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Lawrence A. Cremin

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Lawrence A. Cremin - 1976

Lawrence A. Cremin (1925–1990) holds enormous stature in 20th century American education. His name inspires awe among educational leaders, historians, former colleagues, administrators, teachers, and students who had the good fortune to come in contact with him. He was a gifted scholar, a brilliant teacher, an accomplished administrator, and a gracious ambassador for American education.

A modest man with strong New York City roots, Cremin's parents founded The New York Schools of Music and hoped he might become a concert pianist (Anderson 2001). He attended the Model School of Hunter College and Townsend Harris High School and, at the age of 15-½ years, entered the College of the City of New York. His studies at City College were interrupted by service in the U.S. Army Air Corps, but he returned and received his bachelor's degree. Aided by the G.I. Bill, Cremin became a graduate student at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he earned his master's and doctoral degrees.

He joined the faculty at Teachers College and spent his entire professional career there, sponsoring 31 doctoral students, teaching innumerable classes, and founding many organizations, including the History of Education Society and the National Academy of Education (Lagemann and Graham 1994). He served as the President of Teachers College from 1974–1984 and President of the Spencer Foundation from 1985–1990. He was a trustee of the Children's Television Workshop, the Dalton School, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. He served as associate editor of the *Teachers College Record* and as editor of the *Classics in Education* series, which included 52 volumes. Through his work, Cremin sought to improve scholarship and teaching, with specific emphasis on the field of educational history.

A prolific author, Cremin wrote 16 books and countless articles and reviews. Cremin's first book *American Common School: An Historic Conception* was a revision of his doctoral dissertation. In this work, Cremin argued that common schools helped transmit democratic government. His next major publication was a textbook, *History of Education in American Culture*, which he coauthored with R. Freeman Butts.

Ten years after the publication of his first book, Cremin wrote a ground-breaking work that earned him national recognition as a first-rate historian. *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* established Cremin as a

distinguished scholar in both American history and educational research. This book, which linked the history of progressive education to the larger progressive movement in American history, earned Cremin the prestigious Bancroft prize in American history in 1962 (Fowler 1990). As a result of the success of the book, Cremin received a dual appointment—at Teachers College and in the History Department of Columbia University—which enabled him to champion discipline-based scholars in educational studies and to urge a broadened focus of historical scholarship. Radical revisionists challenged Cremin’s findings, but all acknowledged the intellectual debt owed to Cremin for this pioneering study.

Though *The Transformation of the School* firmly established Cremin as a leading intellectual figure, his most masterful and comprehensive work—a three-volume history of American education—proved Cremin without equal. The three volumes include *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783*; *American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876*; and *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience 1876–1980*. Cremin wrote this comprehensive history of American education at the invitation of American Historical Association officials in honor of the U.S. Office of Education’s centennial in 1967 (Parker and Parker 1991). It took Cremin nearly a quarter of a century to complete this nearly 2,000-page text.

In *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience* (1988, ix–x), Cremin broadly defined education as, “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, or sensibilities, as well as any learning that results from the effort, direct or indirect, intended or unintended.” By using this all-embracing understanding of education in the three volumes of *American Education*, Cremin was able to detail a wide range of American cultural and intellectual history.

He also extended his educational studies to include all institutions and agencies that shaped cultural beliefs and social behavior over time. For example, Cremin believed that educative organizations and tools included television, churches and synagogues, newspapers and magazines, museums, and libraries, as well as schools, colleges, and universities. The second volume of the trilogy won the Pulitzer Prize in history.

In his last published work, *Popular Education and Its Discontents*, which Cremin often referred to as the coda to the three-volume history of American education, he called for educational research that could help provide opportunity for all individuals to live happy, productive lives.

Despite his tremendous accomplishments, Cremin remained a modest man, seldom mentioning his achievements. He viewed himself, first and foremost, as a teacher despite his success as an author, educational leader, public speaker, and college president. When he retired as president of Teachers College, Cremin invited community members to his own “celebration of 10 years of collegueship” with a beer and popcorn party in the Teachers College courtyard.

Cremin’s life was cut short, when he died at age 64 doing what he loved most—walking the streets of New York City, the fertile learning environment that had been his home almost all of his life—heading to work at Teachers College.

Submitted by: Chara Haeussler Bohan, Baylor University

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