

STUDY

## **The 1830s and 40s: Horace Mann, the End of Free-Market Education, and the Rise of Government Schools**

By Matthew J. Brouillette, published on July 16, 1999

During the three decades preceding the Civil War, two significant developments occurred in popular education in the United States. The first is that the foundations were laid for a government takeover of education, and the second is that the historic role of schools in transmitting religious traditions gave way to more secular goals. The educational reform movement that marked the turning point in United States educational history originated in, and was dominated by, the example of Massachusetts and its political leaders, particularly Horace Mann.

Horace Mann was born to a family of farmers in Franklin, Massachusetts, on May 4, 1796. His lineage included some of the earliest Puritan settlers who practiced a "severe brand of Calvinism."<sup>18</sup> At the age of twelve, the bookish and introspective Mann rejected Calvinism and focused his attention on educating himself. He graduated from Brown University in 1819 and, following law school in Connecticut, became a practicing attorney in Boston in 1825.

Mann's interest in politics and law and his views and skills as an orator soon catapulted him into the Massachusetts legislature. It was as president of the State Senate that he became intimately involved in the movement to concentrate control of education in the hands of state.

The fight to bring education under the control of government was essentially a fight over the schools' role in shaping the character of the American people. The goal, implicitly religious, was social integration through the inculcation of certain common beliefs selected for their "uplifting" character. Mann, raised an orthodox Calvinist, came to bitterly reject his upbringing in favor of Unitarianism.<sup>19</sup> Unitarians of the time believed that they were preserving the essence of Christianity, purged of sectarian and divisive doctrines, despite the refusal of orthodox Calvinists to recognize them as Christians. Though he may not have intended to promote Unitarianism as a denomination in the schools, Mann clearly wanted to counter the predominant influence of Calvinism by marginalizing it in the minds of Massachusetts students.<sup>20</sup>

The emphasis of the education reformers shifted from voluntary initiatives for improving the techniques and resources available for instruction to state action promoting a uniform system of education. Voluntary efforts lost ground to state coercion as the diversity among local schools was defined as a problem, and schools not accountable to the political process were condemned as a threat to the best interests of society.

Horace Mann and the education reformers' primary purpose was to bring local school districts under centralized town authority and to achieve some degree of uniformity among the towns through a state agency. They believed that popular schooling could be transformed into a powerful instrument for social unity.<sup>21</sup>

The organizational model Mann and others adopted for use in Massachusetts and elsewhere was the Prussian educational system as described by French philosopher Victor Cousin in his 1833 book *Report on the Condition of Public Instruction in Germany, and Particularly Prussia*.<sup>22</sup> The Prussian system of state-controlled education extended from the lower grades through the university levels. Schools were established, supported, and administered by a central authority: The state supervised the training of teachers, attendance was compulsory, parents were punished for withholding their children from school, and efforts were made to make curricula and instruction uniform. Cousin believed that this system was both efficient and effective and used it as "a prime example of the superiority of centralized authority."<sup>23</sup>

Mann and his supporters, however, did not seek direct authority over local schools, given the public-at-large's opinion against central government control of education. Instead, they worked to extend the state's role in defining what would be taught in schools and preparing those who would teach in them. This state role was exercised not so much through regulation and enforcement as through exhortation and the advantages of having a "bully pulpit" in a highly decentralized system.<sup>24</sup>

As president of the State Senate, Mann was instrumental in establishing the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837 during the height of Whig and Unitarian influence in the state. Appointed as the board's first secretary that year, he served until 1848 when he resigned to fill a vacant seat in Congress. On the board, Mann combined an evangelical fervor for the common school with adroit political skills to accomplish three objectives: (1) state collection of education data; (2) state adoption of textbooks through the establishment of state-approved school libraries in each district; and (3) state control of teacher preparation through the establishment of "Normal Schools" (teacher colleges). Although Mann did not invent the original "public" schools, he advocated state control of the very character and mission of "public" education, and laid the groundwork for greater governmental control.<sup>25</sup>

Yet Mann did not accomplish his goals without bitter and principled opposition. Many orthodox and even some liberal Protestant leaders strongly objected to what they perceived as Mann's imposition of his own sectarianism in the schools. Many also disagreed with Mann about the role of government in schooling—centralized control of schooling was seen as antithetical to republican traditions; in particular, the freedom of parents to pass on their own beliefs and traditions to their children.

Mann succeeded in great part because nonsectarianism was a staple of evangelical Protestantism; where theological division did exist, Mann exploited it to raise fears of sectarianism. Eventually, the generalized Protestant character of the common schools was enough to unify all but the most orthodox Protestants in support of government schooling. This was bolstered in part by Protestants' reaction to increased Catholic immigration

and the attempt by Catholics to gain tax support for their parochial schools. Indeed, the common school movement and anti-Catholic sentiment were inextricably bound up with one another as citizens desired to prevent Catholic schools from being assisted through tax money.<sup>26</sup>

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