

David Nasaw *Schooled to Order: A Social
History of Public Schooling in the United States*
(OUP, 1979) 3

*The Campaign for the Common Schools:
The Enthusiasts, the Indifferent,
and the Opposition*

It was easier for the reformers to secure a monopoly on the meaning and practice of Protestant and republican common schooling than it was to attract or compel attendance at their common schools.

The reformers had formulated the solution to all social problems, or so they believed. They had designed the ultimate institution for the socialization of American youth. Their task was now to catalyze public opinion and raise public monies to pay for its operation.

The manufacturers and the common schools

It has been assumed that the reformers were the primary agents in the establishment and selling of the common school movement. This may or may not be true. What is certainly the case, however, is that without the direct and continual assistance of their friends, allies, and supporters from the business world, the reformers would have accomplished very little indeed. Though the most effective of ideologists, they were incapable by themselves of bringing about substantive reforms, either in the schools or in any other social institution.

As Alexander Field has suggested, "Perhaps it is not Mann, after all, who deserves the full-size statue in front of the Mas-

sachusetts State House, complete with the inscription, 'Father of the American Public School.' " For Mann would never have become secretary to the board if not first nominated by Edmund Dwight, a wealthy cotton textile manufacturer who persuaded Mann to take the job and supplemented his salary by \$500 a year.¹

Dwight was not the only successful businessman to support the common school crusade. The state boards, in Massachusetts as elsewhere, were chosen from a relatively small group of wealthy merchants, manufacturers, lawyers, and clergy. The lawyers and clergy invariably catered to the manufacturers and merchants, making the occupational diversity on the boards much less significant than might appear.²

It is impossible to know who the primary agents of reform were—the businessmen behind the scenes or the reformers on the front lines. What is known, however, is that the two groups worked well together, the reformers supplying the theoretical arguments and propaganda, and the businessmen, the money and political clout.

One of the reasons for Mann's particular success was his connections with the wealthy and powerful in his home state. As his biographer, Jonathan Messerli, has written, from the very start of his first tour of the state, Mann "was attempting to reach the influential people in each community." He was in continual contact not only with the local business elites but with the Lowells, the Appletons, the Lawrences, and the other industrialists and merchants who had amassed fortunes large enough to qualify them as spokesmen for the wealthy and powerful throughout the region.³

Though the prosperous and propertied in every walk of life were solicited for aid and support, it was the manufacturers who were most courted by the reformers. It was they, after all, who were most in need of—and best able to profit from—the character-trained and disciplined workforce the common schools intended to provide.

The reformers did not waste their words with the manufacturers. They appealed directly to their self-interest as businessmen whose profit margin depended on worker productivity.

Even Mann, among the most self-righteous and morally committed of the reformers, did not desist from descending to crude economism in his attempt to persuade the manufacturers to support his campaign. His entire *Fifth Annual Report* was in fact "a direct and plausible appeal to industrialists to support public education."⁴

After sending out questionnaires to several prominent manufacturers, Mann selectively published their conclusions on the "difference in the productive ability . . . between the educated and uneducated." As might have been expected, the employers agreed with Mann that schooled workers were worth more than unschooled.⁵

Neither Mann nor the manufacturers spent much time emphasizing the effects of schooling on specific work skills or general intelligence. The common schools were not going to be sold to manufacturers and taxpayers as intellectual or job training centers. Their contribution to the public welfare was their provision of moral education and character training for the poor. The real advantages of schooled over unschooled workers were, as Mann suggested to the manufacturers, the schooled workers' "docility and quickness in applying themselves to work"; their "domestic and social habits"; their "personal cleanliness"; their "dress and their households"; their "deportment and conversation"; their "economies of housekeeping"; their "standing and respectability among co-laborers, neighbors, and fellow-citizens generally"; and their "punctuality and fidelity in the performance of duties."⁶

The manufacturers were unanimous in proclaiming that those workers with schooling were, as Mann had suggested they might be, "more orderly and respectful in their deportment, and more ready to comply with the wholesome and necessary regulations of an establishment."⁷

J. K. Mills, who was connected with a "house" that had for the past ten years "constantly employed about three thousand people . . . in cotton mills, machine shops and calico printing works," considered common schooling a wise investment. He reminded his fellow manufacturers of the money they had already spent on their machinery. Only a schooled labor force

could be counted on to protect and multiply these investments while permanently preventing "any unnecessary depreciation."⁸

As Mann summed up his own arguments, now buttressed by the manufacturers' testimony, New England had become the most prosperous region in the union because its schools were the best. It would stay prosperous only if its schools were improved and expanded.⁹

The Midwestern reformers, no less than the Northeastern, directed their attention to the merchant and developing manufacturing classes, attempting to persuade them that common schooling would not only protect property already accumulated but enable them to accumulate still more. Caleb Mills, a private citizen in 1846, later to become Indiana's first Superintendent of Public Instruction, took upon himself the task of enlightening the property holders of the state as to their need for common schools. His "Open Letter" to the Indiana Legislature of 1846 contained a lengthy, densely argued section appropriately entitled, "Diffusion of Knowledge Benefits Property." Mills declared that common schooling would not only discipline the common people to the point where they would not threaten the sanctity of private property, engulf businessmen in a "whirlpool of bad debts," or practice disobedience to their employers, it would also be a direct sign to Eastern and European wealth that the West was civilized enough to safeguard their investments.¹⁰

It was only in the Southern states that the reformers were forced to do without the support of the more wealthy and powerful. While the Northeastern and Midwestern reformers could direct their attention to leaders in industry, commerce, and banking, Southerners had no similar constituencies to coax, cajole, and frighten into support for the common schools.

The South was for the most part a region of plantation owners with slaves, on the one hand, and small struggling rural farmers, on the other. Although the poor white farmers far outnumbered the plantation owners, their political power and influence was negligible.

The plantation owners of this period were not disinterested

spondent, the message remained the same. As Mann himself had complained in his *First Report*, the principal obstacle to common school expansion was the "apathy" of the people. The voters and citizens of the local districts—town and country—did not know what was best for them. They continued to ignore the advice of the reformers.²⁰

As early as 1820, Daniel Webster had warned that in the modern age of popular suffrage public instruction had become not a luxury so much as "a wise and liberal system of police, by which property, and life, and the peace of society are secured." The reformers through the 1840s would emphasize and reemphasize this argument. Taxpayers should regard school taxes as a form of property insurance, an investment in the social order. One reformer expressed this argument in a resolution offered to a staged convention called to elicit increased support for the common schools:

Resolved: That the best police for our cities, the lowest insurance of our houses, the firmest security for our banks, the most effective means of preventing pauperism, vice and crime, and the only sure defense of our country, are our common schools; and woe to us, if their means of education be not commensurate with the wants and powers of the people.²¹

Property holders were assailed with arguments that could not be ignored. True, the more prosperous would have to pay higher taxes, but did they not have more to protect from the rapacity of the unschooled? As Caleb Mills warned the "rich land-holders," "merchants," and "manufacturers" of Indiana, they needed the schools as much as the schools needed them. The state—through its establishment and support of common schools—was performing a service for, not taking anything away from, the property holders. School taxes, rather than an infringement on property rights, were the best investment in its security money could buy.²²

In New England and New York the reformers could concentrate their energies on fighting the battle for school taxes in the local districts. Further west and south however, they had to first

secure legislation permitting the districts the right to tax their inhabitants for support of the common schools.²³

The opponents of school taxes had arguments as long-winded, grandiose, and "American" as the reformers. School taxation, it was declared, was not only illegal, antidemocratic, and un-American; it was also an affront to the most basic right of parents: the right to raise their children as they saw fit. No government could compel support of its common schools; it was up to the individual parents to decide which, if any, of the available schools—common, private, or church—they would support.

Compulsory school taxation was, the opponents continued, more than an attack on American freedoms: it was an attack on the sanctity of the private property system. If American property were truly private, as the Founding Fathers had intended it to be, then no branch of government had the legal authority to confiscate any portion of it through compulsory taxation. Property might be taxed for roads and canals, prisons and police, but only because it could be assumed that all citizens either used or were protected by them. But all citizens did not have children in the common schools. Some had no children at all, others had grown children, still others had children whom they preferred to teach at home or send to private or church schools. To compel these individuals to pay taxes for schools their children would never attend was to rob them of their property.²⁴

Horace Mann, perhaps the most theoretically minded of the reformers, devoted almost his entire *Tenth Annual Report* to answering these arguments. The only solid defense of school taxes he could find, however, involved him in an indirect attack on the sanctity of private property. As Mann argued in this Report, those who appeared to have earned and now owned property were merely the "trustees" of the community's wealth. The absolutism of ownership was limited by the cooperation of nature, past generations, and God in allowing accumulation to occur in the first place. The "trustees" had earned not the property itself, but merely the right to oversee it for the community at large. Whether they knew it or not, the property holders of each and