

6-2016

# State of the Field: What is the Legacy of the Common Schools Movement? Revisiting Carl Kaestle's 1983 Pillars of the Republic

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## Recommended Citation

Neem, Johann N., "State of the Field: What is the Legacy of the Common Schools Movement? Revisiting Carl Kaestle's 1983 Pillars of the Republic" (2016). *History*. 78.

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# *State Of The Field*

## WHAT IS THE LEGACY OF THE COMMON SCHOOLS MOVEMENT? REVISITING CARL KAESTLE'S 1983 *PILLARS OF THE REPUBLIC*

JOHANN N. NEEM

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Perhaps no one put it better than Ellwood Cubberley who, during the first half of the twentieth century, was America's best-known education historian. Cubberley had attended common schools in Indiana, taught school, and served as superintendent in San Diego, before becoming an education professor at Stanford in 1898 and receiving his doctorate from Teachers College. In his 1919 *Public Education in the United States*, written for normal-school students, Cubberley laid down a moral tale. He was on the side of the school reformers. His story told of the heroic efforts of Horace Mann and others to overcome ignorance and resistance to achieve something great: public school systems. As Cubberley put it:

The battle for taxation for education; the battle to eliminate the pauper-school idea; the battle to do away with the rate bill and the fuel tax, and make the schools entirely free; the battle to establish supervision; the battle to eliminate sectarianism; the battle to extend and complete the system by adding the high school and the state university; the struggle to establish normal schools, and begin the training of teachers; the gradual evolution of the graded system of instruction; and the opening of instruction to all grades of women;—these are the great milestones in our early educational history which are of real importance for the beginning student of education to know.<sup>1</sup>

Note that these are all battles *to* achieve something, not battles between social groups or battles *against* something. Reformers like Cubberley believed wholeheartedly that education is a public good in a democracy and thus the state's responsibility.

Cubberley's words, for all their naïveté to our sophisticated critical ears, have a certain promise to them, a certain aspiration that we have lost. We are at a point when public school systems are endangered, when policymakers from right and left are embracing market-oriented alternatives and reducing exposure to liberal education in favor of vocational skills, and when teachers, after two centuries of efforts to achieve professional respect, are under

attack. The achievement of public education appears fragile today, as it did for Cubberley, who was not far removed from the deep political conflicts that accompanied the spread of public education. But for revisionist historians after the 1960s, the public schools did not appear fragile at all. To them, the schools were monolithic soul-crushing bureaucracies. Cubberley saw public schools as America's most democratic institutions; the historians of the New Left saw something altogether different.

An early sign of changing times was Rush Welter's 1962 *Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America*. Welter shared a progressive faith in education's centrality to democracy. That faith, Welter worried in 1962, was weakening. "The political education of the people has come to seem a visionary purpose," he wrote, "and because it has been so much a part of our democratic theory, its disappearance threatens democratic theory itself."<sup>2</sup> Welter looked to the nineteenth century to revive our faith. The revisionists did the opposite. And it is the revisionists' books that are now the classics of the field: Ruth Elson's *Guardians of Tradition* (1964); Michael Katz's *Irony of Early School Reform* (1968) and *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools* (1975); Stanley Schultz's *The Culture Factory* (1973); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976); and David Nasaw's *Schooled to Order* (1979).

When Lawrence Cremin accepted Bernard Bailyn's call for a history of education that went beyond schools to include families, churches, and voluntary associations, he argued that there existed an "American paideia." For revisionists, however, there could be no American paideia because there was no consensus. They agreed with Cubberley that the public schools were sites of intense political conflict, but they sided with the purported losers.<sup>3</sup> Reading their books, one cannot help but conclude that the major historical lesson from the common-schools movement is that common schools unjustly imposed Protestantism and nationalism on a diverse population; fostered or sustained class inequality; and sought to produce hard-working but docile workers for an industrializing economy. Ordinary Americans lost control of their schools to elite reformers committed to "social control" and capitalism. Katz concluded that in America "there is only one way to grow up" and "there is little freedom." Katz's conclusion reflects what Daniel Rodgers has called our "age of fracture"—an era in which we turned against institutions and traditions in the name of freedom rather than seeing those institutions and traditions as the sources of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Kaestle, along with David Tyack in *The One Best System* (1974) and *Managers of Virtue* (1982), shared the revisionists' skepticism about the aspirations of the common-school reformers, but sought to mitigate some of their more extreme and totalizing conclusions. *Pillars of the Republic* pulled together, synthesized, but also reinterpreted much of the then-new scholarship on the history of education. Unlike many of the revisionists' works, *Pillars'* tone was positive

even if it offered a critique of the reformers' project. Kaestle's sensitivity to historical complexity—to how good intentions go wrong—gave *Pillars* a moral subtlety that made it the classic it has rightly become. He helped Americans connect the insights of social history to their most noble civic aspirations. Along with Cremin's multivolume *American Education*, *Pillars* remains the go-to source for the formative era of U.S. public education.

Kaestle, unlike many revisionists, did not believe that industrial capitalism was a sufficient cause to explain the emergence of the common schools because reformers espoused similar values in rural settings and because, as he put it in an earlier article, "work discipline was not aimed uniquely at laborers."<sup>5</sup> Yet he agreed that one must start with "the material context" before analyzing "the ideological context" (p. 63). Kaestle urged us to see common schools as cultural responses to deeper changes. Capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, and immigration transformed America. Crime, poverty, and diversity were the effects, and it was to these effects that reformers responded (chap. four). Their solution was "cultural conformity" (p. 71). School reformers believed that "moral education and good citizenship" could "alleviate a host of worrisome problems and secure the nation's destiny" (p. 75) by helping Americans "internalize discipline" (p. 89).

Education reformers were challenged by rural and small-town Americans who favored local control and traditional education; religious and ethnic minorities who worried about reformers' Protestant nationalism; and ultimately by Southerners threatened by Northern ideas. The reformers succeeded because they had unity and influence, while the opponents' arguments were "inherently local and largely negative" (p. 148). Yet Kaestle made clear that at stake were divergent cultural understandings of the purpose of education, and thus he re-opened a space to think about moral purposes and school governance by returning agency to both reformers and their opponents.

We should never return to what Cremin called "the wonderful world of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley." Yet it is time to reconsider some of Kaestle's and the revisionists' conclusions, both because of new scholarship and because we inhabit our own historical moment. One place to start is with the schools' relation to economic change. For many revisionist scholars, public schools served the workforce needs of an industrializing society. Yet even in the 1970s, Alexander James Field found no evidence that industrialization required greater investment in "human capital." More recently, Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz argue in *The Race between Education and Technology* (2008) that there was no correlation between expanded schooling and economic growth in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Kaestle thus was right to question too direct a link between economic change and public schooling. If anything, elite reformers like Mann were responding to the negative aspects of industrialization, in particular the ways in which the

factory floor undermined human development. In 1839 Mann condemned factory owners who, by hiring children, pursued “a course of action by which the godlike powers and capacities of the human soul are wrought into thorough-made products of ignorance and misery and vice.”<sup>7</sup> In a classic essay, Maris Vinovskis rightly argued that Mann, in his 1841 *Annual Report*, promoted the relationship between education and workforce productivity out of a practical desire to appeal to employers at a time when he was under attack from Democrats. To Mann, appeals to economic self-interest were distasteful and were a last resort. Instead Mann believed that education should help young people to resist the “more dangerous seducements of prosperity.”<sup>8</sup> Education should challenge the self-interested behavior that capitalism was demanding.

This is not to say that the market revolution did not matter. In fact, it mattered greatly, but not in the way we think. As Mann’s comments above attest, school reformers sought to use education to correct for the degrading and destructive tendencies of modern capitalism. Public schools would enrich the spirit at a time when the economic world was increasingly unable to do so. For parents, however, the market revolution was also an important context. The market revolution, as new scholarship has made clear, was a source of profound anxiety as Americans were buffeted by what Jonathan Levy has identified as the “freaks of fortune.”<sup>9</sup> Parents sought to protect their children from a dangerous and unstable world. New ideas about childhood, which emphasized young people’s plasticity, made it all the more important that families and schools shelter children from the world and raise them in special nurseries. Thus, the market revolution spurred a focus on education, not for industrial discipline but to counteract it.

Yet there was another side that Kaestle and, before him, Welter emphasized. Many Americans resisted the reformers’ cultural project. They argued that taxes need only cover the basics. Their concern was that the cultural argument hid an economic one, that access to education furthered class privilege. This question was raised explicitly as reformers sought to expand access to public high schools. And here, one might venture, if there was an enemy it was, to use Gordon Wood’s phrase, us. As Katz’s student David Labaree argued in a series of books beginning with *The Making of an American High School* (1988), parents transformed schools into a “credentials market.” It was parents, not reformers, who turned to public schools for private aspirations: “The high school was founded to produce citizens for the new republic but quickly became a vehicle for individual status attainment.”<sup>10</sup>

School reformers opposed but could not resist the credentials racket, Joseph Kett concludes in *Merit* (2013). Opposed to individualistic competition—something that they thought society already had too much of—reformers embraced what Kett calls “managed competition” as a compromise position. They argued for graded schools, where children would progress from grade

to grade (first grade, second grade, etc.) as cohorts, combining meritocracy with group solidarity to lessen the adverse effects of individual competition.<sup>11</sup>

As reformers gained traction, left-leaning scholars celebrated the resistance, and conservative scholars now do too, especially in the wake of Supreme Court decisions that have required public schools to become secular. Many conservative scholars have called for the disestablishment of what they call government schools. The counterpart to Kaestle is Charles Glenn's *The Myth of the Common School* (1988). Glenn, like Cubberley, came to history from practice. From 1970 to 1991 he oversaw urban education and equity efforts in the Massachusetts Department of Education before becoming an education professor at Boston University.

Glenn criticizes reformers' "ungenerosity toward the stubborn particularities of loyalty and conviction, the 'mediating structures' and world views, by which people actually live." For Catholics, ethnic Germans, and others, reformers' efforts to bring Americans together were unjust and alienating. It is therefore a "myth" that the common schools actually promoted something common. Reformers like Mann were not serving capital but "an emerging class specializing in law and government, in social and moral uplift."<sup>12</sup> Revisionists thought schools served the economic elite; Glenn sees them as serving bureaucracy. Neither emphasize benefits to students, families, nor democracy.

Kaestle too ultimately came down against the reformers' project. In fact, there is little difference between Kaestle's and Glenn's conclusions. Kaestle believed that reformers' aspirations reflected "a naïve, incorrect, inhumane, and unjust view of the matter." Their legacy was "the American faith in education" and the "cosmopolitan ideal of inclusive schools," but this legacy came at a "cultural cost" because reformers valued uniformity over diversity and thought that "centrally directed" oversight was necessary (pp. 222–23).<sup>13</sup> Reformers, Glenn writes, were "consciously seeking to create a unified cultural system that, they were convinced, was essential to the health and progress of nation-states in which the common people, for a variety of political, social, and economic reasons, were of increasing significance."<sup>14</sup> Glenn concludes that parents, not the community, ought to be in charge of their children's education, hence we do not need common schools.

Both Kaestle and Glenn claim that the expansion of bureaucratic control served elite interests, a point made most effectively in David Tyack's *The One Best System*. Tyack endorsed "neither the euphoric glorification of public education" nor "the current fashion of berating public school people and regarding the common school as a failure." When he wrote *The One Best System* in 1974, however, Tyack felt a strongly critical approach was justifiable because urban systems were "more like the Great Wall of China than like the Walls of Jericho."<sup>15</sup> More recently, writing in the wake of four decades of school reform, Tyack has become worried that we are in danger of throwing the baby out

with the bathwater. In his recent *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society* (2003), Tyack concludes that we need to recover the best of the common schoolers' aspirations.

Both Tyack and Kaestle placed elite efforts at control at the center of their narratives. There is no doubt that, as Tyack and Kaestle argued, bureaucracies can become entrenched interests that lose sight of their original purposes. Moreover, Tyack recognized the tension between local control and expert guidance. Too often communities were "oblivious of possible local tyranny and parochialism" while reformers did not understand "how fragile, finally, is a sense of voluntary community in a mass society."<sup>16</sup> Kaestle reached a similar conclusion: "Local control is not virtuous merely by being closer to home, but neither is central authority superior just because it is bigger and lays claim to a cosmopolitan ideal" (p. 225).

Localism remains important to American schools today. It enables ordinary citizens to deliberate about what they want their children to learn and to have political voice. Moreover, as William Fischel argues in *Making the Grade: The Economic Evolution of American School Districts* (2009), neighborhood public schools remain a central node for social capital formation, a site where strangers become neighbors and citizens. But democracies also require professional expertise and, today, we live in a society where the authority of experts is eroding—not just in k-12 education, but in journalism, medicine, higher education, and elsewhere. The result has not been greater popular control but managerialism, which shifts power to a different set of elites who are neither invested in nor experts in the ends, virtues, and practices of the professions.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, then, the effort to undermine professionals has gone too far, robbing them of the moral and political resources they need to sustain the public goods they provide.

Americans rightly struggle to find the balance between popular control and professional authority. But, as Sophia Rosenfeld argues in *Common Sense: A Political History* (2011), there is a real danger of anti-intellectualism in the presumption that common sense trumps the uncommon sense of expertise. That's what reformers at the time worried about. In his novel *Locke Amsden* (1848), Daniel Pierce Thompson, who would go on to serve as Vermont's Secretary of State as a Republican in the 1850s, narrated the tale of school teacher Amsden, who so successfully inspired his students that parents started to worry about "brain fever." Amsden almost loses his job when his friend, a local doctor, points out that the students' illness was more likely caused by bad schoolhouse ventilation than too much learning.

Yet the common schools would never have expanded if, ultimately, they were not popular. That raises a conundrum. If they were truly elite-driven institutions, why did Americans support them? Yes, there was conflict, but public schools expanded at a time when they were locally governed and

funded and when party competition enabled popular dissatisfaction to gain political expression. In their careful studies, economists Peter Lindert and Sun Go have found that school taxes and suffrage are correlated: wherever more could vote, public school taxes increased. This was not the result of elite fears of uneducated voters. Instead, as schooling became normative, voters had an incentive to shift the burden from parents (via tuition) to the wealthy (via taxation).

That, however, begs the question of how and why schooling became normative, sufficiently so that Democrats, even as they took on banks, corporations, public canals, and other aspects of the Whig platform, supported public education. For too long we have assumed that public education reflected bipartisan consensus. Actually, it worked the other way around. Public schools proved too popular to resist. And here, the insights of American Political Development (APD) help. To begin, Nancy Beadie's work makes clear that state governments relied on the social capital of communities to expand their provision of public education. Citizens mobilized their own labor and resources to organize schools in localities across the nation. Once in existence, however, public schools themselves were what Richard John has called "agents of change." As communities used taxes to build schoolhouses, elect school boards, and hire teachers, more and more Americans came to expect access. Each decision generated greater momentum, what scholars call "path dependence." By the 1830s, the forces of path dependence were sufficiently strong to resist disruption.<sup>18</sup> This story helps us understand not just the origins of public education systems, but, in fact, the local expansion of the public sector.

Common schools expanded at a time of rapid immigration, especially of Catholics. Philip Hamburger, in *Separation of Church and State* (2004), concluded that anti-Catholicism was a core rather than supplementary reason for expanding public education. Yet much of the common school agenda was articulated before massive Catholic immigration. Immigration confirmed reformers' belief that public schools should foster a common culture. Moreover, recent scholarship obliges us to question whether reformers' cultural agenda was, as Kaestle argued, a misguided response to deeper social and economic changes. In *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993) and *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), political scientist Robert Putnam concludes that communities with social capital—the "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them"—have better civic health. Social capital "lubricates social life" because "frequent interaction among diverse sets of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity."<sup>19</sup> Social capital is particularly vital for democracies. Compared to more coercive regimes, social theorist Charles Taylor writes, democracies require a "strong form of cohesion" since citizens must be able to work together peaceably. Sociologist Craig Calhoun argues that democratic



politics “requires thinking of ‘the people’ as active and coherent and oneself as both a member and an agent.”<sup>20</sup>

This was the project reformers undertook. The public schools would bring together Americans from different economic, social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds to encourage social solidarity. They were acting reasonably at a time when social trust was declining and other institutions—churches and parties, for example—were fragmenting. Americans attacked one another, sometimes violently, over politics, religion, race, class, and access to employment. In *Rioting in America* (1996), Paul Gilje concluded, “Americans could kill each other because they did not identify with each other.”<sup>21</sup>

Randolph Roth, in his monumental study *American Homicide* (2009), reaches the same conclusion. Homicide rates “exploded” in the 1840s and 1850s because of “immigration, economic hardship, and the conquest of areas populated by Hispanic and Native peoples.” While other countries contended with similar issues, the United States was exceptional because “Americans could not coalesce into a nation.” Roth writes: “A sense of patriotism or kinship with countrymen plays a decisive role in determining whether men will subject other members of society to violence.” He also comments that “nothing suppresses homicide within a social group more powerfully than a sense of connectedness that extends beyond the bounds of family and neighborhood and forges a strong bond among peoples who share race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality.”<sup>22</sup> In a violent society divided by race, ethnicity, and religion, reformers hoped that nationality might bring Americans together.

To Kaestle and Glenn, the cost was too high, especially for minorities. Catholic immigrants were obliged to attend schools that, in Diane Ravitch’s words, promoted “sectless Protestantism.” New York City’s Bishop John Hughes noted that a child in the city’s schools would not only be taught what was, to Catholics, false doctrine, but textbooks and teachers regularly portrayed Catholicism negatively. Yet even here, recent scholarship offers a more nuanced interpretation. First, we now know that Catholicism was itself diverse, and that ethnicity and region shaped whether or not Catholic Americans attended public schools or embraced parochial alternatives. Second, historians have sought to return agency to Catholicism, which was engaged in a transatlantic dialogue with liberalism and nationalism. To John McGreevy, “like their European counterparts, Catholic intellectuals in the United States . . . defined themselves against dominant ideas of freedom.” Jay Dolan concludes that 1830s “church leaders rejected the democratic impulse and enlightened piety” and “chose to stand against the [American] culture.” None of this is to diminish nor to excuse anti-Catholicism, which expressed itself not just in politics but through violence, but to recognize the unavoidable tension between respecting minority rights and our democracy’s need for common civic virtues, a tension Stephen Macedo wrestles with in his 2000 book *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy*.<sup>23</sup>

The interchange between Catholics and common school reformers made clear that no curriculum could ever be neutral between goods. And, indeed, reformers had a vision. They believed that a democracy must equip all children with the knowledge, skills, and virtues necessary for both citizenship and self-making, or what was then called "self-culture." This point has been made most effectively by Daniel Walker Howe. Once we understand the faculty psychology of the era, Howe argues, we can better make sense of the intellectual and moral aspirations of education reformers. The common school curriculum was designed to promote what Howe, in *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (1997), called "the democratization of the ideal of self-construction."<sup>24</sup> Kaestle argued that the curriculum promoted "obedience, discipline, and order" (p. 96), a conclusion echoed in François Furstenberg's *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (2006), but, in fact, reformers sought the opposite. Historians of reading, writing, and numeracy have all documented a shift around the 1830s from memorization to a focus on understanding and on the development of the inner self.

As an 1848 advertisement for *McGuffey's Readers* in a Berkshire, Massachusetts, newspaper put it, "the child should be regarded not as a mere recipient of the ideas of others, but as an agent capable of collecting and originating and producing most of the ideas which are necessary for its education, when presented with the objects or the facts from which they may be derived."<sup>25</sup> The curriculum reflected this new emphasis on individual agency. Reading and writing came to matter as much for their impact on the inner self as on public life. If self-culture depended on "a creative mind, revolving, searching, reforming, perfecting within its own silent recesses," how could a student really search within herself or himself without language to "bring into life whatever was prepared in darkness?" wondered Horace Mann.<sup>26</sup>

Scholars of the curriculum—working in the history of teaching English, history, math, or science, or on the history of reading and writing practices—have slowly undermined the claim that reformers sought social control. Instead, they wanted to enable young people to cultivate their inner selves. In her pioneering study of teachers' practices, *Governing the Young: Teacher Behavior in Popular Primary Schools in Nineteenth-Century United States* (1989), Barbara Finkelstein discovered a range of pedagogical approaches, but concluded that the traditional approach of the teacher as "overseer and drillmaster" predominated. A more optimistic account is offered in *The Young Composers* (1999), Lucille Schultz's study of teachers' curricula, textbooks, and student notebooks. Because reading and writing were considered vital for self-culture, Schultz argues, teachers increasingly urged students "to write about the objects and experiences of their own lives." Moreover, teachers emphasized writing as a "practice" instead of the memorization of formal grammar rules.

Teachers sought to help students to become cultural producers—of self and nation—rather than simply consumers. Schultz concludes: “writing instruction was democratized.”<sup>27</sup>

Whatever public education meant in the North, most scholars agree with Kaestle that “in the South there was less enthusiasm for local common schooling and more successful resistance to the creation of state systems” (p. 192). Wealthy planters hired private tutors. Private academies and “field schools” served middle-class children. There was little for poorer children other than charity schools. This picture is also changing. First, we now know a lot more about the structural challenges that inhibited public schools’ development. It was more than hostility to education and the South’s rural nature, as Edgar Knight had long ago argued. Instead, as Robin Einhorn argues in *American Taxation, American Slavery* (2008), because the South relied on taxing wealth, and because the planter elite held a disproportionate share of that wealth, it was very difficult to raise taxes, a point also made by J. Mills Thornton. In 1850, the public subsidized 61 percent of school costs in the North compared to 18 percent in the South. Tuition covered 54 percent of Southern school costs compared to 10 percent in the North and 22 percent nationally. Yet Southerners *did* seek public schools. David Mathews documents the ways in which Alabama’s story does not look all that different from the story we tell for Massachusetts. In North Carolina, when Whigs gained control of the state government in the 1830s, reformers quickly acted to increase access and taxes for schools. Throughout the South, Jonathan Daniel Wells argues in *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class* (2004), middle-class parents sought for their children the same cultural and economic opportunities available in the North. Middle-class voters blamed both elites and poorer farmers for the South’s backwardness. They pressured political leaders—and it paid off. In her 1977 dissertation, Kathryn Pippin, drawing from a 1940 study of American census records, concluded that by 1850 Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina were first, second, fourth, and fifth in public school income (but not taxes) per free person; enrollment in Southern schools increased 43.2 percent between 1850 and 1860; and the number of schools increased by 50 percent. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves why Southerners were as successful as they were.<sup>28</sup>

Enslaved African Americans, of course, did not have access to schools and, thanks to Heather Andrea Williams’ book *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (2005), we now have a much better understanding of what education meant to enslaved people. Enslaved Americans linked education to empowerment and strove to ensure that some within their communities could read. Some enslaved Americans learned from their masters and mistresses, sometimes in violation of the law. Others received lessons from white children. But most learning was on the sly. Enslaved Americans

taught each other, either individually or through covert networks (a kind of hidden counter-public sphere) to organize schools that met in camouflaged underground pits or in cities. These networks emerged publicly during Reconstruction, when African American leaders and legislators were vital to encouraging public education.

Northern free blacks also struggled to gain access to public schools. Hilary Moss' recent *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (2009) offers a profound meditation on their reasons. While some African American parents embraced separate schools, Moss argues that black leaders in New Haven, Baltimore, and Boston wanted access to public funds and integrated schools. These leaders understood that access to public schools was a sign of who was recognized as a citizen and who was not. Prior to the 1830s, blacks, like their white counterparts, had organized schools at the local level. As common school reforms took off, however, being excluded became a form of social exile. Common schools, Moss concludes, "gave white children from all classes and ethnicities the opportunity to become citizens or, at the very least, to feel a part of larger society," but they "reinforced a conception of citizenship becoming increasingly synonymous with whiteness" because public schools were "uniquely able to affirm who could—and who could not—claim American identity." In a diverse society, exclusion from common schools was a greater threat than inclusion.<sup>29</sup>

There are many other areas that merit reconsideration. Scholars, skeptical of elites, have criticized reformers' efforts to professionalize teaching. Yet new work has brought us to the front lines of professionalization, where ordinary women from modest backgrounds sought to improve public schools' quality, only to meet with local hostility. Recent work has focused on the experiences of teachers themselves in order to make, as Geraldine Clifford writes in her 2014 *Those Good Gertrudes: A Social History of Women Teachers in America*, "teachers visible in history at the grass roots." Teachers were at the center of the nineteenth-century's culture wars because they were "expected to express the values of the communities employing them," but in many cases were "also a self-generating subversive force against patriarchy."<sup>30</sup> But it was not just patriarchy that teachers challenged. Teachers educated in normal schools or inspired by reformers' rhetoric sought to transform the very purposes and practices of schooling. We have a better sense of normal-school students' experiences thanks to Christine Ogren's *The American State Normal School* (2005), and to reform-minded teachers' struggles thanks to Kelly Kolodny's *Normalites: The First Professionally Prepared Teachers in the United States* (2005) and Polly Kaufman's *Women Teachers on the Frontier* (1984). For the vast majority of women teachers, social control would have been a joke. In reality, they struggled with students and school boards and felt powerless. When gender and class are brought into the story, the experiences of professionalization take

on a different meaning, and remind us why teachers ultimately unionized later in the century, a point reiterated nicely in journalist Dana Goldstein's recent *Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* (2014).

While we know much more about teachers' experiences than we did when *Pillars* was written, we still know too little about students. Social historians of education since the 1960s have greatly enhanced our understanding of the demography of schooling, but the emergence of childhood studies affirms the importance of writing history from children's perspectives. Evidence suggests that, for most students, despite reformers' and teachers' aspirations, schooling was not experienced as liberation. Instead, at best, most students saw schooling as a necessary evil, something to get through. At worst, as Howard Chudacoff suggests, schools alienated young people from their world.<sup>31</sup>

Carl Kaestle's *Pillars of the Republic* made sense for an era when Americans were losing faith in their institutions. More generally, Kaestle's scholarship taught us much about the social history of education, something that had been largely neglected. We live today in a different moment than when *Pillars* was published. Not only has new scholarship enabled us to ask new questions, but, to answer them, we need to try once again, in political scientist Hugh Hecló's terms, to think institutionally (*On Thinking Institutionally*, 2008). Institutions are the basic building blocks of any society. We must be willing to see our schools not just as sites for exercising power but also as places where our civic and human capabilities are nurtured. Our public schools are deeply flawed, as scholarship since the 1960s has made clear, but they remain vital to achieving our democracy. Their vices, but also their virtues, are ours.

Johann N. Neem is Professor of History at Western Washington University and author of *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts* (2008). He is completing a manuscript on the development of public schools between the Revolution and the Civil War.

1. Ellwood Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States* (1919), viii.

2. Rush Welter, *Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America* (1962), 5–6.

3. Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (1960); Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876* (1980). Good overviews are Diane Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (1978); William J. Reese and John L. Rury, "An Evolving and Expanding Field of Study," in *Rethinking the History of American Education* (2008), 1–16. For recent historiography from a conservative perspective, see Milton Gaither, "The Revisionists Revised: The Libertarian Historiography of Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 52 (Nov. 2012).

4. Michael Katz, *Class, Bureaucracy, and the Schools* (1971), 3; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (2011).

5. Carl Kaestle, "Social Change, Discipline, and the Common School in Early Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 09 (Summer 1978): 1–17; William Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to "No Child Left Behind"* (2011), chap. 1.

6. Lawrence Cremin, *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley: An Essay on the Historiography of American Education* (1965); Alexander James Field, *Educational Reform and*

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