

THE ADVOCACY FOR AND INVENTION OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE 19TH
CENTURY; ALTHOUGH ACHIEVED AMIDST VARIOUS CHALLENGES WAS THE
GREATEST EDUCATION REFORM IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

Name:

Course:

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Introduction

Public education refers to a government funded and regulated education system, that is accessible to all the citizens within a nation through the various public schools. Public education will normally feature a curriculum that is applied in all the set public schools; with various staff members paid by the government to facilitate in tuition. During the colonial times in America, education was mainly for an elitist class that comprised of politicians and business leaders. The commoners only accessed informal education from their families and religions. The origin of the American education system was in the traditional form of schools and not the state education programs before independence.¹ However, even as education remained an elusive aspect in early America, the people still believed in education as an important force to cause change and positive developments in the country.

According to Thomas Jefferson, Education was necessary so that the public could be well informed of their civil rights and therefore vote for meaningful leadership. He was also of the opinion that parents and local communities would retain the right to educate their children in a manner that they deemed okay. Education was therefore perceived as a leeway to a free and happier America and it was also a staircase to a functional democracy according to Rush. A general level of illiteracy characterized the population which a few literate leaders like Thomas Jefferson who were dedicated to a more liberated America were dedicated to change. The various needs that existed in the early America could only be solved by first inspiring a literate population. This was only possible through adopting a public education system that would be accessible to all. Half the population of children in the America had no formal education by early 19th Century.² Free public education was available for children

¹ . Herbst, Jurgen. "Nineteenth-Century Normal Schools In The United States: A Fresh Look". History of Education 9.3 (1980): 219. Web.

² . Ibid., 221.

between the ages of 5 to 21, but still many of the children were working in the farms, factories and mines due to the economic hardships. It was only in six states that education was mandatory (Mann and Cremin).

Education in the early 19th Century

The 19th century was a transitioning period in the American education system as various changes took place and formed a reference point in the history of American education. The education system transitioned from the limited and private system to a public system. During this era, America was characterised by informal systems such as religion or church based schools, charity schools and apprenticeships. Private schools were for the elite group that could afford to pay and the free schooling that was offered by the community required tuition fee to be paid.³

Education reforms became necessary due to several reasons. Children that were not educated from home found themselves locked out of school because the schools required them to know how to read and write. In the 19th century Children below the age of 5 were placed together with young adults of 21 years in class, overcrowded classrooms were the norm which tampered with the quality of tuition offered. During this time, there were increased immigration rates to America and this continued to escalate the demand for a public education system.⁴ From some of the leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, all desired change in America would only be accomplished by first increasing the literacy level in the country. It was practically impossible to cultivate a liberal and defined country with an

³ . Cremin, Lawrence A. American Education, The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1970. Print.

⁴ . Smith, Wilson. "The Evolution Of An Urban School System: New York City, 1750–1850". History: Reviews of New Books 2.2 (1973): 48-49. Web.

illiterate population. The desired level of literacy across the whole of America could only be achieved by effecting a public education system that would be accessible to all.

Challenges in adopting a public education system

The move to have a public education system in the country was not a smooth sail; there were challenges posed by different groups in the population. The existing government was hesitant to adopt the public education system as this posed as an increase in the national expenditure burden. The working class on the other hand were worried that they would be forced to pay increased taxes to cushion the additional expenditure burden by the government.⁵ A tax increase would definitely have a negative impact on the incomes of the working class. They therefore preferred to have the private school system that would not disrupt the taxation and therefore their incomes.

The religious bodies that had previously adopted a religion based education system felt threatened that the place of religion would soon be replaced by the public education system. The religious leaders were therefore hesitant to advocate for acceptance of the public education system among the followers.⁶ There was also a great fear among the private school teachers that they would receive a pay cut or even worse still lose their jobs. The inception of public education system would essentially result in increased teaching opportunities and the demand for teachers would essentially fall. This posed a threat to the teachers in the few private schools that existed.

Education reforms in the 19th Century

⁵ . Smith, Wilson. "The Evolution Of An Urban School System: New York City, 1750–1850". *History: Reviews of New Books* 2.2 (1973): 49. Web.

⁶ . Cremin, Lawrence A. *American Education, The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1970. Print.

There are several people who contributed tirelessly towards the education reforms; they fought tirelessly for things to change in the American education system.⁷ Horace Mann who was a state senator lobbied so hard for the formation of a state board of education and when it was formed, he left his seat at the senate of Massachusetts to become the board's secretary. As a secretary, he fought to obtain government funding for public schools and to make formal education separate from religious education. He also established teachers' training colleges and made the learning duration in schools longer.⁸ In 1848, Horace Mann introduced the grading system based on age and ability. This was an idea he borrowed in Prussia during his numerous travels. The grading system reduced the disparities in the classrooms which subsequently delivered uniformity, which is an important aspect of a school system. The grading system also enhanced diligence among learners as the performance determined their qualification to higher learning opportunities. Thomas Jefferson, as a Virginia governor was involved in organising a systematic and all round education system in his state. In 1779, he proposed a 'Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge'. He advocated for government funded school system and scholarships for the bright students to go to the college of William and Mary.⁹ Jefferson called for the division of counties into wards and the creation of elementary schools where all children would be admitted free of charge. Jefferson in his words said "If a nation expects to be ignorant and in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be".¹⁰

The dawn of Public Education in America

In the 19th century things became different, various changes took place and this saw a push for compulsory free public education. In the public schools, lessons included traditional

⁷ . Ibid.

⁸ . Mondale, Sarah, and Patton, Sarah, eds. *School: The Story of American Public Education*. 2001. Boston: Beacon

⁹ . Katz, Michael B. *Class, Bureaucracy, And Schools*. 1st ed. New York: Praeger, 1971. Print.

¹⁰ . "Ford Madox Ford". *Notes and Queries* (1987): n. pag. Web.

school subjects as well as moral principles and civics. The grade levels created common standards and mandatory attendance so that every citizen would become visionary and educated voters. The reforms started in Massachusetts and later to other states. By the year, 1870, all the states had locally controlled and government funded elementary schools.¹¹ Education reforms were a means of changing the lives of Americans for the better, native and foreign, rural or urban into informed, law abiding and patriotic citizens. The education reforms made the protestant denominations to put their differences aside and come together to form charitable schools for the poor in areas like Philadelphia; therefore, it led to national and social unity among the Americans. In the last three decades of the 19th century, many high schools were built. The education reforms also created an educated public that would ensure a lasting democracy.¹²

Conclusion

The analysis of the education reforms that yielded the public education system in America during the 19th Century clearly highlights the significant changes that were experienced. The process was not without challenges but consistent efforts to have the government, religion and the general population embrace the change was ultimately successful. The reforms in the education system allowed children to be in class with their age mates this was due to the age grading, age differences in the classrooms became outdated. The system also allowed children to graduate to the next grade, which gave them something to work towards.¹³ The sought impacts of a literate population were indeed weighty and

¹¹ . Cremin, Lawrence A. *American Education, The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1970. Print.

¹² . WELTER, Rush Eastman. *Popular Education And Democratic Thought In America*. [With A Bibliography.]. 1st ed. Pp. xiii. 473. Columbia University Press: New York & London, 1962. Print.

¹³ . Mann, Horace, and Lawrence A Cremin. *The Republic And The School*. 1st ed. Print.

ultimately, most were achieved as the public education system was adopted across all states in America. Public education meant that all the children were exposed to literacy and this was just the beginning of common and free education to all in America. Any further improvements on the education system would start at the set standards and the country benefited from the privilege of having a literate population.¹⁴

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¹⁴ . Mondale, Sarah, and Patton, Sarah, eds. *School: The Story of American Public Education.* 2001. Boston: Beacon

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