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When Common School principles were put into action, results were not as expected.

The Uncommon Common School

By Sally H. Wertheim

Equality of educational opportunity is one of the current slogans educators espouse. To provide all children with a sense of community through the same education was one of the original purposes of the American Common School. According to historian Lawrence A. Cremin, the common school was to be common for all people, publicly supported and publicly controlled.1 This statement reflected the ideology of the educational leadership of the times, who were a confident elite trying to apply a set of principles inculcated by family background. education and a sense of civic responsibility to a newly enfranchised citizenry. They were well meaning and motivated by concern for their fellow man. However, they were not alwyas able to achieve their goal of community because when their common school principles were put into practice, the result was not what had been expected. The very people for whom the common school was created were discouraged from attending because they felt excluded from the environment which was created.

This study will attempt to show, through documentation found in the twenty Ohio educational periodicals published prior to the Civil War, that this occurred in Ohio, one of the new frontier communities which was very active in the quest for a common school, as were other states at this same time. Following the Revolution and reflecting the principles advocated in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, it became apparent to the leadership group in Ohio that formal schooling was an appropriate means to achieving the ends espoused by the Founding Fathers. Ohio was a new frontier community which, with the passage of the Bill to establish a State School Superintendent in 1837, tried to put these goals into practice.

As communities formed in the West, social stratification seemed to occur. Certain wealthy people in important business positions assumed community leadership and were advocates of reform movements. Many of the men who published and edited the educational journals were part of, or aspired to become, the ascending leadership group on the frontier. For example, Asa D. Lord, who edited several educational journals, served in educational administrative positions, and was a doctor by training. Another editor, John Hancock, of the Journal of Progress, was part of an old aristocratic American family, being the grandson of John Hancock. William Coggeshall, one editor of the Ohio Journal of Education, was also descended from an old New England family and served in governmental posts and as an editor of other periodicals such as the Genius of the West.

As the frontier began the process of urbanization, this leadership group feared the actions of the others and sought to use the common school as a means of institutionalizing their ideas for these groups. It will be shown that the purposes of education advocated did not meet the needs of these other groups, such as the immigrant, the Catholic, the poor, the workingman, women, and blacks, who were themselves becoming an integral part of the society and expected to attend the new common school.

The question might be raised whether the common school in its sincere desire to provide a sense of community by advocating the same type of education for all people in order to eliminate differences, accomplished the opposite. It often alienated these groups by expecting them to become like the majority group. Albert Picket, editor of the Western Academician and Journal of Education and Science wrote:

But the majority, under any circumstances, must be limited in the intelligence. The stronger, therefore, the reason, that profound knowledge should be extended to as many as possible, so that by intermixture in society with those of circumscribed acquisitions-their knowledge may become diffused-their habits of investigation, and their integrity by such intercourse, be worked into the minds of the mass, and become a part of their thoughts and mode of action. The attainments of well balanced minds exert great influence over those less fortunate, the greater the number of well-educated the wider will be the reach of sound reasoning and correct principles of conduct.2

Oh how simple it all seemed to Picket who was seriously stating what he and most of his contemporaries believed the schools could do. His intent was to create a system which would successfully achieve the dream of a melting

The ideas which created the common school movement emerged and took root during the period known as the era of the common man when Jacksonian democracy was the rule and mobocracy, as a result of the new privileges, was feared by many.

Daniel Aaron noted that when the West was first settled, conditions of equality prevailed, but in the 1830s and '40s, slums, paupers, and class distinctions as well as societies, private clubs, and other outward manifestations of a class differential came into being. This was the situation on the urban, rather than rural scene. In urban localities striking disparities in wealth and diversity of occupations sharpened class lines earlier than in less populous districts. Aaron stated:

western community must be dismissed. The urban West, as well as the urban East, presents a bewildering and complex pattern of cliques and pressure groups, social, political, and economic, sometimes resisting each other, at other times working together for the common good. The dynamic which keeps the society ever moving is money and property, and the financial elite, the merchants and their professional helpers are also the social and the political elite.³

James Hall, an observer of his time writing about the West in 1849, cited the factors which differentiated the classes. He felt the resources of the country were controlled by the business community, "embracing all those who are engaged in the great occupations of buying, and selling, exchanging, importing and exporting merchandise, and including the banker, the broker and the underwriter."4 This view was underscored by Tocqueville in writing of his observations of America. He cited as reasons the fact that money in a democratic society was of greater importance because it could obtain cooperation of others and served as a natural scale by which the merit of men could be measured in the absence of all other material and exterior distinctions.5 The classes, as differentiated by wealth, moved in different circles. They may have come together for business purposes, but those of the upper echelon sent their children to private schools, married them off to social equals, occupied positions of prominence such as those of bank directors, supported the Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches, and served on school committees.*

Cinncinati Society Characteristic

Aaron noted the distinctions which occurred in Cincinnati society from 1819 to 1838 as characteristic of the other urban centers of the times and set up an interesting division along so-called class lines, warning that these divisions ever remained flexible, except perhaps in the case of the blacks. He described the upper classes as the business element and professional men such as doctors, clergymen, editors and teachers, whose position often depended upon the status of the people they served. The majority of the population comprised what he called the lower middle class and the lower class. These included clerks, skilled workmen, storekeepers, minor tradesmen, transients, poor immigrants and the semi-skilled (as the Irish deckhands and draymen). "And at the bottom, forming a kind of lowest helot class and exploited by all, are the hated, disfranchised blacks."7 Sometimes there was a merger between classes as the structure was not absoulte. "In sum then, men in America . . . are arranged according to certain categories in the course of social life: common habits, education, and above all, wealth, establish these classifications.3 In essence the mercantile class presided over urban affairs, for the urban development produced the stratified society and "the notion of equality, though perhaps powerful in the countryside, did not prevail in the towns."

The ideas advanced in support of education reflected

the dominantly conservative ideas of the new rising class. Aaron pointed out that the conception of educated man was:

... one which harmonized especially with the aims and interests of a commercial and 'pecuniary' culture. Education ... was a discipline which inculcated the recognized assumptions of the status quo, or rather the assumptions of the mercantile and land owning class.¹⁶

Education was designed to preserve the ideas of the status quo and though the people were committed to an idea of progress, it was the progress of Meyer's "venturous conservative." Historian Rush Welter, in discussing the concept of progress at that time, thought of education as "... a great engine against 'depotism,"... intended only to preserve the present structure of government and society, albeit with some minor changes." Progress was to be a continuation of the present and educators of the times such as Horace Mann stressed the need for the schools to build a consensus of values, the values of the group who were promoting the schools.

Schools Safeguard of Freedom

What were the values of the society and what did they envision the purposes of the common school to be? In theory the common school was to be a common equalizer that would homogenize all people from diverse backgrounds. This was a need created along with the new republican government and the freedoms it granted to diverse groups. The permanence of civil institutions depended upon educating the youth, otherwise there was the danger of losing control to the many heterogeneous groups of Anglo-Saxons, Germans, and French and halfbreeds which made up the population of the West. It was noted that the ideas of the immigrants should be "remodeled" by the school. 13 There was interest in maintaining the government in its present form for "permanency of our institutions presupposes capability for intelligent public action on the part of every member of the community"14 and in order to secure this, the youth must be educated to preserve existing institutions in their purity. Schools were expected to safeguard democracy and keep the republican form of government from becoming corrupted by outsiders.16

Sound educational training provided a means of social control of the child. There were attitudes of fear of the masses for Tocqueville in meeting with Timothy Walker, an Easterner visiting in Cincinnati, noted Walker's concern with the power being given the masses.18 Reverend B.P. Aydelott, in an address before the closing sessions of Woodward College and High School in Cincinnati in 1836, stated his fear of the less-enlightened and the poor whom he termed "working classes" that and hope the teachers would guard them from "apostles of destruction."" This was an argument used to gain support for the common school movement, for if the poor could be controlled by the educational system, then it would be far less costly than caring for them later as criminals or paupers. Reverend Dr. Humphrey noted that the schoolmaster's effect was for eternity because he was dealing with the plastic minds of his pupils. By making the pupils good, they would curb their waywardness as adults and would fit well into the society. The school had to act upon the young, demanding strict subordination to

prescribed rules and duties. ** Education would diminish atrocious action and evil, and as a result, legislation would become milder, religion would be purlfied from superstition and the society would be improved by the educated. ** Education was looked upon as a form of social insurance to be paid for as a preventive against crime, vice and pauperism. Free universal education, according to Asa D. Lord, editor of the Ohio Journal of Education, was to be the "best insurance which can be effected upon property, and the surest guarantee for the safety of property, reputation and life." **

Another great concern was preventing corruption with sound moral education. This was the beginning of the conflict between those who advocated direct religious training in the schools and those who professed a need for non-sectarian moral training. Part of this battle took place in Massachusetts between Horace Mann, who advocated Bible reading without note or comment, and the group who wanted sectarian religious training in the public schools.

Schools Not Just Intellectual Training

In Ohio, the concern of the people was with the question of moral principles as part of educational training. There was concern expressed that the intellectual needs of the children were being attended to, but that their affective or spiritual culture was inadequate. There was emphasis placed upon development of the whole mind, body and spirit with education promoting loyalty to parents, good institutions, good government and to heaven. It was important to keep the passions in check and to provide youth with discipline using stern principles of religion and morality when children were young. Moral education took precedence for, it was noted in The School Friend that, "we are free to say, unhesitantly, that we consider a right education of the heart to be infinitely more important than any degree of pure intellectual education." 22

In addition to political, moral and social purposes, it was noted in The Universal Educator that the schools were still expected to "cultivate all the powers and faculties of mind... to an equal standing with those of their fellow beings who possess the greatest degree of knowledge, wisdom and goodness." It was hoped that the schools would produce good learners, not necessarily learned men. The intellect was created not to receive material passively, but to use its powers to observe, reason, judge, contrive and be active in acquiring truth, through inquiry.24

While development of the intellect was deemed important, advice was often given against "premature mental effort to be the real cause of very much of the evil which is charged against study itself." It was argued that too much study could be injurious to health, monotonous and irksome. It was even suggested that schools were being promoted to keep students from the employment market, and that shorter sessions should be the rule. Reverend Edward Thompson felt that "genius is more frequently a curse than a blessing. Its possessor, relying on his extraordinary gifts, generally falls into habits of indolence, and fails to collect the materials requisite for useful and magnificent efforts."

Another of the primary objectives of the school was to teach the youth to labor efficiently by instructing them in the principles of business. A differential was drawn between those who attended the colleges and academies and those who sought a livelihood as laborers. The school

was to assist in making the individual productive both to himself and to the society. The schools would produce laborers, industrious shop-keepers, prosperous and wealthy mechanics, and honorable merchants. They would then become influential citizens and act as stimulants to prosperity.

So regardless of the diversity of the student's background, aspirations, ideas, or personal values, the philosophy of education of the first half of the nineteenth century was to prepare the student morally, intellectually, vocationally, socially, and politically to fit neatly into the ideal of community for the society which was being built. The plan was to take all these students, but provide them with the kinds of schooling to ensure social democracy. The common school was designed for the major social group and was, in reality, an uncommon school. Evidence to this effect can be found in the many ways the different groups were viewed and how the programs in the schools were designed for them. In planning education for all, the needs of such groups as the Black, the Indian, the woman, the Catholic, the Jew, the poor, and the immigrant were often overlooked in the zeal to provide community for all. This problem was even recognized by Marcellus F. Cowdery, a noted leader of the times:

If has certainly failed during the last fifteen years, of commanding general confidence, and of meeting the wants of our increasing population... while it affords encouragement to the acquisition of knowledge to a majority of the children of the State, it neither aims at the proper education of all, nor provides means adequate to the accomplishment of this object.²⁸

Educational views expressed about these minority groups provide insights into how they were viewed. This becomes obvious in noting how the poor were viewed. John Picket, expressing his concern for the poor, questioned what would happen, "unless the hand of charity is extended to their aid."29 Many journal articles talked about the lower classes in derogatory ways. Asa D. Lord noted that the number of illiterates had increased since 1840 and attributed this to the influx of foreigners, "many of whom are known to be deplorably ignorant, it is unquestionably true that a large portion of our youth are either orphans, or the children of those who have no just views of the importance of education . . . "30 He went on to affirm that these types of people allowed their children to leave school whenever they could go to work and those that stayed caused trouble in the schools. Stereotypes of the poor were also perpetuated. For example, it was noted that taste and refinement had to be advanced in the schools to prevent the homes of the poor from being "a receptacle of filth . . . "131 Poverty and crime were almost always equated, and evil habits were traced to a lack of instruction for those "whose natural mental powers have been smothered for want of civilization."32

Education a Solution

It was felt that education could be the solution for the problems of the poor. Missionary approaches were directed away from distant lands and to "our dear neighbors who are wretched and destitute..." whereby school "... takes the poor, the unfortunate, the vicious; instructs and clothes them; teaches them practically that it is better to be clean and honest than dirty and vicious,... and starts them on a virtuous line of life..." "35 To promote the

of a class differential came into being. This was the situation on the urban, rather than rural scene. In urban localities striking disparities in wealth and diversity of occupations sharpened class lines earlier than in less populous districts. Aaron stated:

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religion. The Board did not deem this objection sufficient enough to reject the book, however, Hancock editorialized that immigrants had rights and privileges of natives, but "... we believe we ought to have and assert some sort of national character. Though we have no established church, yet we believe the religion of our people to be decidedly Christian and Protestant, and we have no de-

sire to see it anything else."50

Typical of the treatment accorded to the American Indian was the fact that both the Indian and the Negro were excluded from the schools which were designed for all.51 The Negro was relegated to separate schools by the Ohio Supreme Court. Those who were more than three-eighths African and were colored in appearance were also not allowed to attend the common schools.52 This condition of special schools for blacks existed in Ohio till after the Civil War, despite the fact that in 1828, 10 percent of the population of Cincinnati was Negro. Richard Wade in his study of The Urban Frontier concluded that "at just the time when the black population expanded most rapidly, its contacts with other Cincinnatians lessened markedly."53 This happened at the time when the idea of a common school for all people was just getting started as the means of providing social intercourse for all groups in the society.

They felt they were providing for the education of all the children in the state, but only in separate institutions. To the thinking of the leadership this was a progressive step, for there were those serving on the Committee on Education of the Ohio Constitutional Convention in 1850, who argued against provision of any type of education for the Negro. 14 In one place, the Dalton School District, integrated schools for the Negro were advocated, but never accepted. Minority groups occupied little of the plans of the majority power structure as it went about planning an educational system which was to be available and com-

mon to all.

Problems Developed

As the schools developed, evidence began to appear that there were many problems the schools encountered as they tried to provide a common school experience. Merle Curti, in his study of an American frontier community, noted that many did not participate in the formal educational process because some lived in remote sections, there were language barriers for the foreign born, a lack of interest on the part of parents, and that poverty played against education.55 Though Curti's study was of a small community, many of his conclusions paralleled ideas which were discussed in an article in the Ohio Journal of Education. This article dealt with enemies of the common school, placing them into three categories. (1) those unwilling to be taxed, (2) those unwilling to have their children associate with the vulgar and rude, and (3) those who wanted their children instructed in sectarian religious forms. 56 Asa D. Lord wrote about the disinterest in making repairs to buildings and improving existing facilities. He also discussed the subject of irregular attendance; and in other articles statistics were quoted which showed an absentee record of 20 percent of those enrolled in the Cincinnati schools. 57 By 1860 certain statistics showed that less than half of those eligible to attend schools were enrolled. Such variables as illness, bad roads, and the lack of shoes kept many children from the schools each year.58

Perhaps some of this disinterest existed because the schools were not serving the needs of all the groups for whom they were intended. The leaders of the common school movement believed in and supported the concept of a school common to all people, where a common educational program could advance common values and aspirations of a democratic society. This did not provide an opportunity for education in terms of different individual's particular needs or values. The concept of providing for community was not fully realized for certain groups.

Though the leadership group was well-meaning, even they recognized that they did not achieve what had been intended. The Ohio public school system was never able to provide true equality of educational opportunity for all—it served only one class. Its problem has been and still continues to be that it is a common school, with common goals trying to create a community for a society whose needs are not necessarily common. Until it begins to provide for the diversity of the population through purpose and program, it will encounter difficulty in achieving its goals. The uncommonness of the common school will continue to preclude the possibility of equality of educational opportunity, now as then.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Lawrence A. Cremin, The American Common School: An Historic Conception (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1951), pp. 81-82.
- ² Western Academician and Journal of Education and Science, I, No. 1 (1837), 229.
- Daniel Aaron, "Cincinnati, 1818-1838: A Study of Attitudes in the Urban West (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1942), pp. 50-56.
- * James Hall, The West, Its Commerce and Navigation (Cincinnati: H.W. Derby & Co., 1849), p. 2.
- ⁵ Alexis De Tocqueville, Democracy in America, revised by Francis Bowen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), II, 228-29; George W. Pierson, Tocqueville and Beaumont in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 551; See also, Daniel H. Calhoun, Professional Lives in America, Structure and Aspiration, 1750-1850 (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 6, where he discusses the aristocracy of talent.
- ⁶ Aaron, "Cincinnati," pp. 58-61; Pierson, Tocqueville and Beaumont, p. 550.
 - Aaron, "Cincinnati," p. 60.
 - * Pierson, Tocqueville and Beaumont, p. 551.
- Richard C. Wade, The Urban Frontier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 229.
 - 10 Aaron, "Cincinnati," p. 335.
 - 11 Meyer, Jacksonian, p. 39.
- ¹² Rush Welter, "The Idea of Progress in America, An Essay in Ideas and Methods," Journal of the History of Ideas, XVI (1955), 409.
- ¹³ "Our Public Schools," Western School Journal, I, No. 2 (1847), 9.
- "Editorial, "Education, Its Advancement," Western School Journal, I, No. 8 (1847), 88; see also, "The Importance and Advantages of Co-operation in the Cause of Education," Academic Pioneer and the Guardian of Education, I, No. 2 (1832), 34-36.
- ""Introductory," Ohio Common School Director, I, No. 1 (1838), 1; "Educational Papers and Education," Ohio School Journal, III, No. 8 (1848), 113-14; "Letters to Educators, Number Two," Ohio Journal of Education, VII, No. 9 (1858), 261-63; William E, Channing, "What is Education?" Common School Advocate, II, No. 23 (1838), 178-80; Rev. M.R. Dewey, "Common School," Common School Advocate, I, No. 3 (1837), 23; "The Universal Educator," Universal Educator, I, No. 1 (1837), 1; "Have Americans

Any Educational System?" The School Friend, V, No. 3 (1850), 40; Mr. Grable, "Common School Government," The Ohio Teacher and Western Review, I (1850), 540-42.

- 16 Pierson, Tocqueville and Beaumont, p. 561.
- "Rev. B.P. Aydelott, "American Education, or the Education We Need; An Address Delivered at the Close of the Sessions, 1836-37, of Woodward College and Woodward High School," (Cincinnati: Kendall & Henry, Printers, 1837), p. 14.
- ** Rev. Dr. Humphrey, "Teachers' Seminaries," The School Friend, III, No. 2 (1847), 22-23; "A Superintendency," Western School Journal, I, No. 10 (1847), 85; Picket, "Necessity of Discipline," p. 7.
- "The Effects of Education," Common School Advocate, I, No. 1 (1837), 3.
- ²⁰ Asa D. Lord, "The Claims of Universal Education," Ohio Journal of Education, 1, No. 2 (1852), 59.
- ²¹ Rev. Elipha White, "Education," Common School Advocate, I, No. 10 (1837), 73-4; John W. Picket, "Necessity of Discipline," Western Academician and Journal of Education and Science, I, No. 1 (1837), 5-10.
- ²² "Education, Number XIV," The School Friend, II, No. 8 (1847), 113; see also, "Little Things," Common School Advocate, I, No. 9 (1837), 69; "The True End of Education," Western School Journal, II, No. 9 (1848), 138.
 - 23 "The Universal Educator," 3.
- "On Mathematical Instruction," Western Academician and Journal of Education and Science, I, No. 2 (1837), 91-102; Channing, "What is Education?" 38-39; William E. Crosby, "Methods and Power," Journal of Progress in Education, Social Economy and the Useful Arts, II, No. 1 (1861), 11-13; "The End of Education," Western School Journal, I, No. 5 (1847), 36; Charles S. Royce, "First Lesson in School," Journal of Progress in Education, Social Economy and the Useful Arts, II, No. 1 (1860), 13-16; "Article I, To the Public," Academic Pioneer and the Guardian of Education, I, No. 2 (1832), 23-30.
- ²⁵ Howard, "Hurry, Hurry, Hurry," Common School Journal, I, No. 2 (1838), 7; Ohio Journal of Education, VIII, No. 3 (1859), 68-72.
- ²⁶ "Non Attendance," Common School Advocate, I, No. 6 (1837), 35.
- 27 Reverend Edward Thompson, "Perseverance," Ohio Journal of Education, IV, No. 11 (1855), 332.
- ²⁸ Marcelus F. Cowdery, "The School System of Ohio," Ohio Journal of Education, I, No. 3 (1852), 80-81.
- ²³ John W. Picket, "Lancaster and Pestalozzi," Western Academician and Journal of Education and Science, I, No. 5 (1837), 274.
- ³⁰ Asa D. Lord, "Education in Ohio," Ohio Journal of Education, III, No. 9 (1854), 258.
- "Taste and Refinement in the School Room," Ohio Journal of Education, V, No. 4 (1856), 107.
- 31 "Waste of Intellect," Schoolmaster and Academic Journal, I. No. 1 (1834), 7.
- 33 "Industrial Schools," Ohio Journal of Education, VII, No. 3 (1858), 68.
- 34 Samuel Lewis, "Free Schools," Ohio Common School Director, I, No. 3 (1838), 44.
 - 35 Catherine E. Beecher, Educational Reminiscences and

- Suggestions (New York: J.B. Ford, 1874), notes this several times throughout the book.
- ³⁶ William H. Seward, "Females As Teachers," Monthly Chronicle of Interesting and Useful Knowledge, Embracing Education, Internal Improvements and the Arts, II (1839), 174, "A State Society," Ohio Common School Director, I, No. 5 (1838), 72; Universal Educator, I, No. 1 (1837), 2; "Female Teachers," The School Friend, V, No. 4 (1850), 61; Horace Mann, "The Female Teacher," Ohio Journal of Education, VII, No. 9 (1858), 263-64.
- ³⁷ Samuel Lewis, "How to Get Good Teachers," Ohio Common School Director, I, No. 5 (1838), 70, 72.
 - 38 Ibid. 1, p. 72.
- 39 "Editorial Table, Female Teachers," Journal of Progress in Education, Social Economy and the Useful Arts, I (1860), 239.
- Marcelus F. Cowdery, "To Ladies and Lady Teachers," Ohio Journal of Education, I, No. 2 (1852), 55-59.
- ⁴¹ John Grable, "Letter to Professor Rainey," Ohio Teacher and Western Review, I (1850), 542; Ohio Journal of Education, 68-72.
- 42 "Mingling the Sexes in School," The School Friend, V, No. 6 (1850), 88.
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 - " Ohio Teacher and Western Review, II, No. 4 (1851), 181.
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