

HISTORY, EDUCATION, AND THE SCHOOLS

WILLIAM J. REESE

FOREWORD BY MARIS VINOVSIS



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PREVIOUS BOOKS BY WILLIAM J. REESE

Power and the Promise of School Reform: Grassroots Movements During the Progressive Era (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); second edition, Teachers College Press, 2002.

The Social History of American Education (coeditor)
(University of Illinois Press, 1988).

The Origins of the American High School
(Yale University Press, 1995).

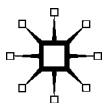
Hoosier Schools: Past and Present (Indiana University Press, 1998).

America's Public Schools: From the Common School to "No Child Left Behind" (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

History, Education, and the Schools

William J. Reese

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*To Richard and Averil Aldrich, for their kindness,
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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>Foreword</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
Introduction	1

Part I History and Its Uses

Chapter 1	
On the Nature and Purpose of History	7
Chapter 2	
What History Teaches about the Impact of Educational Research on Practice	37

Part II Urban Schools in the Nineteenth Century

Chapter 3	
Public Education in St. Louis	61
Chapter 4	
Political Economy and the High School	79

Part III Private Schools, Past and Present

Chapter 5	
Changing Conceptions of “Public” and “Private” in American Educational History	95
Chapter 6	
Soldiers for Christ in the Army of God: The Christian School Movement	113

Part IV The Fate of the Public Schools

Chapter 7	
Public Schools and the Common Good	141
Chapter 8	
Why Americans Love to Reform the Public Schools	159
<i>Notes</i>	173
<i>Index</i>	213

List of Figures

1.1	Graduate Study at the University of Wisconsin: Frederick Jackson Turner's History Seminar, ca. 1893–1894	19
2.1	Dressed in Their Sunday Best: An Ungraded School, ca. 1895	47
2.2	One Size Fits All: An Age-Graded Classroom on Patron's Day, Steelton, Pennsylvania, ca.1905	47
3.1	Learning Together in the Child's Garden: St. Louis, 1898	70
4.1	The Higher Learning in St. Louis	85
6.1	Some First Grade Pupils in a Christian School: Florida, 1988	134
6.2	Karl Shoemaker and Teammates; Florida Christian School, 1988	135
7.1	Jim Crow in the Midwest: First and Second Grade in New Albany, Indiana, 1908	151

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Foreword

In addressing complex issues, policymakers frequently turn to academic experts. In the past, leaders often sought historical information when crafting policies. Today, decision makers are more apt to consult specialists such as economists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, or system analysts. Rarely, if ever, do contemporary politicians seek advice from professional historians. And historians now are less likely to be asked to serve in the government than their colleagues from the other social sciences. At the same time, however, prominent leaders such as Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama periodically draw upon their own interpretations of the past, especially in the area of foreign affairs.

In the early twentieth century, historians were more involved in the policymaking process. For example, Charles Francis Adams, president of the American Historical Association in 1901, recommended that the organization convene a special July meeting before each U.S. presidential election so that scholars could offer advice on the major issues that the next administration might face. During World War I and II, historians also made significant contributions to the war effort. But as the historians became professionalized and focused more narrowly on academia, they gradually showed less interest in current policy issues.

In the past two decades, however, some historians are rediscovering the profession's earlier commitment to providing public policy analysis and advice. Education historians such as Patricia Graham, Carl Kaestle, Michael Katz, Jeffrey Mirel, Diane Ravitch, and David Tyack, for example, have produced timely policy studies of schooling. William Reese's new paperback edition of *History, Education, and the Schools* is a welcome addition as it provides a broad overview of history and policymaking as well as presents several examples of how a deeper understanding of the past might inform school reforms today.

The opening chapter traces the diverse ways in which analysts and citizens view and use history. After examining the debates among the Greeks and Romans about the nature and value of history, Reese traces the evolution of historical studies and concludes with a thoughtful assessment of the influence of post modernism on contemporary historians. The next chapter critically examines the contributions of past educational research on schools. Educators since the early twentieth century repeatedly have called for rigorous, scientific studies of education. But the overall quality and impact of those studies has been disappointing. As Congress continues its reauthorization of No Child Left Behind and the Institute of Education Sciences, legislators and other interested parties would be well advised to consult Reese's chapter on the challenges of producing reliable and useful education research.

The second part of the book looks at education changes in one particular community and then analyzes the national development of public high schools. Reese first examines St. Louis public schools through the contributions of three prominent educators. William T. Harris, the city superintendent of schools and later the U.S. Commissioner of Education, urged providing academic instruction for everyone and promoted schools as a means of fostering social mobility. Susan Blow, who was hired by Harris, instituted a universal kindergarten system in St. Louis and championed early childhood education nationally. And Calvin M. Woodward, a Washington University professor and a long-time school board member, campaigned to introduce manual training into the schools. When vocational education was introduced into the curriculum, however, it was more narrowly defined and applied than what Woodward had proposed. Reese illustrates the ability of influential education leaders to initiate reforms as well as the limitations placed upon them by local and historical circumstances.

The second chapter in this section discusses the creation and growth of nineteenth-century public high schools. Reese, who is the premier scholar of public high school development, discusses the political and social circumstances facilitating high school expansion. Particularly interesting is his analysis of the proliferation and widespread use of high school textbooks, though the basic components of the curriculum remained remarkably similar. Unfortunately most other historians have paid little, if any, attention to how secondary education actually may have influenced a student's subsequent life since most nineteenth-century high school attendees did not stay long enough to graduate from those institutions.

In the third part, Reese explores the evolution of private schools, a subject which has been largely ignored by most historians, but now is

attracting considerable interest among policymakers. After pointing out that the modern distinction between “public” and “private” education did not exist in colonial and early nineteenth-century America, Reese shows how most educators and the public gradually rejected the value of private K-12 education altogether. He concludes the first chapter by explaining why some groups after World War II, however, became more supportive of private schooling. Reese then turns to an analysis of why Christian day schools and academies since the 1960s have educated millions of students whose fundamental or evangelical parents now oppose today’s public schools. Together, these two chapters provide policymakers and historians with a clearer understanding of the re-emergence of public interest and support for private schooling today.

The concluding section looks at the role of public schools in furthering the common good and considers why Americans are so eager to reform their schools. Antebellum reformers, such as Horace Mann, strove to provide all children with the same high-quality education. But Reese then shows how Progressive era reformers subverted the earlier ideal of a common education by creating separate, unequal educational experiences for children from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, while most policymakers today continue to insist that schools should provide equal educational opportunities for all children, in practice, poor minority students living in inner cities are less likely to receive a high-quality education or to pursue a successful career than their more fortunate suburban counterparts. Given the exaggerated rhetoric of what education can achieve as well as the growing number of social problems that schools are expected to address, parents frequently complain about the failures of public education. As a result, policymakers and citizens typically call for yet another round of school reforms without realizing the limited success that similar initiatives achieved in the past.

Overall, Reese has produced a superb collection of thoughtful education history essays ranging from the investigation of public and private schooling in the past to the analysis of how those educational experiences might inform decision-making today. This well-written book will be of great interest not only to scholars, but to education policymakers and the general public.

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The chapters in this book all have previously appeared in a different form in edited books or journals. I am therefore grateful to the journals *Education Research and Perspectives*, *Educational Theory*, and *History of Education* as well as to Taylor & Francis, Thompson Publications, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the University of Missouri Press for permission to draw upon this work. Full citations precede the relevant chapter endnotes. I am also

grateful to those who listened to and commented on earlier drafts of these chapters in public presentations. Some of the central ideas in chapter 3 were presented in a lecture at the Missouri Botanical Gardens in the fall of 2000. And graduate students kindly invited me to present some of the ideas from chapter 8 to the Wisconsin-Spencer Lecture Series on Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2004.

Introduction

According to Greek mythology, Jupiter and Mnemosyne gave birth to nine daughters, each with a special responsibility to promote learning and song and, in the case of Clio, memory. Jupiter was ultimately deposed as ruler of the earth, but the muse of history enjoyed a happier fate. Through the ages, Clio was honored in poetry and prose, paintings, and public art. Often she was depicted with a scroll and books, the historian's armament. An American poet in the early nineteenth century was moved to write:

Majestic Clio touched her silver wire,
And through time's lengthened vista moved a train,
In dignity sublime;—the patriot's fire
Kindled its torch in heaven's resplendent ray,
And 'mid contention rose to Heaven again.¹

The muse still lights the way. "What is Past is Prologue," reads the inscription on the imposing Muse of History that greets visitors at the entrance to the National Archives in Washington, DC. Historians have replaced scrolls with computers and can read books on-line, but the impulse to remember the past, whether in our thoughts or on paper, remains ever powerful in all societies.²

History, Education, and the Schools explores the nature and purpose of history and the evolution of key aspects of public and private schools in America. Two of the chapters were conceived in the mid- to late 1980s, and the rest after 1998. It was a period that witnessed momentous social changes whose impact on history and historical sensibility was profound. Since the early 1980s America has continued its political shift rightward; left-wing fantasies of worldwide revolution have evaporated, and market and communications revolutions and the attendant global economy have come to dominate the postmodern, postcommunist world. Even before the seemingly endless war on terror that followed the tragedies of September 11, 2001, many citizens, including academics and public intellectuals, shared a haunting sense

that the present was strikingly different from a slowly departing “modern” age when, according to many critics, industrialism, colonialism, and imperialism had defined Western culture. To some soothsayers, the events of 1989—the democracy movements in Tiananmen Square and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall—pointed to the end of a world that had stretched forward from the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, and the beginning of another.

Blessed with the advantage of distance, time, and better historical records, the next generation of scholars may better understand how to think about the recent past. For a historian who has lived through this period, however, the present moment is an appropriate time to take stock and reflect upon one’s labors. *History, Education, and the Schools* is divided into four parts, with two chapters apiece. The first chapter analyzes the history of historical writing from antiquity to the post-modern present. It explores the rise of the idea of history in Western culture as well as recent developments in the study of American history, when postmodern critics reopened old debates about the nature and purpose of historical scholarship. While this chapter traces the origins of history as a professional calling, the next one examines a more humble but not less important profession, education. It probes the history of educational research, specifically research on public education, in the twentieth century. Among education’s many social functions, its utility has always been prized in America. The chapter tries to find an answer to the question: Has educational research had an appreciable impact on public school practices?

Part II examines the evolution of public education in the nineteenth century. It focuses on cities, opening with a case study of the public schools of St. Louis, Missouri. Throughout the post—World War II period, citizens often described urban schools as deeply troubled. In a land of verdant hills and productive farms, cities had long seemed threatening and forbidding, despite their being centers of culture and achievement. Because of their innovative programs and leadership, the public schools of St. Louis once attracted visitors and attention from throughout the Western world. Some visited the local high school, one of the many educational innovations of the nineteenth century born in response to a variety of urban problems and educational needs. Often called the “people’s college,” the early American high school is the subject of a separate chapter. To unearth the values that permeated secondary instruction, the chapter explores what pupils read and studied across the curriculum, highlighting the boundaries of acceptable knowledge, especially views of political economy in a period of dramatic socioeconomic change.

Part III shifts the reader's attention from the public schools, which most pupils in America still attend, to the history of private education. Like urban schools, the place of private schools in the social order has been hotly debated over the last quarter century. The opening chapter examines the history of public and private education over a long time span, beginning with the colonial period and culminating in the 2002 U.S. Supreme Court decision that ruled in favor of public funding of church-based schools in Cleveland. (The city, it seems, remains central to educational innovation.) The next chapter moves from the general to the specific, focusing on the history of Christian day schools since the 1960s. It analyzes why many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians abandoned the public schools and also enables readers to experience vicariously the inner world of fundamentalist education. Christian schools are a notable expression of parental dissent against modernity and of emerging criticisms of the "public school monopoly," and school choice, variously defined. Today school choice enjoys almost universal assent.

The final section of this book returns the reader to a consideration of the place of public schools in American culture. Private and public schools have always had a symbiotic relationship, so they cannot be fully understood in isolation. The past generation witnessed growing public support for private schools and choice in general. As President Ronald Reagan famously proclaimed in his inaugural address in 1981—a time of high inflation, unemployment, budget deficits, and familiar complaints about ineffective schools—government was the cause of and not the solution to the nation's ills. Reagan often questioned the role of the public sphere in the common welfare. In what ways, however, had schools in the past contributed to the common good? What gains and losses accrued from the creation of a single system of public schools? Why did so many people in the late twentieth century find public education wanting and favor choices both within and outside of the system? The concluding chapter also covers broad historical terrain. Since numerous citizens, including parents, politicians, and pundits, regularly assail public education, why do so many people still believe the system can be reformed and labor to do so?

A final note: While I have preserved some of the original tone and style of these chapters, they first came to life as independent essays. Thanks to the benefits of further research, reading, and reflection, I have not only revised and rewritten them, but also forged some connections among them. Concentrating on a few interrelated topics, the book rests on a simple faith that the past is still prologue and that history is the best guide to understanding how our world and its educational arrangements

came to be. The present makes little sense without knowledge of the past. As Clio's admirers over the centuries have realized, history liberates us from an excessive preoccupation with ourselves by expanding our intellectual vistas. Otherwise, as it has been often said, one remains a child and never grows up.³

Part I

History and Its Uses

Chapter 1

On the Nature and Purpose of History

What is history? Since its emergence as a distinctive intellectual pursuit among the Greeks in the fifth century BCE, writers from a variety of backgrounds have tried to answer that question. To study, record, and educate others about the past seems so obvious to modern sensibility that it almost seems unnecessary to comment upon. In fact, the significance of the rise of history as a unique type of inquiry—related to but different from chronicles, storytelling, myths, and other ways of memorializing the past—can easily be underestimated. We assume today that acquiring knowledge of history, either for pleasure or for more utilitarian ends such as judging events and seeking “truth,” has some place in our lives, however vaguely the need may be articulated. Everyone, for example, has seen a movie where a character temporarily has lost his or her memory. This is a horrifying thought, since without a sense of the past, the present and future seem un navigable. The same is true of any culture or society. While professionally trained historians routinely argue among themselves about the fine points of historical research in academic journals and seminars, citizens from all walks of life employ history—verifiable or invented, etched through a mixture of sources and means into personal or collective consciousness—to guide their thinking and behavior.¹

Examples of the uses of history abound in our times. When the Smithsonian Institution in the mid-1990s planned an exhibit of the *Enola Gay*, which decades before had dropped the atomic bomb on Japan, outraged veteran groups lobbied politicians to kill the proposal, which they believed criticized America and overly empathized with a former enemy. Those who fought in World War II and conservative activists who had never served in the armed forces invoked an