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Winslow Homer (1836-1910), American, *The Country School*, 1871. See page 875.

ARCHIVES EXPRESS

LONG-TERM EFFECTS
OF INTERVENTIONS FOR
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Winslow Homer (1836-1910)

The Country School, 1871

THROUGHOUT THE 1800S, AS SETTLERS SPREAD across the American prairies and turned them into farmland, the first public building to be erected in a new community was often a 1-room schoolhouse. By the century's end, more than 200 000 1-room schools dotted the nation's landscape, and half of all American schoolchildren attended them.¹

In Winslow Homer's *The Country School*, class is in session. According to custom, boys sit on one side and girls on the other. An exception is the boy and girl on the low bench at the right, who may be brother and sister. Siblings were allowed to sit together so that they could share the same books (or maybe not, in this case). Some of the older children read by themselves or in small groups. Others practice writing or work on arithmetic problems, using a long sloped shelf on the back and side walls for writing in lieu of a desk.

At the center of this orderly scene is the prim young woman framed against the blackboard. In the 1870s, most schoolteachers were women. Men were in short supply after the Civil War, and many were lured away from teaching by higher pay in business or other professions. Teaching was a respectable first job for a young woman while waiting for a marriage prospect to come along. Teachers of either sex were usually hired for just a single school term. They often "boarded around," staying for a week or two with the family of 1 of their students before moving on to stay with another family. At the end of the school term, the teacher organized a public presentation in which children could show off what they had learned. They recited famous orations or poetry, competed in "spell downs," or displayed their knowledge of geography by drawing maps or naming the state capitals. Soon afterward, the teacher and students said goodbye.

Here, the teacher and the 3 boys on her right may be engaged in a recitation session in which pupils take turns reading aloud while the others follow along. What might

they be reading? Chances are good that it is a *McGuffey Reader*. Volume 1 of this venerable 6-volume series was a thin book with big print, starting with the alphabet. Once a student mastered a volume and could read it fluently, regardless of age, he or she was moved up to the next book in the series. Volume 6 was a thick, eclectic collection including biographical essays about famous men and women, stories about chivalry, descriptions of far-away natural wonders, and excerpts from great works of world literature by Longfellow, Poe, Dickens, and Shakespeare, among others.² For children growing up in the cloistered world of a small settlement on the prairie, the *McGuffey Readers* opened the children's minds to the world beyond, including the world of ideas.

A sprig of cherry blossoms on the teacher's desk suggests that it is springtime. On such a sunny day, even the most interesting book or math problem might have a hard time keeping a young person's attention indoors. In another well-known picture from his series about children and schools, Homer turned the youngsters loose for recess and showed them playing a lively game of "snap the whip." This same 1-room schoolhouse appears in the background with its door open, waiting for legs to tire, the teacher to ring the school bell, and young minds to be drawn back again to the business of learning.

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