

School, The Story of American Public Education

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The fiftieth anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision serves to remind us of a significant event of the past. As students, teachers, administrators, and public policy makers struggle with today's uniquely American system of education, however, there is a much richer history to draw upon than a single court decision. School, The Story of American Public Education guides the reader through an historical appreciation of the development of the public education system in the United States.

As a companion reader to a PBS series of the same name, the format of this book is unusual. Each part of the book is defined by a period of time and consists of a substantial introduction written by varying authors as well as a narrative. The narrative section includes pictures and more anecdotal reference, but in most cases is essentially the retelling of the same story in the respective introduction.

Whether those responsible for the book and series began with an argument in mind, there is an obvious concern expressed about applying market economics to the formulation of educational policy. David Tyack summarizes the concern nicely in his introduction to the book when he asks "Is education primarily a consumer good or a common good?" The final section of the book includes the authors' concerns about adopting the consumer good perspective.

The historical tour provided by this book is a trip worth taking for the current generation of stakeholders in American education. Despite the ongoing investment of emotion and resources, it is questionable how well the average American understands how the public education system has arrived at its current state. Such an appreciation of the past might, in fact, inform us about the choices for the future.

Part one of School, The Story of American Public Education summarizes the major events in the development of the common school during the period 1770 to 1900. Educational philosophies during the first half of the time period were greatly influenced by the central issues of the time. Specifically, the work of Thomas Jefferson is frequently

referred to as the voice of the Founding Fathers in expressing the connection between successful democracy and an educated society. Hence, the need for schooling -- though certainly not for all. The early tensions of governance between federal, state, and local powers also featured strongly in the early years of this nation's growth. Horace Mann's drive for standardization of curriculum ultimately failed and local control over public schools prevailed.

Part one continues into the Civil War years. Segregated education was sustained through Supreme Court decisions of 1848 and 1896. The latter established the separate and equal standard for public education, but also marked a growing appreciation for education as the path to improved status and quality of life. The settling of the West also contributed to respect for teaching as a profession, though clearly a woman's role. By the turn of the century the United States offered the most schooling in the world.

Part Two addresses the period 1900 through the 1950's, featuring the impact of major European immigration, English-only teaching, the Depression, and battles over control of curriculum. Progressive reform early in the century included increased vocational education to meet the needs of the workplace and to provide an alternative for underachieving students. The Space Race in the mid 1950's spurred the National Education Defense Act of 1958 that resulted in federal funding for higher education and an emphasis on math and science throughout the educational curriculum.

Part Three documents the civil rights dominated period of American public education between the 1950's and early 1980's. The 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision established that separate schooling is inherently unequal schooling and marked the start of the continuing quest for how to truly integrate the educational process. Reform policy in the 1960's and 1970's addressed the challenges of students with English as Second Language (ESL), gender through the Title IX decision, and special provisions for children with disabilities. The resistance to English-only education by a growing Mexican American population heightened issues of bilingual teaching and learning. Interestingly, no comparison with the earlier impact of English-only education on European assimilation is mentioned.

Part Four, 1980 through 2000, is dedicated largely to the impact of the business community and federal government on public education. The 1983 Presidential Commission report "A Nation at Risk" documented the growing sentiment that the school system was in crisis and was contributing to a failing economy. Rapid changes in technology and losses to foreign competition bolstered the critical review and pessimism. The "Nation at Risk" report also sparked a drive for the education system to adopt a more corporate structure and business methodology, to include the eventual argument for establishing a free market basis for public education. Among the other influences on the educational system was a drive for standard based teaching, to include a heavy reliance on standardized tests. In contrast to the business community's influence at the turn of the previous century, vocational education was now sacrificed in the belief that all students need a standard educational foundation in order to succeed. The authors clearly feel that the impact of these policy decisions, while acknowledging the need for reform, has been

greatly to the detriment of public education. They also suggest that the increasing role of government policy without increased financial support has further stressed the economic well being of already struggling public school districts, particularly in inner cities. Throughout this section the authors also reject the notion that parental choice and its resulting competition for students could generate improvement throughout the massive public education system. Also, it is suggested that the memory of American public education's contribution to the health of democracy has been lost in the arguments.

That a book about public education would include some bias is understandable, if not to be expected. The issues are serious and the challenges facing a system that teaches nearly 50 million students daily are staggering. School, The Story of American Public Education offers readers of all orientations a valuable appreciation for how we arrived at the current state of public education in America.