall call us into the field of active labor in common schools, we will obey the call with alacrity." Unfortunately, no one recorded whether her tongue was in her cheek on this occasion, but both resolutions passed unanimously.[20]

Despite the discriminatory wages and the moralistic public scrutiny that faced female teachers, some recognized the expanding field as an opportunity. Catharine Beecher said it most directly: "A profession is to be created for women. . . . This is the way in which thousands of intelligent and respectable women, who toil for a pittance scarcely sufficient to sustain life, are to be relieved and elevated." However, Beecher thought it was better tactics to present the idea as a way to solve the problems of public education "rather than to start it as an effort for the elevation of woman. By this method, many embarrassments would be escaped, and many advantages secured." Beecher hinted here that some of the talk about women's natures and destinies was self-conscious posturing. As much as she may have believed sincerely in the domestic ideal, her remark about female teachers suggests that she also knew that the price for a measure of independence and public activity was acquiescence in the prevailing ideology.[21]

While common-school reformers advocated female teachers, they also urged a variety of other changes to bolster the status of teachers of both sexes: longer terms for year-round employment, better wages, improved teacher training through normal schools and teachers' institutes, more communication through professional journals and organizations, and improved hiring practices. These reforms, they believed, would simultaneously raise the quality of common-school education and the status of common-school teach-

ers. Orville Taylor pleaded in 1835: "Teaching should be made a distinct profession. The teacher's employment should be made as honourable and as separate as the physician's, the divine's, the lawyer's. . . . Let teaching be made a profession, and let teachers be united for their mutual improvement." Early state teachers' organizations, always male-dominated, provided a platform for school professionals and visibility for promising men on the rise. Sometimes they had an impact on policy, as when the Illinois Teachers' Association controlled the early normal school, when the Wisconsin teachers endorsed the introduction of county superintendents, or when Ohio's College of Professional Teachers publicized the need for a state superintendent of instruction.[22]

Education journals proliferated during the antebellum period. In some cases they were independent publications, in others they were the organs of state superintendents or teachers' organizations. They promoted the common-school reform program, including increased expenditures, more schooling, improved pedagogy, and the professionalization of teaching. Some state superintendents provided every district school committee with a copy of a state or national journal, to promote innovation and public support. Still, these journals were not read by most classroom teachers. In 1855 one-fourth of Massachusetts' teachers subscribed to the *Massachusetts Teacher*. The editors of the *Maine Journal of Education* complained in the 1850s that their journal was an "orphan" because ordinary teachers were "too indifferent to support it," and in Ohio, an estimated 18,000 of 21,000 teachers in 1863 never looked at the state journal. Using very crude figures, Sheldon Davis, a historian, estimated that about 10 percent of the nation's teachers received an education journal in the early 1850s, rising to perhaps 20 percent by the end of the Civil War. Nonetheless, this was an influential minority of teachers, and the impact of the journals may have been multiplied in discussions and through the sharing of copies among several readers. Henry Barnard's compendious *American Journal of Education* was so expensive that it probably never had more than 500 paid subscribers, but it became a standard reference work in pedagogical libraries and was frequently cited among education professionals.[23]

Another means of disseminating educational reform ideas was





the teachers' institute. Often organized at the county level and endorsed by state superintendents, these meetings consisted of several days' speeches and discussion conducted by some prominent professional educator. David Camp, later the superintendent of Connecticut's common schools, described the teachers' institutes he helped conduct in the 1840s. They lasted four days and featured model lessons and discussions of classroom technique during the day, with guest lecturers in the evening, such as the Reverend Horace Bushnell, author of *Christian Nurture*. When William Mowry landed his first job as principal of a graded school in Massachusetts in 1850, he decided to attend a teachers' institute conducted by Barnas Sears, the new secretary of the state Board of Education. He took notes at the lectures, and he said he "kept the book containing them on my desk for the whole year . . . it had a marked influence on my subsequent teaching." In Illinois the superintendent of public instruction said in 1858 that annual institutes should be to teachers "what the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca was to the ancient Arab—the source whence he renews the spirit and life of his existence." Henry Barnard called teachers' institutes an "education revival agency." They became one of the most popular innovations of the reform program. In 1849, Maine officials reported that 36 percent of their teachers, both male and female, attended institutes. In Wisconsin, superintendent Azel Ladd began campaigning for institutes in 1852, "to mitigate the disadvantages" of teachers being "so diversified in qualifications." The state began supporting teachers' institutes in Wisconsin in 1859. In that year about 1,500 teachers attended institutes in fourteen cities, perhaps 20 percent of the state's teaching force. At the same time in Michigan, about 15 percent of all teachers, male and female, attended institutes.[24]

As teachers' institutes became more popular in the Midwest, reformers in the East pressed for better teacher training through the establishment of normal schools (the term originated in France and meant that teachers should be trained to perform according to high standards or "norms"). Impressed by the professional status of Prussia's normal schools, reformers began to place a high priority on the establishment of similar institutions in America. Horace Mann supported normal schools vigorously. Shortly after

he took office as secretary to the Board of Education, Mann attended a meeting at the home of Edmund Dwight, a wealthy industrialist, to discuss the possibility of persuading the legislature to support a normal school. He returned home with a promise from Dwight of a $10,000 private gift for the project, on condition that the legislature match it. In his diary he exulted, "I think I feel pretty sublime! Let the stars look out for my head!" The Whig legislature took advantage of the gift and established the nation's first normal school at Lexington in 1839. Even though the reform forces barely weathered a legislative assault on this "Prussian" institution in 1840, they soon established additional normal schools at Barre and Bridgewater. Classroom instruction at the Lexington normal school, as at most early teacher training institutions, was in academic subjects like geography, grammar, moral philosophy, botany, history, algebra, and political economy. Thirty-five students studied under a single instructor, Cyrus Peirce, regarded by Mann as a master teacher. Teacher training was accomplished in four ways: through the example of the instructor, through his incidental remarks about teaching methods during the regular lessons, through his weekly lectures on the art of teaching, and through practice teaching in the model school, under Peirce's observation. Thus, although the stated curriculum differed little from an academy, teacher training pervaded the day's activities. Henry Barnard called Lexington "the most interesting educational experiment now making on this side of the Atlantic."[25]

In New York, the state regents and legislators decided that existing academies could do the job of teacher training. The superintendent of common schools, John Spencer, rejected normal schools as an "unnecessary expense." Although Spencer's successor supported the establishment of a normal school at Albany, which opened in 1844, New York continued to rely largely upon normal departments within its academies for teacher training during the nineteenth century. Indeed, academies throughout the nation often ran teacher-training departments comparable to the normal schools. For example, a student in the normal department of the academy at Canandaigua, New York, in the 1830s said that the program included "studies and recitations of the common branches; a daily drill upon the best methods of teaching; lectures





upon the theory of teaching, and also upon geology, natural and mental philosophy, physical geography and history, upon warming and ventilation, the laws of health, teachers' associations, schoolhouses and blackboards, also upon the teacher's social habits and duties as a member of the community." He added that graduates of the program "were eagerly sought for the best class of winter schools."[26]

New Yorkers continued to debate which alternative the state should support, while the elite of their teaching force received training at the Albany normal school, at the normal departments of academies, and at periodic teachers' institutes. Most teachers, though, had no such training at all. When the teacher training departments of New York's academies graduated 284 students in 1837, there were about 10,000 school districts, most with frequent vacancies in winter and summer teaching slots. In Michigan, the normal school opened in 1853 and was attended by a few hundred students a year. By 1860, when the normal school had been operating for seven years, about 3 percent of the state's female teachers and about 4 percent of the state's male teachers had attended the normal school. Nonetheless, common-school reformers were confident by 1860 that they had their sights on the right institution for professional training. The post–Civil War era saw the proliferation of normal schools throughout the nation, but it was a very gradual development. By 1900, for example, 40 percent of the public-school teachers of Massachusetts had attended normal school.[27]

Journals, teachers' associations, institutes, normal schools—these first instruments of professionalization probably affected the top 10 to 20 percent of the teachers of the antebellum period, the men and women who were more likely to stay in teaching beyond a few years, who were more likely to teach in the larger towns, and who were more likely to have the ambition to rise in the profession. The great majority of teachers, it seems, were either untouched by the new professional communications, or read a bit about education in popular journals, or learned about new practices from school visitors and annual reports sent to the districts. The potential professional networks existed, but the rapid turnover of teachers remained an obstacle to professionalization. In Trempeleau

County, Wisconsin, the turnover rate was as high as 80 percent in the 1860s. The average teacher had less than two years' experience, and many positions were filled by a "brigade of irregulars," who had not taken the certification exam but applied for licenses the weekend before school was to start, in the absence of qualified candidates. The county superintendent labelled these teachers "vampires" and "barnacles." In Clinton County, New York, in 1843, three-fourths of the teachers were twenty-one or younger, and over 70 percent were new to the district in which they were employed. It was a short-lived occupation. Rapid teacher turnover inhibited professionalism, training, and higher pay for teachers. The reformers tried to break a vicious circle: low pay attracted transient, unqualified teachers, who seemed to merit low pay. But the reformers knew that higher pay rates had to be accompanied by longer sessions and an end to alternating men in winter with women in summer. "It is unreasonable to expect, that a person who is qualified to teach, will pursue a profession, if he can only find employment for three or four months in the year," said one Pennsylvania state superintendent.[28]

Henry Barnard linked teacher turnover to the slow progress of another favorite reform, the grading of schools and students. "The evils of a want of proper classification of schools . . . are aggravated by the almost universal practice of employing one teacher in summer, and another in winter, and different teachers each successive summer and winter." The graded school had numerous organizational and pedagogical implications, and it directly challenged the traditional structure of rural schooling. Grading could transform the organization of the school by classifying pupils roughly into levels of achievement. In the antebellum period, the word "grade" applied not to a particular level within a school, but to the practice of having a coordinated set of schools at different levels. The phrase "grade school," meaning elementary school, is also a later usage. Thus, to say in the 1850s that a town's schools were "graded" meant that they were divided into such levels as infant, primary, grammar, and high school. The purpose, of course, was to divide children by level of instruction so that teachers would not have to deal with such a wide range of ages and lessons. In large schools this effort led to internal gradations as well. The





schools of Utica, New York, were an example of a budding graded system. In 1854, Utica had fourteen primary schools, each divided into higher and lower levels, six intermediate schools, and one advanced school, divided into male and female sections. Educators congratulated themselves that this sort of system was the beginning of proper classification.[29]

Barnard identified the key assumption behind the graded system: "The great principle to be regarded in the classification, either of the schools of a town or district, or of the scholars in the same school, is equality of attainments, which will generally include those of the same age." Although in most graded systems children had to pass some sort of examination to move from one school to the next, the net effect of grading the schools was to stratify children by age. This had a profound impact upon the social experience of schooling for children. In the ungraded, one-room district school, students had been in close contact with older and younger children, sometimes in a cooperative relationship. In the new graded schools of the antebellum period, students increasingly related only to other children their own age, and often in a deliberately competitive situation. Educators lauded competition as a "natural and commendable motive," certainly better than the fear of physical punishment. George Emerson, writing in the *Common School Journal*, urged teachers to try to "prevent the competition becoming personal," but he concluded that the graded system was desirable because in "a system of several connected schools, examination for each higher one may be rendered a strong motive to study."[30]

Reformers believed that graded schools were not only a great pedagogical invention, consistent with principles of efficiency and division of labor, but that they spurred industry and were therefore morally sound. Furthermore, they believed that they were an essential expression of democracy in education. In his *Report on the American System of Graded Free Schools* (1851), Hiram Barney argued that free schools graded into levels would give all children the opportunity to advance according to their merits. All would be on an equal footing. Happily, said Barney, the graded system was even finding some acceptance in rural districts and in the South. Nonetheless, many rural areas still refused to consoli-

date and grade their schools, adding to the reformers' growing impatience with rural schooling and their admiration for the more complex urban systems.[31]

Reformers coupled the drive for classification with a desire to see more uniformity in classroom programs. They did not want lock-step conformity, to be sure. They were for innovation, change, and the adaptation of schools to local circumstances; but they also thought that there were desirable standards of quality and that consistency was a virtue. Having made the assumptions that more schooling was better, that modern teaching aids like blackboards and outline maps were essential, and that some methods were demonstrably better than others, it was easy for them to see their desire for uniformity as a desire for higher quality. The most common issue of uniformity arose from the fact that parents provided textbooks for their own children. Students often had different texts in a given subject, even at the same level. This made it doubly difficult for the overworked teacher to group children for instruction, or to plan lessons. Diversity of textbooks undermined efficiency and professional expertise. .

In Vermont the legislature attempted to impose a law for textbook uniformity, but a local official warned in 1846 that it would take "time and skill to bring about this change without giving occasion to opposers of the state regulations to arm themselves against the law," and in 1851 the state superintendent wearily advised that Vermont should guarantee to people "the peaceful possession of their schoolbooks." In New York a law specified that town committees, on the advice of teachers and the town superintendent, were to "determine what textbooks shall be used in each study, and require every child thereafter coming to the school to be provided with the designated books." Despite the law, implementation of the practice was very slow. A Wisconsin law of 1849 gave the state superintendent the power to "recommend" texts, but in a rural state, with transient teachers, it was nearly impossible to require uniform textbooks until school districts began to purchase the books themselves, a practice not authorized until 1874. Pennsylvania passed a law in 1854 calling for uniformity of texts, but it was widely ignored. If educators could not even get children at the same level in the same school to use the





same spelling book, dreams of further uniformity in public school curriculum had to be postponed. A few states prescribed subjects for study, but such laws also turned out to be exercises in persuasion, not regulation. In the larger cities, however, one could see visions of the bureaucratic future. For example, the board in New York City decided in the 1840s to employ a supervisor to identify the best practices in the city, directing that they then be approved by the board and taught to other teachers. In the post–Civil War era, city superintendents would forge stronger procedures for uniformity, invoking visions of clock-like school systems, only to be criticized by a new generation of critics around the turn of the century who argued for more flexible systems sensitive to individual student differences. In the antebellum period, reformers did not argue for more diversity.[32]

Normal schools, education journals, professional supervision, uniform textbooks, higher teacher wages, and other antebellum reforms were designed to bring a measure of consistency and quality to a collection of local institutions that the reformers considered uneven and largely inadequate. Theirs was a program of assimilation, centralization, and standardization, a program of government encouragement and organization designed to make public education in different communities increasingly similar as well as more substantial, and to make schooling more responsive to the political, economic, and cultural tasks that Anglo-American Protestant educational leaders believed were necessary to preserve and improve their society. On the purposes of common schooling, there was much popular agreement, and when they argued for their innovations, school reformers invoked the necessity of universal schooling in a republic of diverse peoples. There was less agreement on the specific proposals of the reformers. They encountered inertia and resistance on matters of centralized control, nonsectarian religion, full tax support for common schools, and the establishment of new institutions like high schools and normal schools. Nonetheless, they had achieved many of their objectives by 1860 in the North, and they congratulated themselves on a successful campaign.

# 7

# *Ins and Outs: Acquiescence, Ambivalence, and Resistance to Common-School Reform*

COMMON-SCHOOL reformers were fond of battle metaphors. Surveying the field in 1860, they believed that they had carried the day. Except in the South, state legislatures and local school committees had accepted much of the reform program. Most towns provided free common schooling, and most states employed a superintendent of common schools. But we should not imagine that there was general agreement about public education by the end of the period. Opponents of state school systems began as a majority in many states, and in 1860 they remained a strong minority, even in the Northeast. The battles had not been imaginary; the warfare metaphor reflected real conflict. Although few critics assaulted the educational reform program as a whole, there were continuing skirmishes fought by different groups on different issues.

It is easy to underestimate the resistance to state school systems. State superintendents usually publicized only the arguments in favor of more highly organized common schooling, and most newspapers and journals supported the reforms. Many speeches against school reform were lost to history once their echoes died in town meetings or legislative halls. The reformers' characterizations of their opponents prevailed. Horace Mann called his foes "political madmen," while Henry Barnard labelled his enemies "ignorant demagogues" and "a set of blockheads." George Martin,





writing in the 1890s, said that opposition to antebellum school reform stemmed from "hide-bound conservatism, niggardly parsimony, sectarian bigotry, and political animosity." Until the middle of this century most historians equated common-school reform with progress, and they perpetuated the stereotype of the reformers' opponents as hack politicians, penny-pinching bumpkins, unassimilated foreigners, and undemocratic elitists. The historians were not entirely wrong. Some hard-pressed rural towns opposed increased school expenditures, some immigrants resented public-school attitudes, and some wealthy people were indifferent to tax-supported, free schooling. But these groups were not unanimous, and others also dissented.[1]

One important set of questions has to do with class, specifically with whether middle-class people imposed public education on working-class people in order to maintain social control in a changing industrial society, whether working people resisted the reforms, or, alternatively, whether public schools resulted from the conflicting interests of workers and the elite. Public common schooling was indeed devoted to moral education and discipline. Textbooks glorified American politics and social relations, and they often perpetuated demeaning ideas about immigrants and racist ideas about nonwhites. But it is quite another matter to demonstrate widespread class resistance to public schooling. For the most part, generalizations about the attitudes of ordinary workers must be gleaned from the observations of middle-class writers or inferred from fragmentary evidence about working-class behavior, such as voting lists or school enrollment records.[2]

Let us consider some of the evidence about the attitudes of manual workers toward common-school education, using the term *working class* synonymously with *manual workers* and *middle class* to include all white-collar workers except the very wealthy, mindful of the problem of the ambiguous and changing class status of some artisan proprietors on the one hand and some salaried white-collar workers on the other. A possible third or upper-class group, rich people, did not constitute a very distinct class in antebellum America. Despite statements by some wealthy individuals in support of public schooling, many were also indifferent or merely acquiescent in the creation of public schooling. Both workingmen's

spokesmen and middle-class reformers, however, expressed hostility toward elite education. In the late 1820s and early 1830s American labor spokesmen railed against private education for the rich. They demanded common public schools, freed of the stigma of charity education, and an end to public subsidies of colleges and academies. Focusing on these statements, earlier historians assigned a key role to labor in wresting tax-supported education from reluctant and conservative legislatures. They believed that workingmen's groups, far from being suspicious of public education, were centrally important in its triumphs. Although it is difficult to judge how crucial labor's support for public education was, there is no doubt that between 1825 and 1835, workingmen's associations helped popularize tax-supported common schools.[3]

In 1828 the editors of the *Mechanics' Free Press*, complaining about the pauper stigma of charity schools, said, "Give us our rights, and we shall not need your charity." In 1829 they urged every man to "come forward and use his utmost exertions to procure a system of education, where the children of the rich and the poor shall receive a national education, calculated to make republicans and banish aristocrats." The same year a convention of workingmen in New York City predicted that the existing system of education, which separated the children of the poor and the rich, would "eventually lead us into all the distinctions which exist under the despotic governments, and destroy our political liberties." The Albany Mechanics' Society, protesting a public subsidy to the local academy in 1830, asked readers to imagine how greatly the virtue and well-being of the public might have increased if the "immense sums now perverted to the aristocratical nurseries of the wealthy few, had been judiciously and economically applied to the really useful instruction of all." Workingmen in New Castle, Delaware, pledged to support only those political candidates who favored "a rational system of education to be paid for out of public funds," and in 1834 members of the National Trades Union declared that the education system of the United States was "destructive of the Equality which is predicated in the Declaration of Independence."[4]

The workingmen's contribution to the nation's material progress





was a central theme in statements by workingmen's groups. Despite some middle-class writers' stereotypes of working-class people as hard-drinking and profligate, many manual workers prided themselves on hard work, frugality, morality, and enterprise. The hero in workingmen's literature was the self-educated "mechanic" (a craftsman in the mechanical arts). While the later heroes of Horatio Alger's novels attained positions of respectability through hard work, honesty, and luck, the antebellum mechanic made it through self-improvement and inventive genius. Successful, real-life mechanics were called to the podiums of workingmen's lyceums, and they wrote their memoirs for apprentices' magazines. Their lives represented a working-class translation of the dictum, "Knowledge is power." The emphasis on self-education derived from the necessity for workingmen to leave school at a young age and from their desire for practical learning in mechanical subjects. "What is the education of a common school?" asked the *Mechanics' Magazine* in 1834. "Is there a syllable of science taught in one, beyond the rudiments of mathematics? No." The Mechanics' Institute of New York was formed "with the view of carrying the mechanic to something beyond the mere knowing how to read, write and cipher." Professionals, ministers, and manufacturers encouraged the establishment of organizations that would foster the self-improvement of skilled workers, and they frequently cited examples of success through diligence and reading. A judge in Salem, Massachusetts, told a lyceum audience that Isaac Newton had succeeded more by hard work than by genius and that John Locke relied more upon self-teaching than upon his Oxford teachers. "Innumerable are the instances of successful self-instruction," he said, even "among those of apparently moderate powers."[5]

Timothy Claxton, who was born in England in 1790 and finished his career in Boston, is a perfect example of the self-taught artisan hero. His father was a gardener, and both parents were illiterate. His own schooling ended after three years but sufficed to get him started reading, and he learned arithmetic as far as ratios. He worked at several jobs as a little boy, then did a full apprenticeship to a metal worker. Because the other apprentices were illiterate, the master chose Claxton to help keep accounts of work completed. The boy started studying again, borrowing books on

surveying from a journeyman carpenter in the neighborhood. In his spare time he tinkered, proving his perseverance by building a clock. He taught himself mechanical drawing. As a journeyman in a London machine shop, he started reading and going to lectures on chemistry and natural philosophy. Among his evening projects, he invented a mousetrap in which the mouse first reset the trap and then drowned. In 1823, Claxton emigrated to America, and he spent the voyage learning to use a slide rule. Beginning as a journeyman machinist, he eventually gained prominence as a manufacturer of school and scientific apparatus. A tireless self-improver, Claxton helped found the Boston Mechanics' Institution, the Boston Mechanics' Lyceum, and the *Young Mechanic* magazine, all active in the 1830s. A factory manager summed up the ideal when he introduced Claxton at a lyceum lecture: "He is a man we admire, a self-made man, a mechanic—an industrious, persevering, indefatigable student . . . one of the most scientific and intelligent mechanics in the city of Boston."[6]

Workingmen's organizations of the 1830s also supported a more egalitarian public school system. The workingmen's criticism of exclusive educational institutions and their demands for tax-supported common schools were consistent with their general political goals: to eliminate monopoly and special privilege, to remove disabilities in the lives of workingmen, and to provide all youths with an equal chance for advancement. These organizations flourished for a brief period, particularly from 1828 to 1834. During that period, the workingmen's groups stridently publicized their demands for tax-supported common schools. Through political alliances the early workingmen's groups achieved some legislative victories, but by the late 1830s they were torn by factions and had lost workers' votes to the two main political parties. They were succeeded by trade union organizations that eschewed direct political involvement and concentrated more on working conditions. To some degree the early workingmen's groups were victims of their own successes. In the case of education most states moved toward public support of common schools. Even in the states where resistance to free schooling lingered, organized labor lost interest in the issue. As the hard times of the early 1840s turned workers toward issues of wages





and hours, and as the industrial work force became more proletarian, the old workingmen's crusade against privileged education was inherited by such middle-class school reformers as Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and John Pierce. By 1850, the trades unions were almost silent on educational issues. In that year, New York State voters chose by referendum to repeal the unpopular 1849 free-school law; organized labor played no role in the attempt to save the common schools from a reinstatement of tuition bills. By midcentury spokesmen for organized labor viewed public education neither as a panacea nor as a threat.

Like their English contemporaries, American artisan leaders of the 1830s criticized aristocratic education and supported free schools. Unlike the English, however, few drew a line between appropriate middle-class and working-class education. Workingmen's parties acted on the assumption that if abuses in the economy and workplace were rectified and if free common schools were established and were attended by children from all classes, the American economic order could be a just and rewarding one for workingmen. In England the privileges of the aristocracy and the abject conditions of labor had combined with long-standing class traditions to create a context of greater class consciousness, in which working-class radicals eventually saw middle-class educational reform as invidious. In America, there was virtually no overt working-class resistance to middle-class reformers' proposals for state-sponsored schooling. Working-class and middle-class educators shared the goals of morality, respectability, and self-improvement. Even if the concepts meant somewhat different things in the different class structures, many parents of both classes saw free common schools as desirable instruments of moral education. These shared commitments, sometimes reinforced by religious and ethnic identities that crossed class lines, produced an alliance in the 1820s and 1830s between American workingmen's groups and middle-class reformers in favor of tax-supported common schooling. Because the workingmen's political parties were dominated by upper-status craftsmen and included merchants and professionals, there is even less reason to expect in their statements alienation from middle-class educational institutions and values.[7]

Not all spokesmen for workers acquiesced, though. Some challenged capitalism itself, with its individualistic values and unequal distribution of wealth. Among the most widely publicized radical challenges were those of Robert Owen and his followers. Although the ideas of these socialist dissenters did not gain the allegiance of very many people, they are worth remembering because they represented alternatives to the policies and ideological perspectives that dominated school reform in antebellum America. Robert Owen was a successful factory owner who had created at New Lanark, Scotland, a paternalistic, cooperative, workers' community. Owen was convinced, however, that a cotton manufacturing town was not a promising environment for complete social reconstruction, so he decided to create an agrarian, socialist community on the American frontier. Owen purchased land in Indiana and began recruiting settlers for the community, which he named New Harmony. It was to be based on the ideas he had set forth in his *New View of Society* (1813) and on the critique of competitive capitalism that he and his followers developed in the years before his departure for America in 1824. In America the prestigious Owen spoke before the House of Representatives and the President. His educational ideas were publicized by reform-minded educators like Boston's William Woodbridge, editor of the *American Annals of Education*, and John Griscom, chemist and patron of common-school reform in New York City.

Among Owen's important English followers was William Maclure, another wealthy philanthropist. Maclure worried that the beliefs and habits of the adults who would populate New Harmony would be "stubborn, crooked, and too often bent in the opposite direction from their own most evident interest." Nonetheless he went to New Harmony to head up the educational and scientific activities of the community. He believed in the central propositions of Owenite socialism: that social relations could be based on rationality and interdependence, but only in a reformed community in which all shared property and all shared work. Only a loving, rational, and egalitarian education could rid individuals of the false conventions and destructive motives brought about by private property and acquisitiveness. Convinced that Pestalozzian pedagogy was the perfect means to such an education, Maclure





had earlier patronized the schools of outstanding Pestalozzian teachers in France and in Philadelphia. Three of these teachers—Marie Fretageot, William Phiquepal, and Joseph Neef—joined in the New Harmony adventure.[8]

Because Pestalozzian education seemed more effective to them, the Owenites thought it was automatically a threat to the old economic order. In a sarcastic comparison, Maclure said that "to multiply and exaggerate the difficulties" of educating a child was "perfectly consistent with the principles of all commerce and trade, to buy cheap and sell dear." What else could explain such useless and ineffective educational practices? Traditional schools, he said, were devoted to the "killing of time" and to the "imprisoning of children for four or five hours in the day—after which they are let loose on society for eight hours, full of revenge and retaliation against their jailors." Schools at New Harmony would be "bottomed on free will, by the total exclusion of every species of correction." Children would be "constantly occupied with something useful." The schools would omit everything "speculative and ornamental." Girls, like boys, would get a practical education. Because everyone would share manual labor, menial work would be less onerous. Indeed, a proper Pestalozzian education could render "all the useful and necessary operations of both males and females, a pastime and amusement, converting life itself into a play."[9]

It was not to be. New Harmony failed. Disputes, misunderstandings, and schisms began almost immediately. Owen himself, too often absent, was contentious and inconsistent when he was on the scene. Maclure's worst fears about the resiliency of a competitive value system were realized; idealism was ground into the Indiana soil as dissenting groups organized, voiced their complaints, and seceded. Maclure pursued his educational and scholarly ventures at New Harmony after the breakup of the experiment, but they had lost their moorings to an actual reformed community. Owen, wiser and poorer, returned to England, where he pursued his socialist theories through the labor movement. Some of the New Harmony leaders transferred their efforts to New York. This group included Robert Dale Owen, the founder's son, Robert Jennings, a member of the community's governing board, Frances

Wright, the ardent socialist and occasional resident of New Harmony, and William Phiquepal, the Pestalozzian teacher who later married Frances Wright. Wright had co-edited the *Free Enquirer* with Robert Dale Owen at New Harmony, and with Jennings as an assistant, she had lectured and published essays attacking Christianity, asserting women's rights, and advocating family limitation and universal equal education. She was, to say the least, controversial.[10]

These tireless socialist reformers moved their newspaper to New York City and forged an alliance with the leaders of the new Workingmen's Party. Although the *Free Enquirer* group agreed with many workingmen's demands, their central focus was on equal education as the key to a reformed society. "All the reform must be wrought where the corruption has generated—in education," said the *Free Enquirer* in 1829. They disavowed the more radical solutions of Thomas Skidmore, who favored redistribution of land and the abolition of inheritance. The Owen-Wright supporters tried to distance themselves from this position, but their own educational proposals were radical, and they had difficulty escaping the label. They proposed a national system of boarding schools for all children aged two to sixteen, designed to eliminate the unequal influence of family wealth and culture.[11]

For a brief period in 1830, Robert Dale Owen enjoyed great influence in the Workingmen's Party. The Owenites' boarding-school plan seemed at least tentatively acceptable as an education plank. But in the spring of 1830, the majority abandoned it. They were put off by the charge of atheism that plagued Owen and Wright, and they were uncomfortable with the boarding schools' proposed elimination of family influence. The Workingmen's Party adopted a subcommittee report advocating a more moderate endorsement of free public day schools. After a series of acrimonious and sometimes tumultuous meetings, Frances Wright realized that she was doing more harm than good to the education cause in New York. She married Phiquepal and moved to Paris. Robert Dale Owen returned to England briefly; he later settled in New Harmony. Most of the Workingmen's Party members apparently returned to the folds of the Democratic Party.

Radical social reform did not survive in this early labor organi-





zation, dominated as it was by middling-status artisans and absorbed as they were in tough practical issues like mechanics' lien laws and ten-hour days. Frances Wright's attacks on clerical influence in American institutions invited the charge of infidelity against all of the Owenites' plans. Influential evangelical clergymen saw in Frances Wright's popular lectures an anticlerical threat, and they too pressed the counterattack. In a Boston sermon, Lyman Beecher further displayed the connection of assertive Protestant religion to other ideological commitments. Political atheism, said Beecher, aimed at "nothing less than the abolition of marriage and the family state, separate property, civil government, and all sense of accountability." Political atheists, he charged, were engaged in "an effort to turn the world upside down, and empty it of every institution, thought, feeling, and action, which has emanated from Christianity." According to Lyman Beecher, Frances Wright believed that "atheistical education must and will come, either by public suffrage or by revolution."[12]

An attack on Protestant influence in government and schooling was an attack on a coherent ideological perspective in which republicanism and universal education were nurtured by Protestant Christianity and all three were linked in a view of progress and morality. The claim that the Owenite socialists were attempting to "turn the world upside down" had some truth to it. Their social beliefs were indeed linked, just like those of the mainstream Protestants they opposed. Although Frances Wright was more radical and outspoken than her colleagues, they shared several basic beliefs: religion was superstitious, traditional education irrational, capitalism unnatural, the subordination of women artificial, and all of it inequitable. Through the proper sort of education, said Wright, "a revolution would indeed be effected; the present order of things completely subverted."

The brief crusade of the Free Enquirers was as sustained and comprehensive an assault on mainstream Protestant ideology and institutions as anything that appeared in the antebellum period. It failed as the basis for a utopian community at New Harmony through poor planning, dissent about organization, personality clashes, and, as William Maclure had feared, persistent traditional habits of mind. It also failed in its urban political phase. It was

too comprehensive a critique of existing institutions. Workingmen were not in general committed to religious skepticism, to women's rights, or to attacks on marriage and the family. Owen, Wright, and their sympathizers had tried to engraft a thoroughgoing critique of capitalist society onto a stripling labor organization whose members were largely motivated by specific work-related grievances. The effort proved futile.

Antebellum workingmen's groups enthusiastically endorsed tax-supported public education in the 1830s and displayed moderate support or indifference thereafter. But the early labor organizations were dominated by middling-status workers, and therefore their statements do not tell us much about the attitudes of the large group of less skilled manual workers in the cities, nor anything about the large number of farm laborers in the countryside. If we look instead at public-school enrollment rates by occupational groups, the pattern of enrollment by children of manual workers is very similar to those of white-collar groups, except for the teenage years, when the parent's occupational group appears to have affected a child's school-leaving age. But the school enrollment patterns speak only indirectly and uncertainly about attitudes. What other sort of evidence exists about working-class acquiescence or opposition to public schooling? Michael Katz has argued that there is very revealing evidence in a case where the individuals' votes on an important local school issue were recorded—the vote to abolish the high school in Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1860. In that controversy, shoemakers and fishermen voted to abolish the high school by about three to one, while artisans and businessmen split, and professionals generally voted to continue the new institution. A vote against public secondary schooling is, of course, not necessarily an indicator of working-class attitudes toward common elementary schooling, but it does indicate dissent against one particular reform at this point in Beverly's history. In a separate analysis of the same information, however, Maris Vinovskis has demonstrated that while the negative vote correlates with occupational and wealth status, the best predictor of how one voted on the Beverly high school issue was the voter's neighborhood. It appears that the Beverly vote depended to a great extent upon the fact that voters in outlying districts opposed the maintenance of this town-wide institution.[13]





The Beverly high school had been promoted for some years by a small group of ministers and other prominent citizens who threatened to invoke a poorly enforced Massachusetts law requiring towns the size of Beverly to support a high school. In 1857 they made good on their threat, and the suit that followed largely accounted for the reluctant establishment of the high school in that year. The 1860 vote, which defied the law and reversed that decision, indicates an element of resentment against imposed reform, deepened by the hard times of a shoemaker's strike. But there was a more long-standing tension involved. Beverly still had a district system. At midcentury, each of its ten districts controlled the expenditure of its share of the town's school funds. The districts hired teachers and determined the length of the school year. District committees guarded their autonomy and periodically complained of inequities in the distribution of funds. In contrast, the town-wide school committee, which included some of the Protestant ministers, urged not only more expenditures for common-school education, which the districts were prepared to support, but innovations like the abolition of the district committees, the hiring of a professional superintendent, and the establishment of a public high school. Although during the 1850s the town meeting acquiesced in the hiring of a superintendent, the majority resisted incursions on the districts' control of funds, and when they were bullied into establishing a high school, they located it in an unlikely and inconvenient spot at the edge of town. When it was abolished in 1860, only seventeen students were attending.

Beverly soon changed policies again, reopening its public high school in 1861. However, the skirmishes of the period—not just over the high school, but over other reforms associated with centralization—suggest that the main issue was localism, one of the most enduring and pervasive sources of conflict in American educational history. Reformers in Beverly and across the nation called for more state regulation, the consolidation of small districts into town units, the replacement of private schooling with one inclusive public system, and the development of a more professional corps of teachers and administrators. A wide variety of groups opposed one or more of these goals during the antebellum period. Sometimes the tension coincided with class differences, sometimes with

religious, racial, or ethnic conflict, and sometimes it ran along urban-rural lines. In some cases, class, race, or ethnic tensions appear to be the crux of the situation.

On the one hand, issues of control, centralization, and bureaucratization had an independent importance. On the other hand—and equally important—those who favored the centralized solutions were more often insiders, who had more power, while the groups who dissented were characteristically the outsiders. Despite their shared sense that state-regulated schooling was not in their interests, dissenters were drawn from very different groups, and in each of these groups—whether Illinois farmers, Beverly shoemakers, New York blacks, or Minnesota Norwegians—there were some who supported reformers' plans for inclusive public schooling. Opponents in these groups did not think of themselves as a common force; their solutions were inherently local and largely negative. They shared a desire to limit the increasing consolidation and the increasing cost of public education; they argued variously on the basis of tradition, parents' prerogatives, minority rights, religious freedom, and theories of limited government. The diversity of the opponents and their independent orientation spelled their defeat in the long run. But this was not self-evident to the cosmopolitan school reformers. The outcome was far from certain at the beginning of the antebellum period. The opponents, though scattered, were vocal, and in the short run they succeeded in delaying or modifying some aspects of the reform program.

One hotly debated issue was the provision of tuition-free schooling for all children. Despite the Puritans' devotion to education, common schooling supported entirely by general taxation had not been characteristic of the colonial period, even in Massachusetts and Connecticut, and many people in the early nineteenth century did not want their property taxed for the education of children whose parents could afford to pay part of the costs. "The habits of the people were formed by the custom which prevailed from the settlement of the province," wrote Pennsylvania's state superintendent in 1842. "Provision for general education was a private, not a public duty." Opponents of general taxation for free schooling were not necessarily opposed to education under parental control or to charity schooling for the poor. But their opposition





to general taxation for a free school system meant a rejection of the educational reform program. The general property tax, said Henry Barnard in his 1842 Connecticut report, was "the cardinal idea of the free school system."

In the opponents' view, state and town governments had no business regulating common schooling. Parents and neighborhoods, they argued, should decide how much schooling to have and how to divide the cost. Schooling should not be free for those able to pay for it, nor should the state compel communities to provide schooling. These traditional views meant trouble for free-school bills in various state legislatures. In Pennsylvania, lawmakers created a tax-supported system of common schooling between 1834 and 1837, but it was voluntary, and many communities chose not to tax for common schools, particularly where dissent was bolstered by German immigrants and religious groups who wanted to preserve their independent schools. By 1847 the "non-accepting" districts, however, had decreased to 158 out of 1,225. The provision of completely free schooling was also optional for Connecticut towns until 1868. Despite Henry Barnard's campaign against the rate bill and the unusually large amount of aid provided by the state's school fund, many communities refused to use local property taxes to end tuition payments to public schools. About half of the state's 1,600 school districts provided tuition-free schooling by 1860.[14]

Most opponents did not reject all property taxes for common schools, but preferred a combination of general community support mixed with charges to the families whose children benefited. Rate bills accounted for about 10 percent of public-school resources in Rhode Island in 1852, about the same in Connecticut in 1856, about 15 percent in Michigan in 1850, but 40 percent in the average New York town in the same year. Where tuition payments were high, they probably deterred the attendance of children from poor families. Rate bills also tended to discourage regular attendance because towns usually charged parents according to the number of days their children attended. In some places, the acceptance of fully tax-supported schools was a seesaw process. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, voters created a free school system, abolished it, and recreated it in the 1840s. In New York State the

issue was in doubt for over twenty years. A provision requiring full free schooling failed in the constitutional convention of 1846, but the legislature passed a law to the same effect in 1849. Much traditional opposition remained, however, and the details of the tax law were highly controversial. One tiny upstate district angrily resolved "not to raise no money for teacher's wages." An opponent wrote the *Rochester Daily Democrat* that "the new school law takes A's property without his consent and applies it to the benefit of B, which is unconstitutional, arbitrary, and unjust." A petition from Onondaga County said that the law created "strifes, jealousies, divisions and animosities in every district" by authorizing people "to put their hands into their neighbors' pockets." Some opponents believed rate bills for education were fair and should be retained, others preferred county or state level taxes instead of local taxes, and others were upset by the state's property valuation system. The referendum for repeal in 1850 succeeded because of these multiple frustrations.[15]

Opposition in New York had an effect on the deliberations of the Michigan constitutional convention in 1850, which debated the free-school tax issue at great length. Democrats John Pierce and Isaac Crary, who had helped create the state system, argued against a constitutional requirement for district taxes, claiming that New York's free-school experiment had been "disastrous." Delegate Joseph Williams, though, argued that the matter should not be left to the timid legislature or the reluctant districts because "the most backward, the most ignorant, the most indifferent, are the very portion of the population we wish to enlighten. The state wishes to stretch its paternal arms around them. It wishes to educate all, willing and unwilling." There was much resistance to this "paternal arm" of the state. When some delegates argued that the tax should be statewide rather than district-by-district, members from the western counties argued that a state tax would drain money from their part of the state to educate children in the populous eastern counties. Some members said they were for free schools by law but not through a constitutional requirement. However, Mr. D. C. Walker charged that these members were really opponents of free schooling, like the man with "a bottle under his cloak" at a temperance meeting. In the end, the convention





adopted a weak clause stating that any town not providing three months of free primary schooling could lose its state funds. It left the details of taxing to the legislature. Walker predicted that "violent opposition will be got up when it shall be attempted in legislature to establish free schools throughout the state. Men of capital, and men without families, will resist."[16]

Arguments persist in the twentieth century about the inequities of property taxes, about the proper relative state and local share of school expenses, about "double taxation" for those who patronize private schools, and about the heavy school-tax burden on childless and retired property owners. It is not surprising that the original implementation of full tax support encountered resistance, but educational reformers worked hard to devise acceptable schemes of local taxation and to persuade people that public schooling benefited everyone, not just those who received the education. Their arguments prevailed by the 1870s, when the last of the northern states abolished public-school rate bills. Even in the late nineteenth century, however, some communities followed tradition, not the law.

Although tax support was a necessary condition for a free school system, it was only the beginning, and it was only one aspect of the tension between reformers and independent-minded dissenters. The reformers had a long agenda. Two key items affected local control of public schools: the substitution of town control for district control and the creation of state departments to oversee common schools for the legislature. Both innovations prompted vigorous and outspoken opposition. Town government may seem close to the people from a twentieth-century perspective, but nineteenth-century towns were often very large and encompassed people who had little contact. In Boxford, Massachusetts, residents said that some people spent their lives without visiting the other side of town; in Wisconsin, district-school advocates complained that towns measured forty square miles and were often not communities at all. As late as 1865 the Wisconsin state superintendent reported that almost half of his county superintendents were opposed to the township system. Robert Lees of Buffalo County called it "but another step toward the concentration of power, and all concentrations of power have ever proved destruc-

tive to republican forms of government." The superintendent of Columbia County echoed the fear. The township system would place control "one step farther from the people."

In most states the abolition of district control did not happen in one dramatic stroke. The districts had control on some matters while the town controlled others. Legislation gradually reduced the autonomy of the districts, but not without opposition. The Massachusetts legislature passed a law requiring town-wide committees to visit and report on district schools, but in 1841 the townspeople of West Springfield voted that their committee would make no such inspections. When Newbury, Massachusetts, abolished district control in 1851, one of its districts claimed control of its schools and appointed a committee to hire teachers. In many other towns, school committees reported no such opposition and welcomed the transition to central control. The town committees were in the middle of the drama between the defenders of local control and the advocates of statewide school reform. The town committees often included ministers and other prominent citizens, and they typically acted like local agents of the reform program, pressing for more expenditures, longer sessions, better teachers, and town-wide supervision. On the other hand, they were elected and had to be responsive to popular opinion in towns where resistance to reform was clear and vocal.

The debate continued well beyond the antebellum period. In many states, legislation on school district powers was like a tug of war. Massachusetts passed legislation urging the voluntary abolition of districts in 1853, required their abolition in 1859, repealed that law in the same year, required the abolition of districts again in 1869, allowed their reestablishment in 1870, and finally abolished them again in 1883. Many other states made town-level control mandatory by the 1890s, but related debates about centralization continued into the twentieth century. Centralized control, avidly pursued by professional educators and spokesmen for "progress," was the most controversial of the antebellum reforms. As its opponents emphasized, it removed educational control "one step farther from the people."

In addition to town consolidation, reformers supported the creation of state school boards and professional state school officers to gather statistics, urge improvements, recommend legislation, and implement state school laws. Reformers equated the appointment of state school officers with progress, efficiency, and improved quality. Opponents labelled the innovation undemocratic and unnecessary. In Massachusetts, localists mounted an effort to abolish the Board of Education in 1840, two years after its establishment. The legislature's Education Committee, on a 4–3 vote, approved a report that characterized the board as "the commencement of a system of centralization and of monopoly of power in a few hands, contrary, in every respect, to the true spirit of our democratical institutions." The majority report praised the district system and denied the need for a state board or state normal schools. It recommended the abolition of the board and the dismissal of its Secretary, Horace Mann. In the vote that followed, the board survived on a vote of 245–182. The roll-call vote reveals some of the characteristics associated with opposition to state involvement in education. The rural source of the opposition is indicated by the fact that farmers in the legislature voted more heavily against the board than other legislators, as did members in general from rural towns. Legislators who lived farthest from Boston, the capital, tended to vote against the state educational involvement. Legislators from the most highly developed commercial and manufacturing centers generally rallied to the support of the board. But the best single predictor of the vote on the board was the legislator's political party. About four-fifths of the Whig members voted to save the board, and about two-thirds of the Democrats voted to abolish it.[17]



The political parties played a key role in the debates about educational policy between conservative localists and cosmopolitan reformers in the 1840s. Both Democrats and Whigs favored free common schools, and they shared much of the general ideological perspective associated with school reform. Spokesmen for both parties stressed the sacredness and fragility of the republic, the great destiny of America, the sanctity of property, a commitment to universal male franchise, and fair economic opportunity within a free wage-labor market. But to the extent that the cultural core of that ideology was native and Protestant, it was more comfortably and unequivocally the ideology of the Whigs. Democrats adopted

a more pluralist and egalitarian expression of the same commitment to republicanism and capitalism, and they generally opposed centralized regulation of education.

Leaders and supporters of both parties came from a wide socioeconomic range, yet the parties differed in ways that made the Whig ranks attractive to the more conservative, native elite and made the Democratic Party attractive to much of the immigrant working class, particularly Roman Catholics. The Whigs favored government intervention on a wide range of issues. They believed that state governments should finance canals and railroads, regulate banks, build asylums and penitentiaries, and regulate public morality on such matters as temperance and Sabbath-keeping. The Democrats, in keeping with their more diverse constituency and their Jeffersonian philosophy of government, supported these activities less enthusiastically and less often. They urged limited government intervention on most issues and opposed the drift toward centralization in areas where they felt government action was necessary. Their political philosophy has been aptly summarized as "negative liberalism," emphasizing individual liberty and limited government, while the Whigs' "positive liberalism" stressed public morality and state action on many fronts. The Whigs were government activists and were mainly responsible for the translation of Protestant native ideology into state government policy. And in education, they were the ones who turned to the cosmopolitan solutions of centralization and professionalization. They were the modernizers, who believed that social planning and state regulation were essential to progress in both the moral and the economic sphere.[18]

But what were Democrats to do about public education, believing as Robert Rantoul of Massachusetts said, that "the whole object of government is negative"? Government, said this prominent Democrat, should "remove, and keep out of the citizen's way, all obstacles to his natural freedom of action." A few hardheaded Democrats applied this doctrine to public education. John Bigelow, a radical Democrat and writer for the *New York Evening Post*, said that government aid to canals, railroads, and common schools was "downright dangerous." He argued that the entire existing New York State school fund should be applied to the state debt and that the state should cease all involvement in education. Most





Democrats, however, looked upon locally controlled common schools as a necessary and proper government activity. The reason, according to Rantoul, was that people "have a right to have the career kept fairly open to talent, and to be brought equally and together up to the starting point at the public expense; after that we must shift for ourselves." Differences in party philosophy emerged not on the issue of public education per se, but in debates about how public education should be organized.[19]

In Connecticut the focus of the debate was the same, and the party split was even more absolute than in Massachusetts. The Hartford *Times*, a Democratic paper, attacked the Whig centralizing reforms as "despotic" and "Prussian." During 1840 and 1841 it called Henry Barnard's salary exorbitant, his efforts useless, and his powers dangerous. When Democrats captured the legislature and the governorship in 1842, they abolished the board and the position of secretary and repealed the previous year's legislation encouraging district consolidation. In New York State, too, the centralizing orientation of the Whigs and the localist orientation of the Democrats affected educational politics. Opponents of centralized educational supervision had succeeded in 1821 in combining the job of common-school superintendent with that of Secretary of State. Under Martin Van Buren's "Regency" Democrats, who controlled the state government from the late 1820s until 1839, only staunch localists held the combined position. John Dix, Secretary of State from 1833 to 1839, criticized Prussian-style centralization, and in 1837 he criticized the legislature for increasing state aid to common schools. William Seward, a Whig, became governor in 1840 and immediately set out to introduce the cosmopolitan school-reform program to New York, recommending a separate state superintendent and the introduction of county superintendents. In Vermont, educational reform was similarly spearheaded by Whig Governor William Slade and superintendent Horace Eaton, a protégé of Horace Mann. In Ohio, their Whig counterparts were Governor Joseph Vance and superintendent Samuel Lewis, a lawyer born in Massachusetts and devoted to temperance, common schooling, and the abolition of slavery. Whig reformers across the North played the key role in establishing state school systems.[20]

Democrats criticized professionalization as well as centraliza-

tion. In Massachusetts the localists opposed state normal schools, arguing that existing academies and high schools furnished competent teachers for the common schools. It was "not desirable," they declared, "that the business of keeping these schools should become a distinct and separate profession." In Connecticut the Hartford *Times* argued in 1850 that there was "just as much reason for asking the State to instruct young men in making shoes and hats, as to require it to fit them for teaching." To the localists, teaching a common school was something any competently educated person could do; pedagogy was not to be elevated to the level of a science in order to make education a profession, especially if it involved costly government intervention.[21]

It seems, then, that Democrats favored local control of common schooling and emphasized the theme of opportunity, while the Whigs favored organized state systems of education and stressed public morality and social stability. But local and state control could be mixed, and the themes of opportunity and stability were not mutually exclusive. These were matters of emphasis. Horace Mann was a Whig, but there is much in his writings about opportunity, freedom, and respect for diversity, just as there is much about public morality and social stability in the arguments of Michigan's Democratic state school superintendent, John Pierce. In the Illinois constitutional convention of 1847, the strongest advocate of mandating a state school superintendent was the Democrat Thompson Campbell. There were Democrats in other states who, like Campbell, supported the increasing involvement of state government in local schooling. They believed that a strong public school system was compatible with their Democratic philosophy. They joined with reform-minded Whigs in support of temperance, antislavery, and public schooling. This bipartisan support helped to create state school systems in the North in the face of localist opposition.

The cosmopolitan solution aimed in theory at getting all white children—rich and poor, rural and urban, immigrant and native—into one uniform system and imparting to them similar values and similar opportunities. While the egalitarian aspect of that proposition appealed to many Democratic spokesmen, the assimilationist aspect of it had a special appeal to the Whigs, who generally believed that outsiders should conform to the dominant culture and that schools should take on the task of assimilation. Nonetheless, Whig politicians were not predictable on issues of cultural pluralism. After a year as New York's governor, William Seward aimed a message at New York City's immigrant Roman Catholics and declared that they should have "schools in which they may be instructed by teachers speaking the same language as themselves and professing the same faith." Seward's Secretary of State and ex officio superintendent of public instruction, John Spencer, produced a remarkable report condemning the "educational establishment" in New York City and recommending a decentralized, pluralist, "voluntary" system that would accommodate the immigrants' religion and culture. Party affiliation was thus not always a reliable indicator of how antebellum politicians faced educational issues, but these pluralistic Whigs were exceptions to the general orientation of their party.



School reformers attributed localist opposition to petty politics or to popular ignorance. To try to get their message across, state superintendents crisscrossed their states like circuit-riding preachers. Samuel Lewis, Ohio's first superintendent, rode as much as thirty miles a day, speaking in small towns in the evenings. Once, in the more hostile southern part of the state, he arrived unannounced at a meeting that had been called to protest the new state school system. Not aware of Lewis's presence, a committee presented resolutions "which opposed the School Law, demanded its repeal, and the repeal of all school taxes, censured the Superintendent in the severest terms, and imperatively demanded his withdrawal from office." All speakers supported the resolutions, and when Lewis introduced himself and asked to speak on behalf of the laws and the superintendency, only a bare majority approved. But then, according to his son, he delivered a brilliant speech, after which the original resolutions were tabled, new resolutions of praise were passed, "and the crowd gathered around Mr. Lewis with tears of sympathy and pledges of support." Although the story may be exaggerated, it accurately portrays the reformers' perception that the common-school struggle was one of enlightenment against ignorance. They failed to see that there were principles on both sides of the debates over common-school

organization. The effort to professionalize, homogenize, and organize common schooling threatened highly prized local control.[22]

Localism was reinforced by resistance to the reformers' pan-Protestant approach to morality. The policy of a generalized Protestantism for schools found opponents not only among Roman Catholics but among Lutherans, Congregationalists, and other groups, especially where communities were religiously homogeneous and people often wanted sectarian religion kept in their schools. Frederick Packard, a critic of Horace Mann, believed that local majority rule should prevail instead of Mann's policy on moral education, which, he charged, "makes natural religion and ethics the basis of the system." "What doctrines of revealed religion will remain, to be connected with a system of public instruction, after subtracting those about which there are conflicting creeds among men?" he queried. As for excluding books with sectarian religious content, Packard declared, "neither the legislature nor the Board of Education can control a district in this matter." The reformers' view prevailed among most professional educators, but the views of men like Packard continued to have much support at the local level, and many communities quietly continued to include the prayers, catechisms, or storybooks that reflected prevailing religious views.[23]

The local-control tradition left much of the responsibility for schooling to parents. Parents decided when and for how long their children would attend, and they paid partial tuition costs. Parents had great influence over the hiring, retention, and behavior of teachers. Groups of parents sometimes boycotted unpopular teachers, forcing committees to dismiss them. Although teacher-parent conflict was not new to the antebellum period, school reform created a new element of tension between the state and the parent. School reformers argued the precedence of state responsibility over traditional parental responsibility for education. Hiram Barney, Ohio's school commissioner in 1854, wrote that "for educational purposes, the State may with propriety be regarded as one great School District, and the population as constituting but one family, charged with the parental duty of educating all its youth." The Wisconsin Teachers' Association declared in 1865 that "children are the property of the state," an argument often heard in favor of more state activity in common schooling.[24]





Some parents resisted these arguments. The county superintendent of Allen County, Ohio, reported in 1854 that people opposed the school law "because they think its principles subversive of their constitutional and parental rights, in that it takes away the right of the parent to decide as to the manner and the quality of his child's education." Local school reports in antebellum Massachusetts reveal widespread parental resistance to the authority of teachers and school committees. In turn, their resistance prompted frequent complaints by town school officials against uncooperative parents. "There is a class of parents in all communities, who have little or no control over their children," declared the Lynnfield, Massachusetts, school committee in 1853, and it is just these parents who "join, to prevent a teacher from opening a school, or during the term impair its usefulness by continual opposition."[25]

School officials urged parents not to believe their child's version of classroom incidents because children were biased and given to lying. In various reports, children were characterized as "prejudiced witnesses" with "groundless complaints" and "improbable stories" about what goes on in school. If parents wanted the straight story, they were to come to school and get it from the teacher. School committees emphasized that the teacher's authority was crucial and therefore must under no circumstances be challenged. They complained that some parents criticized teachers in front of their children at home and even encouraged them to misbehave in school. Corporal punishment, although considered a last resort, was generally defended by local school committees in the face of parental challenges. School officials complained that petty factions of parents supported favorite teachers for appointments, and that when they failed, they subverted the rival teacher's success by encouraging the disobedience or absence of their children. Over and over, school committees urged parents to come supportively to school exhibitions when invited but never to come angrily supporting their children's complaints. "Most of the difficulties that occur in schools," said the Chicopee, Massachusetts, school committee in 1851, "may be traced to one single source, and that is the undue interference of parents with their government." In a prize essay written for the Essex County Teachers' Association, the principal of a Salem grammar school wrote that students whose parents "violently and unreasonably interfered"

with a teacher's rightful authority, "have, almost without one exception, 'turned out badly' in life."[26]

Some parents reacted contentiously to this anti-parental campaign. They took their children's side in cases of school discipline, disrupting school sessions to argue with teachers, in some cases assaulting the teacher and in others having the teacher arrested and brought before a magistrate. In 1842, a Lynnfield youth insulted a teacher who had criticized him for persistently misspelling the word "Broadway," which apparently had made the other children laugh. The next day, the altercation continued, and the teacher eventually beat the boy with a stick after enduring various insults and profanities. The parents had the teacher brought to trial for assault and battery. Disgruntled parents encouraged their children's absence, sometimes in sufficiently large numbers to force the dismissal of a teacher. Mr. Cutler's harsh discipline in Boxford's winter school in District 7 in 1844 resulted in "the ill will of the scholars, and also of the parents. The scholars withdrew themselves from school, so that only thirteen were present at the close." In the summer of 1851 the parents of Boxford's District 3 evidenced such "prejudice" against the teacher that only nine children remained at the end of the session.

Parents and teachers in the antebellum Northeast were not in a state of declared war, but neither was their relation blissful. The indifference of many parents to school exhibitions, the persistent belligerence of some others resisting school discipline, and the anti-parental propaganda of antebellum educators belie the notion of consensus and collaboration. The adjustment between the family and the antebellum school occasioned sporadic conflict between self-consciously "modern" school spokesmen and stubbornly traditional parents. In general, parents in nineteenth-century America wanted schools to take custody of their children, and they wanted schools to train their children in basic skills and attitudes. The eventual price that they paid was the loss of authority and control over their children's education. The trade-off was made. The state successfully exerted its right to discipline all children in values that served the necessities of the school but also served social leaders' notions of appropriate adult behavior and parents' notions of appropriate childhood behavior. Parents' acquiescence in the





loss of control and involvement in schooling was often reluctant, but ultimately it was insured by the schools' promise to confer opportunity and status. It was sweetened by some shared goals, chiefly literacy and character building. School discipline offered something to everyone in a time of rapid change: obedient children for anxious parents, malleable students for efficient schools, productive workers for the emerging capitalist economy, and acquiescent citizens for the frail republic. The need for discipline was a bridge over a widening gap between family and school; it was a bridge that some families crossed reluctantly, however, for there was a sign at the other end reading "children proceed, no parents beyond this point."[27]

Some of the parents who resisted the assertion of teachers' authority and the erosion of district control were white, Anglo-American, middling-status Protestants. But outsiders had even more potent reasons for resisting state-controlled common schooling. For European immigrants the culture of the public school was often alien and the benefits uncertain. Still, the common school offered English literacy, math training, and an introduction to American society at little or no direct expense. Many immigrants therefore sent their children enthusiastically or obediently; others hesitated or resisted. The American immigrants' confrontation with the dominant culture involved a mixture of accommodation and resistance, of assimilation and cultural maintenance, of cooperation and conflict. The blend of these opposing tendencies differed not only from one immigrant group to another but from one geographical setting to another. Within immigrant groups, clergy and lay people often disagreed about public schooling. Even among the clergy, there were Americanizers and traditionalists. It is thus impossible to assess as a general matter how popular the American common school was among immigrants. Instead, different degrees of acceptance and participation can be illustrated by looking at different groups in different settings.

In the urban Northeast, public-school educators put much emphasis on the assimilation of immigrant children. When large numbers of foreigners began arriving in the industrializing cities, people looked to education as the best way to transmit Anglo-American Protestant values and to prevent the collapse of re-

publican institutions. Holyoke, Massachusetts, provides a dramatic example. Basically rural until the 1840s, Holyoke had a traditional district school system, and its few mills employed native farmers' daughters. The arrival of the railroad, the presence of strong water power, the construction of elaborate canals, and the availability of plentiful Irish labor changed the town's character almost overnight. By 1850 half the factory operatives were Irish. The farmers' daughters, said an employer in neighboring Chicopee, no longer found the workplace "congenial to their tastes and feelings." One-fourth of Holyoke's school-age children were not enrolled in school, and employers were lackadaisical in enforcing the education provision of the child labor law. The School Committee complained that "free institutions cannot be sustained by ignorant or vicious men" and declared that only education could "perpetuate our republican form of government." But the public schools had to compete with payrolls and priests for the time of the Irish children. Bobbin boys, who worked from 5 a.m. until 6:30 p.m., could supplement the meager wages of their parents. Furthermore, the priest of the newly established Roman Catholic church criticized the public schools' use of the Protestant Bible and reportedly discouraged his parishioners from attending. In the 1860s the School Committee adopted two key reforms. They abolished the district system and created a paid superintendent. At the same time, though, Catholics established schools for both boys and girls. By 1873, when the city had 2,300 children aged five to fifteen, 975 were enrolled in public schools and 700 in the parochial schools. Most of the rest were working in the mills or were perhaps, as the superintendent of schools said, "students in the public or private haunts of vice and crime."[28]

Other cities approximated the Holyoke experience. Rapid immigration, the equation of immigrant status with ill-paid manual labor, the deteriorating environment of factory and tenement, widespread child labor, the anxious rhetoric of a school committee, and the resistance of the Catholic church were common features of cities in the industrial Northeast. In Lawrence, Massachusetts, another new factory town, the Irish were paid low wages, consigned either to tenements or a shanty town, and then criticized for their unhealthy "habitations, habits and peculiar modes





of living." Anxious natives proposed public schools to combat "idleness, truancy, falsehood, deceit, thieving, obscenity, profanity, and every other wicked and disgraceful practice." But some Irish Catholics had a different idea. In 1848 the Lawrence *Courier* reported that "the Irish have, during the past season, maintained a large school, and we are informed that it is the determination of that portion of our population to continue the instruction of their children and youth in schools of their own, so far as they may be able to support them." The *Courier* article stated that the teachers, Mr. O'Connell and Mr. Bresnihan, were very popular. The town's School Committee, however, did not share this sanguine view of the Irish Catholic school. In their 1850 report, they raised the problem of immigrant children who were "incipient rogues and vagabonds," and in 1855 the city's school superintendent bemoaned the growth of Roman Catholic schools among the Irish. Nonetheless the Roman Catholic schools of Lawrence continued to grow, providing immigrants with an alternative.[29]

In New York City the foreign-born comprised over 50 percent of the population by the 1850s. An alarmed state assembly committee warned: "We must decompose and cleanse the impurities which rush into our midst," and *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* provided the answer: "There is but one rectifying agent—one infallible filter—the SCHOOL." The Irish Catholic bishop, John Hughes, protested against public-school textbooks that slurred immigrants and Catholics; one book said that Irish immigration would make America the "common sewer of Ireland." Some German and Italian parents petitioned to have dual-language schools for their children, but public-school officials rejected this policy after a brief trial. Those "who come to this country to be Americans and not foreigners," they said, should be "attending the common schools and mingling with our children." Many immigrants acquiesced in the demand that they become more American by becoming less European, but not without some private anguish and much public debate. Irish children in the public schools are called "Paddies," said New York's Thomas McGee. "Here," he said, "is precisely where the second generation breaks off from the first" and "our children become our opponents." A nun in Hartford complained that poor Irish children in the public schools

"see their parents looked upon as an inferior race," and an immigrant paper in Chicago complained that public schools taught children "to feel ashamed of the creed of their forefathers, which is often assailed."[30]

Immigrant resistance to common schooling was not restricted to Catholics or to cities. In southeast and central Pennsylvania, German Lutherans, Reformed Protestants, and Mennonites in small towns and rural districts resisted the introduction of free schools in the 1830s and 1840s. In contrast to the immigrant Catholics of industrial New England, who had started new parochial schools as alternatives to existing public schools, German pietists and other immigrant Protestants of Pennsylvania had supported their own schools long before the creation of public schools, and they had withstood efforts in the eighteenth century to assimilate their children through English-language charity schools. In the antebellum period, these German religious groups staunchly resisted the creation of a unitary, free school system, preferring parochial schools that combined religion, basic skills, and German language. In 1830, 217 of Pennsylvania's 294 Lutheran churches operated day schools. Despite the antebellum public-school crusade, there were still about 100 Lutheran schools in 1850.[31]

In the Midwest, there were similar efforts by immigrant groups to maintain language and religion through independent schools, but tension with public-school advocates was generally more muted. In the middle decades of the century, at least, the region was characterized by more cooperation and compromise on immigrant cultural issues. Wisconsin, with 36 percent of its population foreign-born by 1840, is a good example. Unlike the urban Atlantic-seaboard states, Wisconsin could not count on a supply of immigrant laborers and settlers without some enthusiastic recruiting and some cultural concessions. Also, the European migrants who made it as far west as Wisconsin were often those with more financial resources or saleable skills, so they did not get concentrated as heavily in the ranks of unskilled labor. The Midwest thus provided a different context for immigrant adjustment and resistance than the Northeast.

In Wisconsin a vague phrase in the state's 1848 education law





allowed districts to provide public-school instruction in languages other than English, and public-school officials in some areas took a relatively accommodating position about foreign-language instruction or religious observances in accord with local preferences. They did not want to foster the development of nonpublic alternatives to the fledgling public schools. In the countryside there were many different patterns. In some communities, children of several different nationalities mixed in the district schools, which were taught in English. In District 5 near Kenosha, for example, there were Germans, Welsh, Irish, and "Yankee" pupils in a typical one-room school. In one Pierce County district, most of the pupils were Norwegian, but the school also enrolled some Irish, French, Germans, and "Americans." In other communities, a single immigrant group dominated, and the district schools reflected its language and religion. A variety of bilingual schemes existed in such immigrant communities. Some schools had English instruction for part of the day and German during the remainder; some had German for a specified portion of the year. Some predominantly German towns had instruction entirely in German, despite a revised education law in 1854 requiring that basic subjects be taught in English. Elsewhere, immigrants supplemented English-speaking public schools with other institutions for the maintenance of culture. Nils Haugen learned to read Norwegian at home before he went to school. Church services were in Norwegian, and Norwegian children spoke their native language during school recesses. Norwegian children also attended church schools in the summer, where laymen taught them Norwegian history and Lutheran doctrine. Norwegian ministers criticized the public schools and feared their influence. In 1857 a conference of Norwegian Lutheran clergy, meeting at Coon Prairie, Wisconsin, said that rapid assimiliation had become "idolized by the Norwegians." They envisioned a system of parochial day schools to stem the erosion of language and religion. Nonetheless, a majority of Norwegian lay people seemed to favor participation in the free common schools.[32]

In yet another type of community, Yankees and immigrants in comparable numbers competed to control the hiring, curriculum, and language in the district schools, sometimes compromising,

sometimes appealing their disputes to the state superintendent. In Herman, Wisconsin, Yankees successfully challenged the teaching certificate of a non-English-speaking Lutheran minister whom the residents had hired to teach the district school. They wanted "an English school and not a forked tongued one." In another town, near Milwaukee, a petition complained in 1852 that the teacher had been installed by "a clan of foreigners." Sometimes local officials would settle the conflict by redrawing district boundaries to set up "foreign districts," or by providing public funds for foreign-language schools after the common-school session ended. Until the 1860s, both the state teachers' association and the state superintendent encouraged bilingual arrangements where possible. Some immigrant groups, of course, established wholly independent parochial schools, and when the spirit of accommodation in the public schools turned to a more uncompromising Americanism in the postwar decades, the independent alternatives became more popular with immigrant dissenters.[33]

In Wisconsin and around the country, Roman Catholic immigrants established and supported the largest number of independent schools, and ultimately they were the only group to organize and sustain a sizable number of schools outside the public system. Ethnic pride played a role, as we have seen in the case of the Irish, and language maintenance reinforced the support of parish schools among non-English Catholics. Indeed, ethnic segregation and rivalries among Catholic immigrants often spurred the proliferation of Catholic parish schools. But Roman Catholic schooling was also generated by the historic enmity between Protestants and Catholics and by the Catholics' philosophical objections to state-regulated common schooling.

During the early nineteenth century, the distinction between private and public schooling was still fuzzy. Many independent schools, including some church-affiliated schools, received government funds. The Catholic charity schools of New York City got aid until 1825, along with schools run by Methodists, Episcopalians, and other groups. Public funds were also granted to support Catholic schools in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1830s and 1840s, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the 1840s, and in Hartford and Middletown, Connecticut, in the 1860s. In New Jersey the





apportionment of public funds to denominational schools was not abolished until 1866. The idea of separation of church and state with regard to education did not spring full-blown from the United States Constitution. It was a public policy developed gradually and unevenly at the local level during the nineteenth century. The relevance of the federal constitution to the matter was asserted only in the twentieth century. The first impulse of state or city officials interested in subsidizing schooling for the poor was to give aid to existing institutions. In some cases this included religiously sponsored schools. In the antebellum period the idea of a unified public school system gained ground. Still, people could only accept the common-school plan if they agreed that moral education could be separated from doctrinal religion. As we have seen, some Protestants as well as Catholics resisted this view. Eventually, most Protestant leaders acquiesced in the common-school concept, while many Catholics, especially the clergy, looked upon the public common schools as either godless or Protestant. If the schools were Protestant, they were a threat to Catholic children's faith and culture, a slur on their parents, and an injustice to Catholic taxpayers. If the common schools were nonreligious, they could not carry on proper moral training, and it would be a sin to send a Catholic child to them.

The more the common-school concept gained, the more the Catholic leaders urged the establishment of parish schools, and their convictions were reinforced by periodic eruptions of anti-Catholic feeling and violence. Shrill nativist warnings increased apace with immigration. Native laborers were often hostile to immigrants because they accepted low wages. Newspaper commentators worried that Catholic Europe would dump its paupers and criminals on American shores. The 1830s saw an increase in violent incidents and anti-Catholic literature. The Catholic population was growing rapidly. In the hostile environment of Protestant America, the education of Catholic children became a pressing public question. Parish schools served some families, and others willingly sent their children to the public schools, but others faced a choice they found unsatisfactory: Protestant-oriented public schools or none.[34]

Governor William Seward's sympathetic remarks on this subject

in 1840 encouraged New York City Catholics to petition for a restoration of public funds to religious schools, which had been discontinued in 1825. In a series of petitions and public debates, the Catholics made their case against New York's public schools, which were still governed by a self-perpetuating philanthropic board called the Public School Society. John Hughes, the fiery new bishop of New York, attacked the schools' use of the Protestant Bible, their practice of Bible-reading without accompanying doctrinal instruction, and the frequent slurs upon Catholics in their textbooks. The public schools, charged Hughes, taught children that Catholics were "necessarily, morally, intellectually, infallibly, a stupid race." After much debate, the state legislature passed a bill in 1842 ending the reign of the Public School Society and establishing public control of New York City's schools, with some decisions to be made at the ward level and some by the central, elected board. In a few wards, Catholic children were subsequently allowed to substitute the Douay version, but Bible reading "without note or comment" remained the official policy of New York's public schools. Many Catholic leaders saw the legislation as a signal that they would have to embark on the development of parish schools without public assistance. The First Plenary Council of the Church, meeting in Baltimore in 1852, urged Catholics to "encourage the establishment and support of Catholic schools; make every sacrifice which may be necessary for this object."[35]

Bishop Hughes of New York was the most outspoken, but not the only separatist. Like-minded Catholics challenged public schooling root and branch, criticizing its commitment to the superiority of native Protestant culture and its new claim that moral education could be conducted apart from religious doctrines. Although these alienated Catholic spokesmen assaulted the common school's cosmopolitan solution on religious grounds, they also made some of the same arguments as democratic localists. Hughes warned in 1840 that the common-school idea had spread "from the dark regions of Prussia." Orestes Brownson, who was both a Catholic and a critic of centralization, charged in the *Boston Quarterly Review* in 1839 that the "Whig Board of Education" was trying "to imitate despotic Prussia."[36]





Catholic opponents of public schooling shared another complaint with localists: the infringement of parental responsibility in education. "To you, Christian parents, God has committed these His children," said the First Plenary Council. "You are to watch over the purity of their faith and morals with jealous vigilance. . . . Listen not to those who would persuade you that religion can be separated from secular instruction." The precedence of parental responsibility in education was a common Catholic argument against taxation for public schools. A related argument, shared by other religious groups, was that the state should not enjoy a monopoly in education. Just as the Baptists had argued in 1824 that competition in schooling was healthy and spurred efficiency, Bishop Hughes and Seward's Secretary of State John Spencer both criticized the Public School Society as an inefficient and improper "monopoly."[37]

In reply, public school defenders asserted government's responsibility in education and the efficiencies of a large-scale, unified system. The right of the state to intervene to guarantee minimal education for citizenship, said Theodore Sedgwick, "no longer admits of argument." In 1853 the Hartford *Courant* lamented that Catholics in Cincinnati, Detroit, and Baltimore seemed determined "to break down the Common School System of this country," a system which should be allowed to proceed with "the rapid amalgamation of our different races." Horace Bushnell criticized Catholics for accepting "the common rights of the law, the common powers of voting, the common terms of property, a common privilege in the new lands and the mines of gold, but when they come to the matter of common schools, they will not be common with us there." He warned against recent attempts by Catholics in Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania to get a share of public school funds.[38]

But not all Catholics were separatists. Catholic reactions toward public schools ranged from resistance and separatism, to ambivalence and compromise, to outright acceptance and endorsement. In New York, Hughes's subordinate, Father Varela, pressed for changes in public-school textbooks to make the schools more tolerable for Catholics. The Philadelphia clergy did not at first establish separate schools, attempting instead to gain concessions from the

public-school board, which in 1843 ruled that Catholic children could read the Douay Bible and be excused from other religious instruction or exercises. Unfortunately this compromise led to further misunderstanding and tension. The American Protestant Association charged that Catholics were attempting to exclude the Bible altogether from the public schools. Arguments turned to demonstrations and demonstrations to violence. Before the Philadelphia Bible riots of 1844 were over, thirteen were dead and St. Augustine's Church was in ashes. This tragedy turned Philadelphia's Bishop Kenrick toward the development of independent Catholic free schools. In Cincinnati, Catholics objected to Protestant Bible readings as early as 1839; but not until 1855 did the public board relent and allow parental choice of scripture, in a belated attempt to stem the rapid growth of parochial schools in that city. Nonetheless, pressure by Catholics did have some effect on public schools. Horace Bushnell reluctantly suggested that while the public schools of New England had changed from being Puritan to being Protestant, they now had to try to be more generally Christian in order to avoid the desertion of Roman Catholic immigrants. School officials in some cities began heeding this advice.[39]

Compromises on religious practices in the public schools were often begrudging, imperfect, and transient, but they illustrate a general point about the development of public schools. In some communities, there was a process of give-and-take that softened the native Protestant emphasis of common schooling during the critical mid-nineteenth-century decades of immigration. Negotiations and concessions helped attract some newcomers to the public schools even though the schools continued to base instruction for morality and citizenship on Anglo-American, pan-Protestant culture. The process that Bushnell articulated, from Puritanism to Protestantism to Christianity, was characteristic of the cosmopolitan program for common schooling. School officials from Horace Mann to the present have tried to make public schools as inclusive as possible by making them as uncontroversial as possible and by devising a curriculum as universally acceptable as possible. As part of this process, nineteenth-century schoolmen sometimes made concessions, allowing scriptural choice, restricting prayer, or expurgating offensive religious and ethnic slurs from textbooks.





Sketchy evidence suggests that many Catholic parents sent their children to public schools. In New York City, the Irish newspaper supported public-school attendance, and in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the German priests acquiesced in the development of a common system. In Boston in the 1840s, 7,000 children, about one-third of all public-school pupils, were Catholic; and in Chicago in the 1860s, over 80 percent of Catholic elementary schoolchildren were in the public system. Nonetheless, disputes and incidents continued. In Oswego, New York, a Catholic student was whipped and expelled from a public school in the 1850s for refusing to read the King James Bible, and a similar refusal in Boston prompted a teacher to beat eleven-year-old Thomas Wall for thirty minutes. Legal action against the teachers failed in both cases, and in another case from the 1850s, the Maine Supreme Court upheld the right of public-school officials to compel all children to read the Protestant Bible. Despite this bias, parochial-school development was slow in many areas. By the 1860s, Massachusetts had only fourteen Catholic parish schools, Connecticut had about twenty, and Wisconsin about the same. Chicago had fourteen schools in 1865, while New York State had about thirty. In Pennsylvania, only fourteen parish schools were founded between 1830 and 1850. Cincinnati had seventeen Roman Catholic schools by 1860; St. Louis and Baltimore were also centers of parish-school enthusiasm before the Civil War, and in territories where there were large numbers of Catholics, as in Louisiana and the Southwest, priests attempted to establish parish schools. Still, in the judgment of James Burns, a historian of Roman Catholic education, "parochial education on a large scale did not begin till after 1870." Roman Catholic religious leaders had set out on a separatist educational course by 1860, but resources were slim and Catholic lay people had varying opinions about public schools. Thus the establishment of independent Catholic schools was slow in most areas.[40]

A similar pattern of ambivalence and resistance occurred in the case of American blacks. While historic religious conflict made it difficult for Protestants to apply the cosmopolitan educational reforms in a tolerant way to Roman Catholics, racism made it even rarer for antebellum public-school advocates to argue for the integration of black children into

that promoted the idea of a common-school system prevented it from being cosmopolitan in the best sense of the word because that ideology, in all its variants, featured a belief in the racial superiority of whites. Because they were excluded from most northern common-school systems, blacks were faced with a strategic dilemma, whether to make the best of separate-and-unequal black schools or to press for integration into white schools. Some blacks supported the common school as an ideal; some argued for the value of separate black institutions in a racist society. In either case, their relationship to the emerging public common-school systems of the North was pervaded by conflict and disappointment.

In the early national period, schooling for blacks was supported either by private black efforts or by white philanthropy. In this respect it was like schooling for poor whites before the advent of the public common school. From the 1790s to the 1820s, whites helped to found charity schools for blacks in many cities. In a few small towns these were integrated; generally they were separate. Meanwhile, blacks, like whites, supported inexpensive pay schools taught by teachers of their own race. In other ways, of course, black education was not at all like white education. Segregation and racism permeated northern society, and this was a central problem for black parents and educators. Except in New England and New York, whites barred blacks from voting, denying the relevance for blacks of one of the major goals of common schooling, participation in political institutions. Opportunities for most jobs and for most higher education were also closed. Speaking in 1839 at the funeral of a black Revolutionary War veteran in Newark, New Jersey, a minister noted that William Stives's children had been refused admission to local schools. He bemoaned the fact that although Stives "had purchased the country with his sacrifices, toil and blood," his family had been "proscribed out of all their civil rights and privileges." Even where laws sugggested that blacks had rights, they were often denied. As John Jay Smith commented to Tocqueville in 1831, "the law with us is nothing if it is not supported by public opinion—the people are imbued with the greatest prejudice against Negroes, and the magistrates don't feel strong enough to enforce the laws favorable to them." When





an 1845 Massachusetts law stated that all children had a right to attend neighborhood public schools, the Boston School Committee vigorously denied its applicability to racial segregation.[41]

Education had little effect on job discrimination for blacks. Although African free schools of northern cities were the focus of some high-sounding egalitarian statements by enlightened white philanthropists, they were also the cause of considerable frustration for black parents and students. In 1842 a black newspaper in Albany demanded to know how many abolitionist merchants and lawyers had chosen their clerks from graduates of the African free schools started by abolitionists. The question was purely rhetorical. The main rationale for charity schooling was moral education. Black parents, however, complained about the lack of job opportunities for educated blacks, and they complained about the mechanical nature of the Lancasterian system used almost universally in African free schools. Where they could, blacks started their own schools. As with most private schooling, no systematic evidence has survived, so the extent of these educational efforts is impossible to gauge, but sketchy evidence indicates that independent day schools run by blacks existed in New York City, Brooklyn, Columbus, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Troy, Rochester, New Brunswick, Princeton, and most other northern cities with a sizable black population.[42]

In Boston, black initiative mixed with public financial assistance in the development of segregated black education. In the 1790s, blacks requested public aid for separate schools, saying that the black children who went to town schools met with prejudice. The city refused, but blacks started a school on their own with some help from white philanthropists. In 1812 the town reversed its decision and agreed to an annual subsidy. By 1830 the School Committee had established black primary schools in the growing ghettos. Some blacks viewed separate schools as merely better than none. It was a choice involving the "least between two evils," said a black teacher in New York. Because of their depressed economic condition, blacks could not go it alone; they needed free public schooling. Recognizing this need, officials of northern public-school systems gradually absorbed the black charity schools. Although these systems were generated by the common-school

ideal, very few whites thought that common schools ought to integrate the races. The absorption of African free schools by public systems had nothing to do with common schooling. It was simply part of a trend toward public administration of schools and the waning of independent philanthropic effort to provide charity schools. It was a change of mode, not a change of philosophy, and many of the same prominent white citizens were on both the charity-school and the public-school boards. In Detroit, independent black schools became public in 1842; in Poughkeepsie the public school board adopted the African free school in 1843, and in Schenectady the same process occurred in 1854 upon the creation of a unified public-school system. Thus systems that boasted their commitment to efficiency and the promotion of common culture absorbed segregated schools that were neither efficient nor common.[43]

Black parents did not merely acquiesce in the meager segregated schooling provisions of northern public-school systems. New York City provides a good example of black initiatives and black resistance in the development of public schooling. By 1820 there were 10,000 black people in the city, and the succeeding decade witnessed the development of important black community institutions. In 1823 the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church split from the Methodists and established an independent black church, and in 1827, New York blacks established *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in the country. Leaders associated with these institutions also took a strong interest in the schools of the Manumission Society, mounting a successful attendance drive in 1827 and providing winter clothing for poor schoolchildren.

Charles Andrews, a white Englishman, had been the head teacher of the Society's schools since 1809. Like other charity-school teachers, he emphasized moral education, but he also opposed slavery and stressed black achievement. He enjoyed the support of most New York black leaders until 1830, when he became convinced that the future of free blacks lay in African colonization. Because many colonization advocates discouraged the development of black educational institutions as a diversion that would dissuade blacks from emigrating, the movement was





anathema to most black leaders. Andrews's colonization views led to declining enrollments at the Manumission Society schools. In 1832 the Society announced his resignation due to the "prejudice now existing against him among the coloured population." They replaced him, at the urging of black leaders, with a black man, James Adams. The schools continued to expand and hire teachers who had "the confidence of the coloured people." Soon, however, black community leaders had a new organization to reckon with. In 1834 the Manumission Society transferred its schools, with an enrollment of 1,500 children, to the Public School Society. By this time, the Society had developed a near-monopoly on free schools. Without consulting black leaders, the trustees reduced the status of all but one of the black schools to the primary level. Enrollments dropped, and some black families turned to private schooling again. In the quarter-century between 1835 and the Civil War, the enthusiasm of New York City black leaders for the black public schools waxed and waned. Some radical blacks espoused a separate, nationalist course; of these some eventually emigrated to Africa. The moderates, who predominated in New York City and in the nation generally, advocated public-school attendance, moral education, intellectual improvement, parental involvement, and the appointment of black teachers in public schools for blacks. School boards were often receptive to the suggestions and petitions of such groups, partly because they wanted to avoid black boycotts of public schools and partly because they much preferred such compromises to radical demands for integration.[44]

Some black leaders began to press for truly common schools. They had to wage two debates, one against white segregationists and one against blacks who preferred separate public schools. The integrationists' arguments centered on two main points: that segregated schools were by definition unjust and that segregated black schools consistently received poorer resources. The first point was stated in a hundred ways by frustrated black integrationists and a handful of white allies throughout the nineteenth century. The very existence of segregated public schools offended justice, they argued. It impeded the acquisition of political rights and prevented the contact between the races that might ultimately reduce

prejudice. The second point, about unequal resources, was a commonplace. "Conscious of the unequal advantages enjoyed by our children," said two angry Philadelphia mothers, "we feel indignant against those who are continually vituperating us for the ignorance and degradation of our people." Philadelphia officials continued the Lancasterian method in black schools after they had abandoned it for whites, provided infant schools for whites but not for blacks, denied blacks admission to the public high school, and in general starved the black school facilities. An angry and militant integrationist, Robert Purvis, wrote the Philadelphia tax collectors in 1853 that his "rights as a man and a parent have been grossly outraged" by such a system.[45]

Blacks who favored separate schools countered integrationists' arguments with two compelling arguments of their own. Black children in white schools were subject to insults and racial stereotypes, and to white teachers' low expectations. Moreover, even if white school officials would integrate children, they certainly would not integrate teachers. Thus there would be little employment for blacks in teaching, one of the few professions open to educated blacks. Black parents placed great stress on the importance of having black teachers for their children, and they often fought hard to replace insensitive white teachers with black teachers in the segregated schools. The prospect of losing these teachers was one of the most agonizing drawbacks to integration. Whites seized upon black sentiment for separate schools. Boston officials reminded black integrationists that the segregated public schools had been established "at the urgent and repeated requests of the colored people themselves." In Providence the president of Brown University observed that segregation "works well" and that Negroes preferred it. Whatever the preferences of blacks, they faced overwhelming white opinion against integrated schools. The confrontation between black integrationists and white public-school officials is most dramatically illustrated by the case of Boston, a city with a large, vocal black minority, a city with a reputation both as the cradle of liberty and the seat of deep racial animosity.[46]

After years of mixed results from their efforts to improve the segregated black schools of Boston, a growing number of parents decided to press for integration. A group meeting in the Belknap





Street Church resolved in 1849 "to contend for equal school rights, until the schemes of prejudice and expediency are alike driven to the wall." They had been frustrated by unsatisfactory concessions regarding teachers at the black schools, and they were encouraged by the relatively peaceful integration of schools in the nearby Massachusetts cities of Lowell, Nantucket, New Bedford, and Worcester. In Salem, after a decade of agitation of the school-integration question between blacks and whites, the city's attorney had written a stirring opinion in favor of integration, which the School Committee accepted in 1844 by a vote of seventeen to two. The opinion was reprinted as a pamphlet in Boston and in the *Common School Journal*; the attorney, Richard Fletcher, went on to become a state supreme court justice. "Perfect equality is the vital principle" of a common-school system, said Fletcher. All must have an opportunity to gain power and wealth, or to be trained for public office. Without this equality of opportunity, there would be class oppression and class war. Black people could not be an exception, argued Fletcher, especially because Massachusetts recognized them as voting, tax-paying citizens. Fletcher rejected the separate-but-equal argument. He doubted that the black schools had resources equal to the white schools, but even if they did, he declared, "it would in no way affect the decision of the question. The colored children are lawfully entitled to the benefits of the free schools, and are not bound to accept an equivalent." Finally, argued Fletcher, "the people can be lawfully taxed, only for the support of the public schools." A segregated school, he concluded, "is not a public school."

Boston integrationists were encouraged by the Salem decision, but the Boston School Committee did not find Fletcher's logic persuasive. Their segregation policy was unswerving. The Primary School Committee stated their reasons for rejecting integration in 1846. Blacks' "peculiar physical, mental and moral structure require an educational treatment different" from whites. Although black children can memorize and imitate, "when progress comes to depend chiefly on the faculties of invention, comparison and reasoning, they quickly fall behind." Thus, integrated schools don't work. Expressing the view of most Boston whites, they declared that "amalgamation is degradation."

The segregation issue split Boston's black community. The integrationists were led by Benjamin Roberts, a printer who had long been active in black educational causes. The separatists were led by Thomas Paul Smith. Smith had attended Boston's black grammar school under the hated white teacher Abner Forbes. Refused admission to the public high school, Smith had attended nearby Andover Academy and became a successful clothing dealer in the city. When Roberts became disgusted with the School Committee and led an effort to boycott the grammar school, Smith labelled the tactic "suicidal." Roberts soon concluded that no amount of petitioning or boycotting would move the Boston School Committee toward integration, so he sued them to recover damages for the unlawful exclusion of his daughter, who had to pass several white elementary schools on her two-and-one-half–mile walk to a segregated school. Smith opposed Roberts's goal as well as his tactics. A black child, he argued, was far better off "taught by those who felt his elevation their own, cheered on by the unanimous shout of encouragement by all his fellows." In his harshest statement, Smith declared that the integration movement "injures, it lies." One of Smith's allies said that black children in a white school would "be under the constant criticism of the whole school." This would cause poor achievement, which would in turn be "falsely attributed to a natural inferiority."

Fears of racism in integrated schools did not deter Benjamin Roberts and his supporters. They engaged two lawyers, Robert Morris, a black member of the Massachusetts bar, and Charles Sumner, a white. Sumner, later a radical Republican in the United States Senate, was a rising young Boston lawyer. He had been defeated as a candidate for the Boston School Committee only a few years earlier. The Roberts case was heard in the Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1850. Sumner argued along the same lines as Salem's attorney, Richard Fletcher. After describing the history of freedom in America, and the schools' role in preserving it, Sumner compared the Boston School Committee to Southern slaveholders. They had no legal right to "brand a whole race with the stigma of inferiority," Sumner argued. Racial segregation was based on unreasonable prejudice and was therefore illegal. Like Fletcher, Sumner rejected the separate-but-equal argument. Because segregated schools stigmatized black children, they were not equivalent. Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw disagreed. He admitted that segregation constituted a caste system, but he held that the schools did not create and could not alter racial prejudice. Nor was classification by race arbitrary; it had the sanction of tradition and culture. He upheld the Boston School Committee. Defeated in court, Roberts and his followers soon won in the legislature. Integration had been implemented in many Massachusetts communities voluntarily, and in 1855 the legislature made it mandatory. Boston school officials complied reluctantly but without further open resistance.[47]



In the long run, Boston whites found new ways to restore school segregation through residential segregation and other tacit public policies. In the short run, black public-school enrollment picked up, and a sprinkling of black students graduated from Boston's high schools. The rest of the North did not follow Massachusetts's lead in integration. In an editorial illustrative of blatant northern racism, the *New York Herald* reacted to the Massachusetts law: "Now the niggers are really just as good as white folks. The North is to be Africanized. Amalgamation has commenced. New England heads the column. God save the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." The Pennsylvania legislature declared itself against such "amalgamation" with an 1854 law permitting segregation. The state's superintendent of public instruction explained that blacks were "destitute of either moral or intellectual culture." That they provided a large share of paupers and criminals was no surprise, he said, since blacks were "naturally indolent, and perhaps improvident," and "their resort to vicious practices is, perhaps, no more than could be expected." Ohio likewise sanctioned separate schools, in a law that was sustained by the state supreme court in 1849. Most states were simply silent, allowing segregation to stand. At the time of the Civil War, blacks were afforded separate and unequal public schooling throughout most of the North. Blacks remained outside of the cosmopolitan rationale of antebellum school reform. In the face of this racist reality, black leaders remained ambivalent toward public schooling.[48]

Northern blacks were not the only group outside the assimilationist policy of early public-school reform. Most poor southerners,

whether white or black, lacked common schooling, for in the antebellum South, school reform had only modest success, even for whites. American Indians faced a policy of extinction and removal, not of assimilation. Hispanic Americans, largely beyond the scope of this book in space and time, waged the same sort of uneven contest with white governments that black Americans waged in the East and the Midwest. Women, the largest out-group, were dispersed across racial, ethnic, religious, and class lines. Even more than other out-groups, therefore, they tended not to speak and act as a group on issues of common schooling. Some women objected to the whole ideology and structure of female education in antebellum America, but many more accepted the prevailing ideal of domesticity and its educational implications. Those who accepted native Protestant ideology and cosmopolitan school reform fought for more access to schooling for girls, more practical education for women's roles, and the development of teaching as a woman's profession. Many women believed that these policies would improve women's lives. This does not mean that middle-class antebellum spokeswomen merely acquiesced; their efforts helped to shape the outcome and to win concessions about women's intellectual and professional capabilities.

There were, then, a variety of dissenters, and they had some impact. Catholics forced some concessions on Bible-reading practices, black boycotts prompted the hiring of black teachers, and rebellious rural parents expelled unpopular district teachers. In the countryside less assertive forms of opposition were often successful. State school officials, empowered to regulate local schooling in a variety of ways, often had little actual impact at the local level. Admonitions, laws, and occasional missionary sweeps could be ignored if the local population concurred. In small-town America, school reforms succeeded only where influential local residents became the agents of change. No matter how much circuit-riding the superintendents did, they could not accomplish their mission alone, and some rural communities simply ignored all but the most mandatory common-school reforms. Similarly, there was tacit opposition among urban workers. Manual laborers' families were not served as well by the new public-school systems as were middle-class children, and the costs of sending their children were greater.





But open conflict on educational issues rarely took the form of white-collar versus blue-collar interests. Blue-collar people expressed their support, indifference, or alienation about common schooling in family counsels more often than in organized groups. They expressed their challenges to educational policy through individual choices and family strategies.

The combination of tacit and expressed opposition was enough to give cosmopolitan school reformers the impression they were fighting a war, but it was a guerrilla war. The opponents were scattered; their goals and their cultures differed. Localists wanted small-scale majority rule, separatists wanted independent group control. Integrationists protested not the principle of common schooling but its failure. Some opponents were as alienated from each other as from the educational reforms. Local ward control advocates in the cities had little else in common with rural people clinging to district schools; urban blacks and Irish Catholics were in conflict because of historic racial animosity and the competitive position in which the capitalist economy placed them.

There was very substantial opposition in antebellum America to the creation of state school systems. Although some opponents gained concessions and some others successfully ignored the reform program, they did not prevent the establishment of a state school apparatus, the beginnings of professional training, the shift from private to public administration, the consolidation of districts, and a substantial increase in the amount of time and resources spent on public schooling. Opponents of this program of common-school reform shared some philosophical objections to a state monopoly in education, but their circumstances and goals varied, and they were predominantly outsiders with less power and influence than those who supported the reforms. The reforms prevailed, gradually and imperfectly, sometimes with compromises. The reforms prevailed because they served the predominant ideology and because a majority of people in the North appear to have been convinced that a cosmopolitan common-school system would serve not only the collective goals of republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism, but individual goals of enlightenment, morality, and personal advancement as well.