

Is the Era of American Public Schools Over?

In discussing the anti-public school sentiment among Americans, Theobald argues that this trend can be better understood if it is placed in the context of country school history. He laments the public's nostalgic interest in one-room schooling as representative of a simpler, more satisfying era. In contrast, his carefully researched inquiry focuses on the deeper significance of country schooling. Struggle, he avers, is its legacy, a struggle for democracy. He believes that these struggles will ultimately result in the triumph of democracy. Theobald's article is followed by reflections on his essay by historians of education in the United States, Sweden, and Australia. The purpose of this arrangement is to analyze Theobald's remarks from diverse perspectives, further stimulate readers' thinking about the legacy of American country schools, and raise new questions for further research.

—Eds.

America's Country School Legacy

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There is a great deal of interest in the history of America's one-room schools. And while most of that interest centers around things like the school bell, the wood-burning stove, the water bucket, schoolyard games, McGuffey's readers, recitations, and the occasional use of the "switch," there is a deeper significance to the American one-room school experience. That deeper significance is the focus of this essay.

If a public school system didn't exist today, and someone decided to propose one, it would quickly be labeled "socialism," and the idea would be fought with all the rhetorical ammunition money can buy. Even with the momentum coming from more than one hundred fifty years of public-provided education, a Republican candidate for President in 2012 recently published a book calling for an end to America's public schools.¹ The current anti-public school sentiment is

more easily understood in light of the history of America's one-room schools. It turns out that that history is intertwined with many issues related to the distribution of social justice in American society; and, consequently, the history of one-room schools is a story of struggle. At the outset, rural dwellers often intensely resisted the free-school idea, leading historians to hypothesize that it was the centralized nature of the new school systems, the state department office in particular, that bothered local farmers. They resisted, the argument continues, in the name of democracy.

It is true that the eventual triumph of the free-school idea had much to do with a growing commitment to democracy in America. But the story is not nearly as straightforward as it has been told. Democracy always has its opponents. In fact, the history of America's one-room school experience clearly exemplifies the lesson John Dewey taught generations of students: the struggle for free, high-quality education is indistinguishable from the struggle for democracy.²

“Here Lies an Enemy of Free Schools”

To be sure, there was a great deal of rural resistance to state department initiatives. Whether or not it is accurate to interpret this resistance as allegiance to local democracy as so many have done is another question. To explore this issue, it is helpful to consider what type of educational system predated common schools in farming neighborhoods. Subscription schools had a few interesting characteristics that seemingly made them well suited to the rural environment. First, parents paid the teacher “by the scholar,” which meant they paid for the days their children were in school. The exigencies of farm life and the value of child labor often doomed rural children to irregular school attendance. With the subscription system, parents paid for no more education than their children received. There is some evidence to suggest that the teacher's “grade book” evolved from an account book of sorts, a teacher's record of student attendance and the amount owed by parents.

Second, subscription schools were usually associated with a particular religious denomination, so small country schools were often closely tied to a network of like-minded neighbors who attended the same church. But the subscription system disadvantaged poor tenant families without the money to pay the teacher. Also, parents whose religious views did not align with the school's denomination sometimes chose no schooling over a curriculum thought to be

imbued with the wrong religious overtones. Those who controlled the affairs of the local church also controlled the affairs of the local school, meaning church leaders often made decisions, such as where to place the school building, which advantaged some families more than others.

Not surprisingly, some rural dwellers resisted the creation of free schools that might diminish the amenities of subscription schooling. One newly elected school board member in a newly formed district in Wisconsin in 1851 wrote to the state superintendent to complain that “at the present time [there is] considerable difficulty in regard to the District School, much of the wealth of the district is in the hands of individuals, who have no children to send to the School[;] these men are endeavoring to have the school supported by paying by the scholar and are endeavoring to make the people believe that such may be done [T]here is a great struggle between the two classes of individuals, and what we need is a decisive voice from you.”³ While nineteenth-century urban dwellers may have accepted a noncontroversial Protestantism in common school curriculum, as educational historians suggest, this was much less the case for the nation’s rural population.

Subscription schools, locally controlled, served the religious and secular needs of the landed families in rural neighborhoods well. The common-school concept, controlled by an urban, centralized, and often Calvinist authority, presupposed the forfeiture of some of this control. When Indiana’s second state commissioner of schools, Caleb Mills, was about to leave office, he commented on the outcry regarding his replacement. “The question being asked,” he said, “is not whether he’s qualified, but is he *Presbyterian*?”⁴ During the uproar, a state legislator announced that when he died, he wanted it etched into his gravestone that “Here lies an enemy of free schools.” As late as 1890, the Franklin, Indiana, *Jacksonian* reported that “there are strong indications that a Presbyterian will be chosen [as state superintendent of public instruction]” and considered it necessary to add that “there is more than half concealed kicking from the other denominations.”⁵

Local Control

Because midwestern farmers enjoyed considerable political clout at the state level, the architects of common schools were forced to leave a great deal of decision-making power in local hands in order to get the system off the ground. Even with this concession, however, the

battle was not easily won. Michigan, for example, did not adopt a complete common-school system until 1869, well after the younger states of Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Kansas.⁶ But, again, this was only accomplished by extending broad powers to rural districts. James Shields's experience teaching in rural Minnesota provides an example.⁷ Shields began the winter term in November 1885 with fourteen students in attendance, but over the following weeks he added more and more students to the roster as neighborhood harvests were completed. In each instance, Shields simply recorded the names of the new pupils and took note of the books they planned to study. On the fourth Monday of the term, this pattern was broken. Shields wrote in his diary that "Louis PrahI asked to be enrolled." Shields continued, "[B]efore enrolling him I asked the advice of the Board, receiving him conditionally meanwhile." The next day Shields was given permission to enroll PrahI permanently. It is not clear why Shields hesitated to enroll PrahI, although it is likely that he had a rough reputation that preceded him. Yet no subsequent diary entries indicate that he was a problem student.

Two weeks later an interesting occurrence reduced the number of pupils in Shields's school from twenty-six to twenty-five. On Monday, December 14, one of the school-board members entered the schoolhouse in the afternoon and according to Shields, "without even consulting my rights as a teacher, rudely expelled (or ordered) Annie PrahI to leave school." When school was dismissed Shields went to another board member's home "to register my solemn protest against the act of today but received no satisfaction." This expulsion had nothing to do with Annie PrahI's behavior or performance in school. More than likely, school-board members determined that Annie had committed some impropriety or some act of immorality somewhere off school grounds. Shields's comments earlier concerning Louis suggest that the PrahI family perhaps had a rather unsavory reputation in the vicinity and that, as a consequence, schooling for the family was a tenuous affair, subject to the whims of the district board members.⁸ Invoking political localism, the established farmers who served on boards of education exercised wide powers to manipulate the local school as they saw fit.

Giving a Voice to the Voiceless

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, states prohibited women from voting in school district elections or on school issues. As the teaching profession feminized, however, women's

enforced silence on educational concerns became a paradox increasingly difficult to rationalize. Frontier regions were the first to extend to women the right to vote at school meetings. Dakota Territory provided for this in 1879, and two years later made it legal for women to hold the office of county superintendent of schools. Kansas did so in 1889. Wisconsin extended the right of women to vote at annual school meetings in 1885 but only if they were not classified as paupers.⁹ In general, the older midwestern states moved toward democracy in the local school district more slowly. Illinois made provisions to include women in 1891; Ohio, in 1904. However, several states, including Ohio, limited the voice of women to the election of board members and restricted their voting privilege “on such questions as special tax levy, bond issue, erection of buildings, etc.” Michigan first extended the vote to women on school affairs in 1893. However, a year later a state court found the law to be unconstitutional. The state did not pass another bill of this sort until 1909; this time the courts allowed the law to stand.¹⁰

Women were not the only excluded population. State laws similarly disenfranchised tenant farmers with respect to the school. Iowa Territory’s 1840 school law clearly specified the qualifications for voting in the local district: “Every white male inhabitant of the age of twenty-one years, residing in such district, liable to pay a school district tax, shall be entitled to vote at any district meeting.”¹¹ Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois had similar qualifications during the antebellum years. Though the rhetoric of school legislation during the 1870s and 1880s began to sound more democratic, state governments exercised caution in extending a school voice to the mobile of midwestern society. In 1873 Wisconsin opened up the vote at school meetings to anyone who had the vote in general elections, but lawmakers added that in the case of school elections, the prospective voter needed “a fixed and permanent abode as contradistinguished from a mere temporary locality of existence.”¹² Almost by definition, this clause excluded tenant farmers from voting in school elections.

Michigan retained the property qualifications through the 1870s, dispensed with them in the 1880s, but stipulated, as was often the case for women, that “a person who has no property within the school district liable to assessment for school taxes has no right to vote when raising of money by tax is in question.”¹³ Minnesota extended participation in school district affairs but kept a few key provisions reserved for “freeholders, or those holding real property” beyond the turn of the century. “These only are authorized to call special meetings; to sign petitions for changed of district boundary; to sign petitions for rehearing in change of district boundaries, and

to sign petitions to consolidate districts.”¹⁴ In creative ways, a small minority of those who lived and worked in the rural Midwest kept the institution of schooling theirs to manipulate. The appearance of democracy in local rural districts hid some uncomfortable realities.

As states adopted common-school plans, small school districts were created by the thousands. Parents or other interested parties came together and petitioned the state office of education for the creation of a legal school district. Property-owning white males in these newly created districts held elections in which they generally selected three officers to serve for three-year terms. If no school as yet existed in the area, the first order of business was to build one. Those who resisted the common-school concept to the bitter end surrendered their school taxes only after threats from the county sheriff.

Locating the Schoolhouse

Assuming the newly elected board members could keep costs low, for instance, through the construction of a log structure, there was still the sticky question of where the schoolhouse would be built. One location would serve some families better than others. Often land-owning farmers donated an acre or two of their land to the district in order to ensure that the school would be built in a favorable location. In the spring of 1868 in District #3 of Blooming Grove Township, Dane County, Wisconsin, School Board Chairman George Nichols donated an acre and a half for a schoolhouse site. A few district residents, led by Alexander Campbell, opposed the new location and petitioned for a special meeting to reconsider the issue. The special meeting was held in the Nichols’s home. There those present rejected the motion to reconsider. Campbell was so enraged at this decision that he may have vented his frustration by breaking down the schoolhouse door. At the next annual meeting the board voted to “prosecute Alexander Campbell for trespass on school house for breaking in door and entering same [*sic*].”¹⁵

The placement of the schoolhouse might mean that the children of certain families had to cover longer distances to reach the school, and for some the trip to school entailed crossing through dark stands of timber or over dangerous creeks, streams, and rivers. In the spring of 1868, parents in District #2, Oronoco Township, Olmsted County, Minnesota, engaged in a series of rigorous debates regarding the location of the district school. The Zumbro River ran through the middle of the district, and spring floods had washed away the bridge connecting the

district's northern and southern halves. Not surprisingly, all parents were adamant that the new school be constructed on their side of the river.¹⁶

The extant records indicate that surprisingly often schools were placed on land donated by a school board member. Until very late in the nineteenth or early in the twentieth century, landless tenants had no voice at the district meeting. Their objections to the school location were seldom heard. A district in western Minnesota provides a rare exception. Here the board "moved and carried that those present who are not legal voters of the Dist. be admitted to a seat in the house and allowed to take part in the debate."¹⁷ While the records in this instance are too sparse to determine whether an equitable location was chosen, a similar circumstance in Iowa reflects the more typical treatment received by tenant families. In this instance a group of fifteen parents confronted their board about the long distances their children were forced to travel to school and requested the creation of a subdistrict. The board responded that the complaints were exaggerated and that the petitioners were "merely transients anyway."¹⁸

"Shall We Provide Free Textbooks?"

The schoolhouse location was not the only matter frequently solved according to power dynamics in rural neighborhoods. The recitation pedagogy of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rural schools depended on textbooks. If children could not bring a schoolbook to class, they often simply did not attend. As a result, some rural dwellers began agitating for free-textbook laws during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and free-textbook legislation was a part of most Populist Party platforms. Resistance to free-textbook legislation took on a pattern similar to giving women and tenant farmers a voice in school affairs. Younger states, such as Nebraska and the Dakotas, led the way with such legislation, while rural districts in the older states of the Midwest, such as Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin, resisted supplying free textbooks for all students until well into the twentieth century.

Voters in rural Wisconsin districts frequently decided not to furnish free texts. Although requests came as early as 1889, such motions inevitably failed. It was not until about 1920 that a few Wisconsin districts began to acquiesce on this issue. The very earliest district records found indicating a willingness to supply free textbooks in Wisconsin date from 1909.¹⁹ In Minnesota some records indicate an earlier acceptance of the free-textbook issue. The state legislature

outlined a free textbook plan in 1893; some districts adopted this plan, but local adoption remained optional. In Isanti County, one district “voted not to inforce [*sic*] the Free Textbook Sistem [*sic*].”²⁰ Even before Nebraska’s legal mandate for free textbooks in 1897, some local districts had earlier made provisions to supply them. District #35 in Harlan County “voted to supply the district with textbooks” at its annual meeting in 1880. This is far in advance of any such action in Minnesota or Wisconsin.²¹ The large amount of Nebraska land protected from taxation by homestead law makes this action in Harlan County even more significant.

The trend toward greater equity in schooling in the newer states may have been due to the strength of the Farmers’ Alliance in these states, as this organization saw free-textbook legislation as an ethical necessity. The Alliance-supported Mandan, North Dakota, *Pioneer* claimed that “many of the children of the state are kept from schools because of the cost of books.”²² A rural Michigan teacher remorsefully commented in her class register in 1908 on the progress of one of her students, “She is a ‘fair student’ but she lacks the necessary books.”²³ The pervasiveness of recitation pedagogy meant that without books there was little or no schooling.

Conclusion

Martin Luther King, Jr., famously paraphrased Theodore Parker when he noted that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it leans toward justice.”²⁴ This is uniquely evident in the history of midwestern one-room schools. Beginning with the struggle over whether to create free-school systems in the first place, through struggles over where the schoolhouse would be placed, whose voices would be heard on school questions, whether students would receive access to free textbooks, and so forth, the one-room school experience highlights the slow, but ultimate triumph of democracy—and that is its deepest significance.

Notes

1. Ron Paul, *The School Revolution: A New Answer to Our Broken Education System* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2013).
2. John Dewey, “Education as Politics,” *The New Republic*, 32 (October 4, 1922): 139-140.
3. J. S. Brown to Eleaser Root, 16 December 1851, Azell Ladd Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.

4. Quoted in Andrew A. Sherockman, "Caleb Mills, Pioneer Educator in Indiana," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1955), 118.
5. Patricia Albjerg Graham, *Community and Class in American Education, 1865-1900* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), 40.
6. Wayne E. Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 41.
7. James Shields Diary, Manuscript Division, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN (MHS).
8. See the James Shields Diary beginning at November 9, 1885, MHS. The diary is a valuable source for historians interested in the everyday life of country teachers in the Midwest. Several scholars who came to enter Shields's school were turned away because they lived outside school district boundaries. In fact, this was an issue that faced almost all rural districts because schoolhouses were generally placed in a particular location, as mentioned earlier, according to the dynamics of power rather than equity. This left excluded families, often from different ethnic or religious heritages, on the periphery of school districts, which sometimes meant they were closer to a neighboring district school than they were to their own. In some states, like Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Dakota, the local district policy on "outside scholars" was almost synonymous with "foreign scholars." In fact, many districts used the latter phrase when delineating their policy for the new school year. Anyone who has spent any time amid rural school records in the Midwest knows how pervasive the problem of "outside scholars" was.
9. Bertha Palmer, "A Brief History of the Department of Public Instruction, 1860-1932," unpublished manuscript included in Superintendent's Files, series 386, box 1, North Dakota Historical Society, Bismarck, ND (NDHS). For a reference to Wisconsin school statutes regarding women and school districts, see Oliver E. Wells, comp., *Laws of Wisconsin Relating to Common Schools* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing, 1892), 15. For Kansas, see Frank Nelson, comp., *Laws for the Regulation and Support of the Common Schools of Kansas* (Topeka, Kansas: W.Y. Morgan, 1899), 26.
10. The quotation of Indiana's state superintendent can be found in Hervey D. Vories, comp., *The Laws of Indiana* (Indianapolis: n.p., 1891), 154. Other information concerning the issue of including or excluding women can be found here as well. The quotation from Ohio school law can be found in Edmund J. Jones, comp., *Ohio School Laws* (Columbus, Ohio: F.J. Herr, 1906), 64. Also see *The Illinois School Law, 1889-1893* (Springfield, IL.: H.W. Rokker, 1893), 95; and Frederick C. Martindale, comp., *State of Michigan General School Laws* (Lansing, MI: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck, Crawford, 1913), 20. It should be added that women who owned taxable property had the right to vote at school elections in the Midwest. It was only upon marriage (or remarriage in the case of widows) that this right was forfeited.
11. Clarence R. Aurner, *History of Education in Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1914), 2:360.
12. Samuel Fallows, comp., *Laws of Wisconsin Relating to the Common Schools* (Madison: Atwood & Culver, 1873), 23.
13. Martindale, *State of Michigan General School Laws*, 21.
14. David Kiehle, *Education in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: H.H. Williams, 1903), 1:34.
15. Clerk's Minutes, April 17, 1868, District #3, Blooming Grove Twp., Dane County, Wisconsin State Historical Society (WSHS). What follows is a partial list of records documenting the donation of land for a school on the part of a local district board member: Clerk's Minutes, April 17, 1868, District #3, Blooming Grove Twp., Dane County, WSHS; Clerk's Minutes, September 13, 1873, Jt. District #9, Blooming Grove and Dunn Twps., Dane County, WSHS; and Clerk's Minutes, April 6, 1859, Jt. District #8, Excelsior and Dellona Twps., Sauk County, WSHS. Also, Clerk's Minutes, June 20, 1847, District #6, Center Twp., Rock County, Rock County Historical Society, Janesville, Wisconsin (RCHS); Clerk's Minutes, September 3, 1892, District #138, Pleasant Grove Twp., Olmsted County, Olmsted County Historical Society (OCHS), Rochester, MN; and Clerk's Minutes, February 26, 1890, District #34, Chippewa County, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).
16. Clerk's Minutes, March 31, 1868, District #2, Oronoco Twp., Olmsted County, OCHS.
17. Clerk's Minutes, December 14, 1889, District #34, Chippewa County, MHS.
18. Clerk's Minutes, March 18, 1889, Fairview Twp. District, Jones County, Iowa State Historical Society, Iowa City, IA. Also see Fuller, 129. Fuller claims that "many a small schoolhouse came to sit where it sat not because it was centrally located but because of other considerations, which frequently delayed the building and led to fights that left bitter memories long afterward" (61).
19. For an example of early requests for free texts in Wisconsin denied by local district board men, see Clerk's Minutes, July 1, 1889, Jt. District #8, Marcellon and Buffalo Twps., Columbia and Marquette Counties, Columbia County Series, WSHS; and Clerk's Minutes, July 7, 1890, Jt. District #9, Sun Prairie and Bristol Twps., Dane

County, WSHS. For examples of the earliest acceptance of free textbooks in Wisconsin, see Clerk's Minutes, July 5, 1909, Jt. District #3, Center and Porter Twps., Rock County, RCHS. Also, Clerk's Minutes, July 1, 1912. Jt. District #1, Lodi and West Point Twps., Dane County, WSHS.

20. Some examples of districts adopting free textbooks considerably earlier than districts in Wisconsin include Clerk's Minutes, July 21, 1894, District #72, Winfield Twp., Renville County, MHS. The quotation indicating an unwillingness to provide free texts can be found in Clerk's Minutes, July 15, 1893, District #3, Cambridge, Twp., Isanti County, MHS.

21. Clerk's Minutes, April 5, 1880, District #35, Harlan County records, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.

22. Mandan *Pioneer*, January 23, 1891, scrapbook ser. 394, box 1, NDHS.

23. The quote is taken from Fuller, 209.

24. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Out of the Long Night," *The Gospel Messenger* (February 8, 1958), 14, <https://archive.org/details/gospelmessengerv107mors>.

In Response to "America's Country School Legacy"

No. 1

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The image of the one-room country school generates multi-dimensional responses in the American memory. For some, the little red schoolhouse conjures nostalgia for better, simpler, more direct and honest times when teachers taught children to read, write, spell, do arithmetic, behave civilly, and love their country. For others, the country school, with its blackboard, rows of students' desks, and teacher's bell, is more like a visit to an antique store. For historians like Paul Theobald, the country school was a significant institution in America history whose role and significance need to be researched and written with care and accuracy.

Theobald's well-researched "America's Country School Legacy" succeeds as an effort to free the history of rural schools from the familiar nostalgia and the antique curiosity that long for the happier days of the past. We all know the story of the one-room country school that is part history and part myth: teachers, usually unmarried young women, taught a large class of mixed-aged girls and boys to be literate, obedient, and patriotic citizens of the greatest nation on earth. Penetrating that nostalgic mist, Theobald begins by describing subscription tuition-free schools

as institutional antecedents that either paved the way or delayed the establishment of rural public schools. He then examines four issues that had an impact on these schools: (1) local versus state control of schools; (2) efforts to include women as participants in school-board elections and school governance; (3) the location of schools; and (4) publicly-provided textbooks. Basing his analysis of these issues on documentary research in the archives of midwestern state historical societies, he reaches three major conclusions. One, farmers practicing direct democracy often resisted what they regarded as state intrusions into local educational affairs. Two, some midwestern states slowly allowed women to participate in school-board elections. Three, the practice of using family-provided textbooks persisted for a long time until districts began to provide textbooks at public expense. The issue of where to locate the school building, then as now, remains a perennial issue.

Like any solid piece of historical writing, Theobald's article, though it answers some important questions, generates even more lines of inquiry. The author attributes farmers' resistance to state efforts to coordinate common schools to their commitment to direct democracy. Was their preference for local control based on a democratic impulse that people should make the decisions that faced them in the places where they lived and worked? Or was this preference part of a larger political ideology? Whig politicians, like Horace Mann, tended to favor a larger state role in education. The Whig ideology saw public support of education as an investment in an important internal improvement that would contribute to economic prosperity. Further, the Whigs believed that publicly-supported, state-coordinated schools would contribute to responsible citizenship that would be a check on Jacksonian mobocracy. The Whig ideological orientation was passed on to the Republican Party, especially in the midwestern states. Were the farmers aware of the Whig orientation? Were they Jacksonian Democrats? Or was their response simply based on a home-grown democracy that was largely detached from the larger political ideologies of nineteenth-century America?

The standard history of the one-room country school is that these rural schools functioned with direct community involvement and without the administrative bureaucracy found in urban districts. Theobald relates the story of how a board member appeared unannounced at the school in rural Minnesota and summarily and rudely expelled a student without an explanation to the teacher. This kind of incident shows that situations between teachers and school boards in one-

room country schools were without an intervening administrative layer found in urban schools with their district superintendents and building principals. This raises the question: Were country schools outposts of direct community-practiced democracy or were they places where petty local tyrants could arbitrarily impose their will on teachers and students?

Theobald's article raises still another question about methods of instruction in one-room country schools. The traditional interpretation is that teachers typically used the drill-and-recitation method in which a student or a small group of students would come to the front of the room and recite a previously memorized passage from a textbook. But did these self-contained, ungraded learning environments, with their multi-age student population, offer creative teachers an opportunity to construct innovative methods not available to teachers in the larger, more structured, graded urban schools? Located so close to the world of work and nature, did country school teachers try to connect their lessons to the environment outside of the school's windows?

An example of an innovative country school teacher can be found in the early career of Helen Parkhurst, founder of the Dalton Plan of education.¹ Parkhurst began her teaching career in a one-room, ungraded rural school with a class of forty pupils. She experimented with arrangements in which some of the students worked individually on their lessons while she worked with others in small groups. As a normal schoolteacher, she continued her interest in individualized and small-group instruction and came to envision the school as an educational laboratory. Were there other teachers like Parkhurst in America's country schools? Or was she a rare exception?

Theobald's insightful analysis of America's country school legacy opens the history of these schools to more needed research and writing. Hopefully, we will learn from this research that the legacy of these schools is much more than nostalgia about an antique institution and may lead us to an enhanced understanding of their role in American educational history.

1. Helen Parkhurst, *Education on the Dalton Plan* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1922), 12.

No. 2

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More than thirty years ago, I worked at Glasgow University in Scotland. As befits an institution founded in 1450, it has an excellent library, including bound volumes of reports from nineteenth-century U.S. school agencies. In my research I used a number of documents such as the *Report on the Common School System of the United States and of the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada* (1866), and *The Free School System of the United States* (1875). The fruits of this research eventually appeared as a chapter, “The Recitation Revisited,” in a volume published in 1989.¹

More recently, I was drawn back to the nineteenth century—an environment where, in 1844, “the Superintendent of Cayuga County² reported that with over 100 different kinds of books in use across 210 schools, the average class size was less than 2 pupils.”³ At that time, I was interested in the fate of such schools as, collectively, they were recalibrated with nineteenth- and twentieth-century notions of social adjustment, central management, and economic productivity. Here, I limit my comments to two aspects of Paul’s paper: his terminology and his search for the “deeper significance” of such schooling. My illustrations come from my own work in the 1980s and from a more recent exercise in the history of educational ideas.⁴

Paul Theobald describes schools as, variously, “public,” “free,” and “common.” These terms are saturated with historical meaning. While I assume that American educators are conversant with the notions of common [Protestant] schooling advanced in the first half of the nineteenth century, it may be relevant to revisit the ideas that underpinned public and free schools. At root, the idea of public education has, throughout history, been contrasted with private education—as is still the case. But there is an additional dimension to the notion of “public,” one that reaches back to classical Latin ideas about *respublica*, a term later translated as *commonwealth*. Advocates of public schooling saw it as preparation for learners’ participation in the public sphere, a domain that has existed at least since Roman times.

In sixteenth-century England, for instance, the public sphere was restricted to three constituencies: male members of the nobility, landowners, and senior officials of the church, themselves often drawn from noble and land-owning families. During the contemporaneous

Renaissance and Reformation, claims were made that schooling should not only be extended to members of the “commons” (knights and office holders in local government, viz., burgesses) but also to women and members of the burgeoning commercial and mercantile elites. Erudition acquired at school (especially logic and rhetoric) secured sponsored entry into the governing elites. It is no accident, therefore, that while many people were excluded from both schooling and participation in public life, others actively sought access to the political levers of public life, typically through schools established in urban settings such as London. Meantime, public schooling in England was not yet a mass or universal institution.

Applied to schooling, “free” is another historically-contingent characterization. It can denote schooling supported by dissenting religious sects who have broken free from centralist church control; it can be used as a contraction of the word “free-standing,” becoming synonymous with the notion of “independent” schools; or the label “free” can be imbued with ethical notions about the provision of “freedom from” the pedagogic or curricular control exerted by national or local state authorities.

Paul Theobald suggests that the “deeper significance” of the one-room school experience is that its history “highlights the slow, but ultimate triumph of democracy.” I find it difficult to clarify Paul’s claim. Is his claim that debates surrounding one-room schools prefigure John Dewey’s later lesson—that “the struggle for high-quality education is indistinguishable from the struggle for democracy”? Or is Paul Theobald making a more specific point—that the one-room school served as seed-corn for a later institution—the comprehensive high school which, mapped out in the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* (1918), became the variant of public schooling that dominated educational provision in the twentieth century, not only in the U.S. Thus, is the heart of Paul’s argument that the “legacy” of America’s country schools is under threat and that, therefore, public schooling should be reanimated using a measure of historical hindsight? Is he echoing, therefore, an argument recently made by Daniel Tanner, emeritus professor in the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University: namely, that educationists in the U.S. have allowed themselves to “surrender the education cause as conceived and developed through the American experience”?⁵

Both authors, it seems, are concerned about the relationship between the past and the present—a perennial problem for educational historians. My view is that the diverse

management of one-room school provision in the nineteenth century should be understood as an episode in a centuries-old struggle to reconcile private (or domestic) education with public schooling. Indeed, the boundary between public and private is still as controversial in the twenty-first century as it was in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth-century protagonists reported by Paul Theobald were focused on the novelty of their ideas. In the here and now of practical politics, they looked forward as politicians, not backwards as historians. Moreover, by the end of the nineteenth century, they felt they had also identified a way forward. A positive or scientific view of pedagogics had emerged. Teaching school could be considered a rule-based activity, something that could be acquired by one-room teachers through their attendance at a normal school (*norma* being the Latin word for rule).

To conclude: just as our understandings of science have changed since the nineteenth century, so have the circumstances surrounding the organization of public schooling. Nevertheless, Paul Theobald is justified in wrestling with questions about the historical significance of America's one-room schools in the upbringing of a nation. In the process he throws light on the complexity inherent in extending domestic education into the ever-changing public realm. To this end, I also take my cue from John Dewey. When I wrote my 1989 chapter on the recitation, I drew on *Democracy and Education* (1916) for an epigraph. It reads as follows: "Such terms as the individual and the social conception of education are quite meaningless . . . apart from their context."⁶

Notes

1. David Hamilton, *Towards a Theory of Schooling* (1989, reprint, London: Routledge, 2013).
2. This county is in the State of New York.
3. Hamilton, *Towards a Theory*, 125.
4. David Hamilton and Benjamin Zufiaurre, *Blackboards and Bootstraps: Revisioning Education and Schooling* (Boston: Sense, 2013).
5. Daniel Tanner, "Race to the Top and Leave the Children Behind," *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45, no. 1 (2013): 10.
6. Hamilton, *Towards a Theory*, 120.

No. 3

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Paul Theobald has written an engaging analysis of the checkered history of America's country schools. He makes the case that despite the struggles that have marked the history of rural schools in the United States, these schools represent what he calls the "ultimate triumph of democracy." He strives to show how the country school can be seen as a microcosm of large-scale conflict over the character of democracy and governance in the United States. For instance, in the crucible of a historical debate about the admissibility or even educability of a child whose parents cannot afford to buy textbooks, we can also gain perspective on larger discussions among and about the groups of people (and particularly the elites) who make up a polity.

Theobald's basic argument is that the establishment of the public school system¹ in the United States was a kind of democratic social experiment that would be impossible to mount today because of the shift to the right in American political culture. He argues that early precursors of what we now know as public schools were founded in multiple small communities emerging out of the struggle between essentially private and exclusive subscription schools, which were controlled by the local gentry, and publicly-funded common schools. After much effort on the part of key social reformers, the latter prevailed. Theobald presents this as a victory for democracy and for more socially inclusive schools, which set the nation on the road to accessible, if imperfect, schooling for all. The general movement was one that advanced inexorably toward greater democracy.

There are two things I want to say about this position. The first is that the common school movement represented a challenge to moneyed and landed interests, but it also represented a shift in the way elites saw the purpose and promise of schooling. Indeed, it represented a shift in power between two sets of elites.² Whether or not this transformation indicated greater democracy or simply a different form of control is an open question. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, we might ask: was the farm laborer more or less free than the industrial worker? The industrial worker may have had a bit more schooling, but does this mean that s/he was more likely to exercise and appreciate a democratic franchise? And in the exercise of voice

(which may or may not be supported or hindered by schooling), was s/he more likely to achieve goals or effectively resist oppression?

Of course, what has changed is that analogous contemporary debates over school control are now set within the context of a neoliberal political climate.³ As often as not, modern small-school resistance movements operating in support of local schools are led by people whose agenda is to find a way to either opt out of public schooling or to tap into a quasi-private scheme like the charter school. So ironically, the support for smaller schools that today may be said to approximate the traditional rural-school model, may actually come from pockets of significant privilege. Indeed, most elite private schools promote their small class sizes, conviviality, and community cohesiveness. Those who most forcefully resist the public schools today are not the landed gentry, who want subscriptions and textbooks that the families of the students are required to buy; they tend to be religiously motivated public-school dissenters and/or comfortable middle-class parents who are convinced that the public schools are places of either moral contagion, low academic standards, or both. Theobald is right to suggest that the grand dream of the nineteenth-century common schools is seriously threatened in such a context.

Struggles over who should control small rural schools is not something that has been consigned to the past. Today, the struggle continues as community activists, parents, grandparents, and other leaders struggle to maintain some level of influence over the schooling of their children. They are still accused of the same sorts of localism and prejudice as the school resisters of the nineteenth century. Of course, the ideal vision of the public school is simply that, a lingering dream. It has never been particularly inclusive or democratic. And yet, Theobald claims at the end of his essay that the free-school system that we (sort of) have today in the United States (and indeed, in much of world at least at the elementary level) is evidence of the power and perhaps the inevitability of democracy.

This takes me to a second point. The assumption in Theobald's argument is that the establishment of the public schools is, in Dewey's terms, "indistinguishable from the struggle for democracy." This assumption is debatable. By bringing rural and urban populations that were formerly denied education into school, the children of laborers could be disciplined and made ready for the kinds of industrial work increasingly needed by capital. From a critical perspective,⁴ it is possible to argue that the landed rural gentry struggled against allowing the

children of farm laborers, racialized populations, and targeted religious groups into schools on the grounds that they were incapable of benefitting from education. Yet these elites began losing the argument to the interests of the towns and cities that needed and wanted children to be disciplined to the clock and the factory. It is not that one group was necessarily more or less classist, racist, or what have you; they may simply have had different financial interests some of which required a schooled population.

Schooling is now generally understood to be a key part of the production of a workforce that is habituated to routine and time-discipline.⁵ In this analysis, schooling is not necessarily the crucible of democracy so much as a disciplinary space where the production of what Foucault called “docile bodies” is undertaken in systematic and more or less organized ways. The term “docility” is often misinterpreted here to mean a passive condition, but Foucault’s sense of the term is more properly understood as what we might call today “ready to learn.”⁶ Such a youngster is sufficiently introspective to be able to receive and integrate instruction into his/her character and become ultimately, a self-regulating subject whose demeanor, sense of self and agency, personal habits, sexuality, learning orientation, etc., are all neatly circumscribed. The child who is ready to learn is active and reflective and ready to act upon knowledge of him or herself which is produced in the interaction between the educational expert on the one hand and the child and possibly his or her family on the other. The child is not in a “prison” as Foucault’s famous book on training⁷ sometimes suggests; indeed in many ways, *Discipline and Punish* suggests an escape from the prison-like conditions of a pre-modern life. On the other hand, neither does the idea of the docile body suggest one who is free to participate in a culture of open governance, choosing more or less freely between options.⁸

This all seems to take us a good distance from the history of the country school. Theobald positions these schools as remarkably resilient places in which the key developmental tensions of the midlands of the United States played out. Here we find the struggle between emerging industrial interests and what the Australians call “squatters,” the landed gentry whose wealth rested on indentured low-wage labor which was mobile enough to move with the seasons, the herds, and the crops. In this history, struggles over the country school, its governance, its location, who got to attend and so forth, were also struggles over the kind of laboring subject various interests required. The form of docility, the form of knowledge, and the kind of power

that are exercised through this transformation, or what Raymond Williams called the *Long Revolution*,⁹ is the issue that I think is most important to keep in mind. These issues have not yet been resolved.

Theobald calls attention to the positive side of the struggle and how the country school represents a site of resistance to the march of modernization in both its bureaucratic and its capitalist forms. But at the same time, he also shows how the country school represents the way that this very resistance contains within it the deep prejudices that “local control” often represents. His story of the lad who was drummed out of school because his family’s conduct or morality displeased the trustee called to mind for me an account of an incident on a school bus from the 1970s that I heard as part of my ethnographic work around a small country school. In this case, a female student was bullied mercilessly on the long school bus ride and gradually driven out of high school because of a romantic liaison with a young man of color. Such stories are poignant reminders that small country schools were and continue to be spaces that can be as problematic as the large urban schools that are so often cited as impersonal, institutional, and rife with violence.

In Theobald’s analysis of the tension between local control and what can be characterized as a more bureaucratic, more distant mode of governance, he makes the point that this issue is not necessarily one of more or less democracy. He appears to actually come down on the side of the bureaucrats who worked to create more inclusive schools against the wishes of the “squatters,” who seemed to see education as something that ought to be reserved for their own children. Here we encounter a question of whether or not democracy is best supported by keeping it local and close to the people. If it is too local, then those who hold power in the locale have a relatively free hand to do as they wish as those bullies on a rural school bus route illustrate. So the state descends to disrupt the vested interests of local elites.

In recent decades, bigness has carried the day, often on a wave of data or evidence-based decision-making that is itself supported by increasingly fine-grained forms of data analysis. What this does is to shift power to more distant state elites which of course creates another set of problems which result in consolidated schools, long bus rides, and the litany of complaints that small country-school activists and advocates have pressed for generations. The scale at which democracy is imagined is a very important consideration here. Big government fits rather well

with big business, big agriculture, and big box stores, all of which generate increasingly big data that can be telescoped to suit this or that purpose. We now know how each place relates to every other place through standardized national and sub-national comparisons and by the data-collection exercises of massive governance and assessment mechanisms like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and other global education metrics. Big schools fit well, and by and large, perform well in the resulting testing sweepstakes. But all of this “bigness” causes a backlash, as many parents crave the mythic “good place to raise kids.”¹⁰ Many small country schools sit incongruously in the midst of bigness, often in small, out-of-the-way communities, but more often in what we now call exurbia (in a rural or quasi-rural setting yet within commuting distance of the metropolis). The relative resilience, and perhaps even the revival of the small country school in select locations has to do with a couple of factors.

First of all, there is the fact that some people refuse to leave the rural places they love. In Atlantic Canadian literature, for example, there is a long string of books that plays on the theme of place attachment and a powerful and even irrational desire to remain in places that time seems to have left behind. For a recent fictional example, see Michael Crummy’s *Sweetland* or Ralph Matthews’s now classic non-fiction study, *There’s No Better Place Than Here*.¹¹ A second, more important factor is represented by the movement of people out of the cities and into rural communities that are, for the most part, within commuting distance of metropolitan areas. There are also numbers of people who relocate to rural areas for lifestyle reasons and/or because their livelihoods do not depend on urban proximity. While many of these people are older and childless, some bring their children into rural communities, creating a small revival of places perhaps once considered abandoned. These are often people who get involved in community-school affairs, which often include small-schools activism in the face of closure and amalgamation schemes initiated by school governance bureaucracies.

Ironically, it may be the networked nature of late modernity that will allow the small community school to once again find a life in the midst of the struggles over space that characterize a new age. Australians call this trend the “sea change” and the “tree change”: that is, lifestyle migrants and retiring baby boomers are repopulating rural places, sometimes giving challenged communities and small country schools new life. And in this new life we also see

contemporary struggles over resource development, climate change, animal rights, land-use zoning issues, and a variety of new struggles and challenges for democracy.¹² The tensions contained in contemporary capitalism with its emerging and receding winners and losers is evident in competing discourses on rural development,¹³ which Michael Woods has characterized as the politics of the rural.¹⁴ No doubt the small country school will continue to be a locus for debate and even a flashpoint for many of these struggles.

Whether or not the overall trend represented by the ongoing legacy of the small country school is a testament to the resilience of democracy remains an open question. What I see more clearly is the way small rural schools often take on the role of fairly transparent test cases in the exercise of power. Tree- and sea-change parents have privilege and are much more likely to save their schools, not because of any democratic principal or argument, but rather because they have political clout, money, and voice. Voices that are heard at any given juncture in history tend to be those representing established and emerging power, and some of them care about small country schools.

Notes

1. There is, of course, a long history that tracks the development of schooling in North America. See Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); J. Donald Wilson, Robert Stamp, and Louis Audet, eds., *Canadian Education: A History* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1970). See also Michael Corbett, *Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community* (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing Co., Ltd., 2007); Paul Theobald, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and The Renewal of Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

2. The landed elites (European settlers) are key figures in the imaginary of the Americas and in Oceania. They are as various in rural history as are the rural communities in which they settled. Indeed, the category of “settler” society is one that is contested and debated. See Daiva K. Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, eds., *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1995); Andrew Gorman-Murray, “Interrogating Rurality in Settler-Societies: Place, Identity and Culture,” *Cultural Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2012): 273–82. I use the term “elites” here to denote those who, largely through land-granting systems and in some cases through access to indentured labor, came to control large tracts of land and resources. Theobald is, in my reading, describing conflict between rurally-based elites, whose wealth is nested in land and rent, and urban elites in search of concentrated and differently disciplined labor.

3. Neoliberalism is an economic theory (or perhaps an assemblage of economic theory is a better way to put things) that has provided a wide general framing for economic and social policy discussions on a global level. The general argument is that government should have a limited role in economic and social affairs and that marketization of all aspects of social life will ultimately result in a better life for all. For an analysis of the educational consequences of this policy direction, see Dave Hill and Ravi Kumar, *Global Neoliberalism and Education and Its Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Richard D. Lakes and Patricia A. Carter, “Neoliberalism and Education: An Introduction,” *Educational Studies* 47, no. 2 (March 23, 2011): 107–10. While neoliberalism is predicated on the globalization of financialization and the mobility of capital, which is theorized to erode the

significance of the national state everywhere, the United States is generally considered to be the point of origin of this theory and the place where it has been implemented most successfully. The consequences of this move to the right both in the United States and elsewhere is the subject of considerable debate, analysis, and critique in recent years. The popular work of Thomas Piketty is just the latest example of a growing concern about the long-term consequences of the neoliberal drift. See Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 1st. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

4. By critical perspective I refer to those forms of social analysis which are predicated on a deep critique of the workings of capitalism both historically and in contemporary societies. Each of the sources cited in the previous endnote operate from this point of sight.

5. Edward P. Thompson, *Modern Classics Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Classics, 2013).

6. Michael Corbett, "Docile Bodies," in Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos, and Elden Wiebe, eds., *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 315-318.

7. Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

8. Indeed, to speak in this way is to take up Theobald's point about the ultimate triumph of democracy, a view he actually problematizes very powerfully in his *Education Now: How Rethinking America's Past Can Change Its Future* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009). This book is an analysis of the way that democracy in the United States has moved increasingly far away from ordinary citizens. In the book Theobald is resiliently optimistic, and he develops what I think is an excellent case for new institutional forms that allow ordinary citizens to participate in governance in classic, town-hall fashion.

9. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2001).

10. Kieran Martin Bonner, *A Great Place to Raise Kids: Interpretation, Science, and the Rural-Urban Debate* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1999).

11. Michael Crummy, *Sweetland* (New York: Liveright, 2015); Ralph Matthews, *There's No Better Place Than Here: Social Change in Three Newfoundland Communities* (St. John's ISER Press, 1970).

12. Rural Tasmania stands as good example of such a space where people with long histories of resource extraction come up against environmentalists, many of whom are relatively new migrants. Green Party politics are one indicator of this shift, and in Tasmania the party has polled close to twenty percent of the popular vote in recent years.

13. Jørn Cruickshank, Hans Kjetil Lysgård, and May-Linda Magnussen, "The Logic of the Construction of Rural Politics: Political Discourses on Rurality in Norway," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 91, no. 1 (2009): 73–89.

14. Michael Woods, "Redefining the 'Rural Question': The New 'Politics of the Rural' and Social Policy," *Social Policy & Administration* 40, no. 6 (2006): 579–95.

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