

Preface

DURING the three decades before the American Civil War, state governments in the North created common-school systems. They passed legislation for tax-supported elementary schools and appointed state school officers. Reform-minded legislators and educators urged higher local school expenditures, more schooling for children, and the beginnings of professional training for teachers. Their goal was an improved and unified school system. Although there has been a resurgence of interest in American educational history during the past twenty years, no one has subjected the rise of common-school systems to sustained analysis since the influential works of Ellwood Cubberley, Paul Monroe, and other early twentieth-century historians who associated public schooling with democracy, progress, and humanitarian reform. In the meantime, books about particular urban communities by so-called revisionist historians have opened up new questions and developed new theories about the purposes of common schooling in the pre-Civil War era, challenging the focus, the tone, and the values of the Cubberley generation. I was thus pleased when Arthur Wang asked me to undertake a reassessment of the origins of common-school systems.

This book is the culmination of a series of books and articles I have written about the history of schooling. It draws on much of my earlier research on England and the American Northeast, as well as upon new research I have undertaken on the Midwest and the South. There is much description in the book—of rural district schools, of urban charity schools, of the legislative battles waged by reformers, and of the institutions they worked to establish, such as teachers' institutes and graded schools. Thus the book is structured around many traditional categories in the institutional and political history of education, and it should serve as an introduction for readers new to the subject. It offers, however, a new interpretation of the origins of public schooling and of the

nature of popular resistance to that reform. I emphasize, for example, that there was a substantial rise in school enrollments in the first fifty years of the nation's history, prior to the common-school reform movement; that unlike England, America witnessed virtually no opposition to popular education per se, only to a structure of state control and financing and to the attempt to gather all groups into a common system with a common curriculum; and that the tension between localist tradition and centralizing innovation was the main dynamic in the drama of school reform after 1830.

I argue that the eventual acceptance of state common-school systems was encouraged by Americans' commitment to republican government, by the dominance of native Protestant culture, and by the development of capitalism. I argue that in translating republican, Protestant, and capitalist values into public policy, leaders were guided by a particular ideology. The reform version of this ideology called for state-regulated common schools to integrate and assimilate a diverse population into the nation's political, economic, and cultural institutions. This ideology and various aspects of the reform program were opposed by independent-minded local-control advocates, many Southern slaveholders, members of non-English and non-Protestant groups who favored cultural distinctiveness and independent schooling, blacks who had been left out of the new common-school systems, and a smattering of full-fledged radicals who opposed the whole religious and economic underpinning of the predominant ideology. These groups did not make common cause with each other, did not have the same goals, and did not succeed in preventing the creation of state common-school systems. They did, however, achieve various concessions and adjustments, thus contributing to the shape and content of American common schooling as it existed by 1860.

This book is about schools, not about all education. Families, churches, apprenticeships, and other institutions continued to play important educational roles in the early republic. But this was also the period during which the school was emerging as the principal agent of cognitive and moral teaching and as an important instrument of public policy. This book attempts to explain

that process. It looks beyond schools to the broader economic and cultural context, but only in order to explain changes in the organization and purposes of schooling. If one wants to understand state policy toward education, schools are the appropriate focus. Society educates in many ways; the state educates through schools.

The chapters of this book are organized around two chronological periods, the early national period (1780 to 1830) and the antebellum period (1830 to 1860). Within these periods chapters are organized on a topical basis. After a brief prologue about the educational ideas of the founding fathers, two chapters describe rural and urban schooling in the early national period and note some connections between education and social changes between 1780 and 1830. The next four chapters concentrate on the North in the antebellum period. The argument moves from social structure to ideology, then to the reformers' program, and then to popular reaction. Common-school developments in the midwestern states generally followed the same lines as those in the Northeast. This raises some interesting questions about the causes of successful common-school systematization, because the Midwest was less industrial and less urban than the Northeast. Most southern states, in contrast, did not adopt tax-supported, state-regulated common schools by the time of the Civil War. Historians have long characterized the South as a region with different educational attitudes and institutions. This is a half-truth. There was much common-school reform effort and support in the South. Nonetheless, the North-South contrast is important. I have therefore postponed discussion of the South, except for occasional references, until a final chapter on regional differences in common-school reform.

By "common school" I mean an elementary school intended to serve all the children in an area. An expensive independent school, obviously, would not be a "common school," but neither would a charity school open only to the poor. Some of the tuition schools of the early national period were quite inexpensive and enrolled children from a variety of family circumstances. I have called these "common pay schools." "Common school" was not synonymous with "free school." In both the North and the South,

even after the creation of state common-school systems, parents were often required to pay part of the cost of their child's instruction in common schools. Conversely, a "free school" was not always a "common school," for the term "free school" was often applied to charity schools attended only by the children of the poor.

The history of common schooling is complicated not only by endless local variation but by the fact that each state was different, and by 1860 there were thirty-three states. In doing my research I adopted Lord Bacon's advice that some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. I did considerable archival work in some states; for others I concentrated on the published primary and secondary sources; and others I studied only incidentally as topical interests led me into the sources. I have not attempted to cover the states west of the Mississippi. Because state policies about common schooling had little impact on Native and Hispanic Americans in the pre-Civil War East, these groups play no part in my analysis.

I have included a few pages of some previously published articles in this book. These include a portion of "The Scylla of Brutal Ignorance and the Charybdis of a Literary Education': Elite Attitudes Toward Mass Education in Early Industrial England and America," in Lawrence Stone, ed., *School and Society* (Baltimore, 1976), reprinted by permission of the editor and the Johns Hopkins University Press; a portion of "Social Change, Discipline and the Common School in Early Nineteenth-Century America," in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 9 (Summer 1978), reprinted by permission of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* and the MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; and a portion of "Ideology and American Educational History," in the *History of Education Quarterly* 22 (Summer 1982), reprinted by permission of the *History of Education Quarterly*.

The endnotes in this book serve three purposes. They give the source of direct quotations so that interested researchers can check the context of the remark and read more of the arguments of the historical actors from whom I have drawn my examples. The notes also provide suggestions for further reading on special

topics. In the index I have included references to those endnotes that cite basic secondary works. Finally, the notes give credit where I have relied upon other historians' works for background. In order to reduce the distractions of scholarly apparatus, I have placed note references only at the ends of paragraphs. In the notes I have omitted references if the source is already obvious in the text, most often in the case of annual education reports of states or towns. After noting the most helpful reference works on a particular topic, I have not repeated their titles to document general narrative details, nor have I provided notes to document statistics readily available from the United States Census volumes or other common works. Readers who are willing to accept on faith that the quotations are accurate, and who have no plans to dig further on particular topics, may safely ignore the endnotes. None of them discusses events, terminology, or interpretations.

In writing this book, I have been fortunate to have financial support, excellent research assistants, and keen, critical colleagues. The book benefited from some technical and more narrowly focused earlier projects and from the grants that supported them. These include a research grant from the National Institute of Education (1973-76), a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship (1977-78), a Romnes Faculty Fellowship (1978-83) and other support from the Research Committee of the Graduate School, University of Wisconsin, and a grant from the Royalty Fund of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. My judgments, however, do not necessarily reflect the position of the National Institute of Education, and no one should infer any official endorsement by NIE or by any of the other funding agencies mentioned above.

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DeBats and Paul Bourke of the American Studies discipline at Flinders University, South Australia, as well as various members of the Adelaide Social History Group, the Faculty of Education at Melbourne University, and the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Some have suggested problems that I was unable to resolve or revisions that I was unwilling to make. Thus, to restate the ritual caveat, I urge readers not to blame my faults on my friends. At the University of Wisconsin, the staffs of the Department of Educational Policy Studies and the Department of History have been unceasingly supportive; in particular I wish to thank Mary Jo Gessler and especially Jean Kennedy, who has typed some of the chapters more times than either of us cares to remember.

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The constant support of my wife, Elizabeth MacKenzie Kaestle, has soothed the frustrations that resulted from trying to think seriously about the writing of this book while taking my turn as chair of an academic department. I owe much of my sanity and my happiness to her companionship.

C.F.K.

“American democracy is supported by a thousand pillars . . . I mean, and you must have anticipated me, our free schools. These are in truth the very bulwark of our Republic.”

Andrew Lunt, *Anniversary Address*
before the Salem Charitable Mechanic Association
(Salem, 1835)

1

Prologue: The Founding Fathers and Education

RUDIMENTARY learning was widespread in Revolutionary America. Conditions in the British colonies had fostered education. Migration drawn largely from the middling social ranks of England and the continent resulted in a disproportionately literate population. Protestants in general, and particularly the Calvinist groups that predominated in the northern colonies, stressed Bible reading and early education as preparation for salvation. The colonies' commercial development and broad male franchise reinforced the importance of literacy for adults. Americans of the revolutionary era valued elementary education. Figures on schooling and literacy suggest that a majority of white men in the new nation could read and write. Indicators of women's literacy were rising, and the availability of schools was increasing at the time of the Revolution.

Elementary education among white Americans was accomplished through parental initiative and informal, local control of institutions. In a few cases, New England colonial legislatures tried to ensure that towns would provide schools or that parents would not neglect their children's education, but these laws were weakly enforced. Elsewhere the central colonial governments played little role in education. Towns or neighborhoods often decided to provide schools, funded in a variety of ways. Attendance was voluntary and usually involved some charges to parents. Other local communities left schooling to the initiative of families, who formed groups to organize subscription schools, or

sent their children to study with entrepreneurial private-venture teachers or inexpensive "dame" schools in their neighborhoods. Most children attended school at some time, but much education also came through the family, the church, and the workplace. Some poor children were instructed in church-affiliated charity schools; others did without schooling, remaining illiterate or picking up the three R's from parents or friends. Nowhere was schooling entirely tax supported or compulsory. The demand for education did not come principally from above, although political leaders and ministers sometimes argued the importance of schooling. The proliferation of private-venture schools in the cities and neighborhood district schools in rural areas was a response to popular demand. Provincial America's informal, unsystematic, local mode of schooling resulted in a relatively high level of elementary education and proved capable of expansion.¹

Nonetheless, educational opportunity was uneven at the time of the Revolution, and training beyond the rudiments was not widespread. The South's literacy rate lagged behind the North's, while in all areas, women, blacks, Native Americans, and poor whites were to differing degrees excluded from the culture of the printed English word. In the large commercial seaports, poverty had increased in the years preceding the Revolution, as had factional politics and ideological splintering. In the turbulent revolutionary decades, urban dwellers witnessed crowd actions that sometimes went beyond the intentions of their leaders. These tendencies to fragmentation added to the anxieties of newly won independence and created an urgent quest for coherence, discipline, and public unity among the new nation's leaders.²

The nation's Founding Fathers knew from classical political theory that the most stable governments combined elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. But Americans had expelled monarchy, and revolutionary leaders stood firm against the creation of a formal American aristocracy. How, then, were they to escape the degeneration into anarchy that they believed was the inevitable fate of pure democracies? They pinned their hopes on the creation of a republic, a representative form of government in which the general will would be refined and articulated by the best men. Here again, though, classical theory

and much contemporary opinion warned them that republican government would not work in a country as large as America, especially with its well-defined sections and heterogeneous population. The perception of a precarious national government was intensified by disorders like the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania and Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts. Political theorists and policy makers were therefore concerned not only with protecting liberty, for which the Revolution had been fought, but also with maintaining order, without which all might be lost. Education could play an important role in reconciling freedom and order. A sound education would prepare men to vote intelligently and prepare women to train their sons properly. Moral training based on the Protestant Bible would produce virtuous, well-behaved citizens. Not just the three R's but "an acquaintance with ethics and with the general principles of law, commerce, money and government is necessary for the yeomanry of a republican state," said Noah Webster.³

Republicanism united concepts of virtue, balanced government, and liberty. By "virtue," republican essayists meant discipline, sacrifice, simplicity, and intelligence, and they called upon ministers, teachers, and parents to aid in the creation and maintenance of a virtuous citizenry. Virtue and intelligence did not necessarily depend upon deliberate instruction, however. Republican thought emphasized the natural virtue and intelligence of a landed yeomanry. The symbols of American rural virtue were prominent in political discussions of the revolutionary era. Two problems undermined that faith in natural virtue. America had increasing numbers of citizens who were not landed yeomen; the natural virtue of such citizens could not be assumed. Also, factional politics became magnified as independence thrust upon the colonies the necessity of political union. To foster the intelligence required of republican citizens, some of America's most eloquent political leaders looked to education—not just through the informal colonial modes of instruction but through schools organized and financed by the states.

Along with anxieties about the future of the republic these men shared a sense of opportunity, of responsibility to mankind, a sense that a real revolution had been made, that they could

build a new society based on enlightened ideas about the perfectibility of men and institutions. Here was a chance for a real departure from corrupt Europe. This was the ideal of the American Revolution, and education had a critical role in it. The ideal demanded new efforts and new forms of organization. "We have only finished the first act of the great drama," wrote Benjamin Rush, the Philadelphia physician and statesman. "It remains yet to effect a revolution in our principles, opinions, and manners so as to accommodate them to the forms of government we have adopted." Noah Webster argued that for the new state governments to aid colleges and academies while they did nothing about free common schooling was a glaring contradiction in a country where "every citizen who is worth a few shillings" can vote. "The constitutions are republican and the laws of education are monarchical," he complained.⁴

In the preamble of his 1779 bill for free schools in Virginia, Thomas Jefferson laid out the basic logic of state-sponsored schools for republican citizenship. Citizens must choose leaders wisely, defeat ambition and corruption in politics, and protect liberty by keeping a vigilant eye on government. All citizens should have a chance not only to vote but to be elected. The government needs wise and honest laws, Jefferson argued, and thus it needs educated and virtuous lawmakers. In a republic, these men must be chosen "without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition." Because there are many people who cannot afford a good education, Jefferson argued, all should share the cost, in order to foster the best possible representative government.⁵

A thoroughly American curriculum would help unify the language and culture of the new nation and wean America away from a corrupt Europe. "For America in her infancy to adopt the maxims of the Old World," said Webster in his famous spelling book, "would be to stamp the wrinkles of old age upon the bloom of youth, and to plant the seed of decay in a vigorous constitution." Instead, he advised, "begin with the infant in his cradle . . . let the first word he lisps be 'Washington.'" "The national character is not yet formed," wrote Webster in 1790. Common schools are needed to instill in American children "an

inviolable attachment to their own country." Benjamin Rush joined Webster in emphasizing the theme of national integration, urging the creation of a national university "where the youth of all the states may be melted (as it were) together into one mass of citizens."⁶

In an essay on common-school education written in 1786, Rush's anxieties got the best of him, leaving a memorable and somewhat chilling reminder of the harsh side of revolutionary educational thought:

In the education of youth, let the authority of our masters be as absolute as possible. . . . By this mode of education we prepare our youth for the subordination of laws and thereby qualify them for becoming good citizens of the republic. I am satisfied that the most useful citizens have been formed from those youth who have never known or felt their own wills till they were one and twenty years of age.

Then, in a famous line, Rush declared, "I consider it as possible to convert men into republican machines. This must be done if we expect them to perform their parts properly in the great machine of the state." Although Rush's flamboyant language is unusual, many shared his desire to achieve political conformity and disciplined behavior through education.⁷

Other educational theorists, however, wrote about the positive, liberating values of republicanism. In a prize-winning essay on education written in 1797, Samuel Harrison Smith, a Washington newspaper editor, listed five reasons for the broad diffusion of knowledge in the United States.

1. An enlightened nation is always most tenacious of its rights.
2. It is not in the interest of such a society to perpetuate error.
3. In a republic the sources of happiness are open to all without injuring any.
4. If happiness be made at all to depend on the improvement of the mind and the collision of mind with mind, the happiness of an individual will greatly depend upon the general diffusion of knowledge. . . .
5. Under a republic . . . man feels as strong a bias to improvement as under a despotism he feels an impulse to ignorance and depression.⁸

Writers like Smith stressed the exercise of liberty and unfettered intelligence more than the need for social order. All republican educational theorists, however, emphasized the heavy responsibilities of citizenship and the importance of moral training for the survival of republican institutions. "The virtues of men are of more consequence to society than their abilities," said Webster. While they reconciled freedom and order in different ways, these writers were similarly preoccupied with those two philosophical poles. They produced many proposals for state-supported common schooling, which they believed would contribute to disciplined, republican liberty.⁹

But did these republican educational theorists have any impact on the actual schooling of children in the new republic? Some commentators lamented the conditions of American schools in the 1780s and 1790s and joined in the chorus for reform. Governor George Clinton warned the New York legislature in 1782 that the war had created a "chasm in education," and he urged the members to encourage schooling for citizenship and restraint. Robert Coram of Delaware thought that schools outside the large towns were "completely despicable, wretched, and contemptible" and that the teachers were "shamefully deficient." This conviction that there was a "chasm" in education prompted some prominent men in the early national period to argue for state laws requiring free local schools, or even to argue for systematic state aid to common schools, both ideas without precedent in America. Even the oft-cited Massachusetts school laws of the seventeenth century had insisted only that towns maintain schools, not that they had to be free. No one had imagined anything as comprehensive as the plans of the Revolutionary generation.¹⁰

Flush with the enthusiasm and the anxieties of new nationhood, Thomas Jefferson proposed for Virginia a three-tiered system of local education—free elementary schools, twenty regional academies with free tuition for selected boys, and support at William and Mary College for the best ten needy academy graduates. Jefferson also envisioned regional-level supervision and general oversight of a statewide curriculum by the faculty of the college. These features were unheard of before Jefferson's pro-

posal of 1779. In Pennsylvania, Benjamin Rush introduced a similar plan in 1786, calling for a state-supported university in Philadelphia, four colleges around the state, and free schools in every town. By this plan, he said, "the whole state will be tied together by one system of education." Revered by historians as harbingers of later state systems, these proposals failed to win legislative approval and had little or no effect on schooling at the local level. The persistent Jefferson introduced his 1779 plan again in the 1790s and in 1817, but each time it failed. As his supporter Joseph Cabell told him, "neither the people nor the representatives would agree" to property taxes for a general system of common schools. In the 1780s Jefferson had attributed the defeat of his Virginia school bill to the people's economic anxieties and the state government's scant resources. But by 1817 he charged that the proposal was foiled by "ignorance, malice, egoism, fanaticism, religious, political and local perversities." Virginians did not adopt a statewide free school system until 1870. In the meantime, they settled for a policy of charity schools for the poor. Rush's plan met a similar fate in Pennsylvania, where opposition to free common schooling was still fierce in the 1830s.¹¹

William Wirt, an English visitor, said that Jefferson's bill had failed in the 1780s because "the comprehensive views and generous patriotism which produced the bill, have not prevailed throughout the country." But there was more principle to the opposition than Wirt's statement implied. The very devotion to liberty that schooling was designed to protect also made local citizens skeptical of new forms of taxation by the state, and of new institutional regulation by the central government. Furthermore, it was not clear to members of hard-pressed state legislatures that the republic would collapse without new systems of common schooling, or that the existing mode of local and parental initiative was insufficient. Resistance to new taxes, devotion to local control and individual choice, and a faith in existing educational arrangements—these were the factors that foiled early plans for state systems of free common schooling. While the great ideas of the American Revolution had some impact on the popular mind and found much practical expression in new state

and national political arrangements, many local institutions were largely unchanged. This was the case with schooling. The Revolution was not a social cataclysm, and Rush's vision of a state school system to make "republican machines" in Pennsylvania remained only a vision during his lifetime.

Farther to the North, however, republican enthusiasm for education bore some legislative fruit. Massachusetts in 1789, then New York and Connecticut in 1795, tried three quite different approaches to state encouragement of elementary schooling. The Massachusetts law, similar to its colonial precedents, required towns of fifty or more families to provide an elementary school for at least six months a year and required towns of two hundred or more families to provide a grammar school where classical languages would be taught. It is difficult, however, to gauge the educational impact of the 1789 law. Because most towns already provided partially free elementary schools, because the grammar-school provisions were widely unheeded and unenforced, because the law provided no state financial aid, and because the permissive clause authorizing the organization of school districts merely recognized an already common practice, the law probably had a very modest effect on popular schooling in Massachusetts.

New York's legislation, in contrast, provided substantial state aid to local schools. Since 1784 New York had had a general education board, called the Regents, who granted charters and financial assistance to incorporated colleges and academies. In 1795 Governor Clinton complained that this aid was "confined to the children of the opulent" and urged state aid to common schools. The legislature responded with a five-year law appropriating \$50,000 a year to be divided among local common-school committees that agreed to match at least half of their state allotment with local funds. The state money came from land sales and interest on surplus capital. These funds proved insufficient by 1799 and necessitated a direct property tax. In 1800 the state's senate, unwilling to tax property for education, refused to renew the law.¹²

It is difficult to assess the local impact of this early educational legislation in New York. Its effects were certainly more tangible than those of the Massachusetts law. Substantial sums of money

reached the local level; we cannot assume that these funds would have been raised in some other way if the state had not acted. In 1800, 58,000 children attended the state-assisted schools, about 37 percent of all children from birth to age nineteen in the counties that reported receiving funds (sixteen of twenty-three counties). This is quite an impressive enrollment rate. If we assumed, for example, that the usual school age was approximately four to thirteen, about 75 percent of all school-age children would have been enrolled for some period of the year in these counties in 1800. Unfortunately, there are no systematic enrollment rates from the years just preceding or just following the five years that New York's school aid law was in effect, so we cannot tell whether the state aid increased enrollments or not. The New York State law of 1795 was a more thoroughgoing effort at state encouragement of schooling than the Massachusetts law of 1789, but it was unusual for its time, its impact is uncertain, and it was in any case short-lived. In the minds of most New Yorkers, apparently, republican education did not require state intervention.¹³

The most unusual law was Connecticut's of 1795. The legislature voted to sell all of its land in the Western Reserve territory, which resulted in the receipt of \$1,200,000, with which it created a permanent school fund. The interest of the fund was distributed to localities for teachers' salaries, with no strings attached and no matching requirement. The state collected a supplementary property tax of \$2 per \$1,000 of assessed value until 1820, when the interest from the school fund was sufficient to render the tax unnecessary. Local school areas, based on existing Congregational Church parish lines but with no clerical involvement, were called "school societies." They were free to raise additional funds by taxes or by tuition. Some societies merely paid the teachers' salaries with the state money for as many months as it lasted and then charged tuition for supplementary months. This practice, which avoided local school taxes, apparently increased in the 1820s and 1830s, leading to the charge by school reformers that the 1795 law had vitiated local initiative. Nonetheless, the interest distributed from the school fund was considerable, averaging \$50,000 a year in the 1810s and rising to over \$100,000 a year

in the 1840s. From the 1790s until the 1820s some foreign visitors and some American commentators rated Connecticut's common schools as the best in the country. This may have been nothing more than a coincidence, however. Common schooling did not languish in other states for lack of support. Elsewhere in the Northeast, local taxes and tuition sufficed to meet local needs. Statements like George Clinton's, that there was a "chasm" in post-Revolutionary education, do not reveal very much about actual school conditions in the new republic. Rather than looking for legislative precedents of modern school systems in this period, we should ask what kind of schooling ordinary people sought in the new republic, and what the institutional results were.

2

*Rural Schools in the
Early Republic*

MOST Americans in the early national period lived in dispersed farm communities or very small towns. The proportion of people living in places with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants was 95 percent in 1790, and it was still 91 percent in 1830. In the rural Northeast and the new Midwest, the characteristic school was the district school, organized and controlled by a small locality and financed by some combination of property taxes, fuel contributions, tuition payments, and state aid. The district system had become prevalent in the North during the second half of the eighteenth century, as population dispersed outward from towns, and outlying neighborhoods demanded control of their schools. In the South, more commonly, itinerant schoolmasters selected a location on their own initiative and set tuition rates for parents who chose to send their children, or they were engaged by a group of parents to teach a term in a neighborhood "old-field school," a log cabin built on useless fallow land. Often these schools were not very different in curriculum or clientele from district schools in the North, though a smaller proportion of southern white children attended schools. The terms "public" and "private" did not have their present connotations, and most schools did not fit neatly into either of our modern categories.

When one investigates the actual history of district education, the first image that crumbles is that of the "little red schoolhouse," high on a hill and surrounded by a meadow. Schoolhouses of this period were not red; they were log or unpainted clapboard. Nor

were they in idyllic locations. Cleared land was scarce, and schoolhouses were usually located on plots that were good for nothing else, often next to highways or on swampy ground. Referring to Connecticut in the early nineteenth century, Heman Humphrey wrote, "all the school-houses that I remember stood close by the travelled road, without any playgrounds or enclosures whatever." Parents in a district often quarreled vociferously over the location of the schoolhouse, each wanting it as close as possible to home. In a book called *Sketches of American Character* (1829), Sarah Hale parodied the selection of a district school site: "The only requisite was, to fix precisely on the centre of the district; and after measuring in every direction, the centre had been discovered exactly in the centre of a frog-pond. As near that pond as safety would permit, stood the schoolhouse." School officials of the 1840s bemoaned the poor location of schoolhouses, claiming that it demonstrated public indifference to education. Schoolhouses are "sometimes adjacent to a cooper's shop or between a blacksmith's shop and a sawmill," wrote Michigan's Superintendent of Public Instruction. Reform-minded school officials had a jaundiced view of district schools, but on this point they were unanimous. There may have been some sturdy, ample schoolhouses in spacious fields, but they were the exceptions.¹

The number of children attending these schoolhouses varied widely from district to district. Although one usually associates large classes and overcrowding with urban schools, the rural district schools in the North were often too small to accommodate the increased number of students who attended in the winter months, when farmwork slackened. "Not unfrequently sixty or seventy scholars were daily shut up six hours, where there was hardly room for thirty," said Heman Humphrey. Descriptions of the interiors of district schoolhouses of the period 1780 to 1840 are remarkably similar. The usual plan included built-in desks around three walls, with benches on which the older children could face either their desks or the center of the room. In the center of the floor were benches for the younger children, generally close to the stove or fireplace. The teacher's desk, on a low platform, was positioned in front of the fourth wall or in the

center, depending on the location of the stove. Into these one-room schoolhouses tumbled the children of rural republican America. They began at younger ages and enrolled in greater proportions than their urban contemporaries. By the age of four or five, and until the age of about fourteen, most rural children in the North and a substantial number of white children in the South attended school at some time during the year. This does not mean that they received more education than children in cities, for the sessions were short, usually two or three months each in winter and summer. Beginning at about age ten, children typically attended only the winter session, when farm work slackened. There was no standard age for beginning school, and teachers did not attempt to prevent the attendance of toddlers, often as young as three years old, although one teacher called them "trundle bed trash."²

Many reminiscences tell of children beginning school at surprisingly young ages. Warren Burton, author of *The District School As It Was*, entered a school at Wilton, New Hampshire, in 1804 at the age of three and a half and became an "abecedarian," as the beginners were called. Horace Greeley, the famous New York editor, also grew up in New Hampshire. He began school when he was two years and ten months old. Elizabeth Buffum, another memoir writer, was born in 1806 and grew up in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. "When I was two years old," she said, "I began to be taken to the Quaker meeting as well as to school. . . . When I was three years old I could read very well." Not all children were such prodigies, however. William Mowry of Rhode Island wrote that learning the whole alphabet "would take probably the entire summer term," and for some children "a whole year would pass before this task was successfully accomplished."³

Parents who sent very young children to school seem to have done so through a desire to have them out from under foot as much as from eagerness to get them started on the three R's early. One memoir speaks of "the front seats for the little ones sent to school to relieve the mothers of their care at home," and another refers to a two-year-old "sent to school to relieve his mother from trouble, rather than learn." One can understand the desire

of rural mothers with busy work schedules to be freed from the care of toddlers. Whatever the motives of the parents, the youngest children did very little intellectual training in district schools. William Mowry said that when he went to school, the abecedarians got about five minutes of instruction twice a day reciting the alphabet. The rest of the time, he said, "we had nothing to do but to look on and thus cultivate our powers of observation."⁴

Two features of district schools added to the burden of the toddlers' inactivity. The benches, according to an apparently inviolable tradition, were backless, and high enough so that most children's feet did not touch the floor. "A more complete rack of torture and machine for making cripples could hardly be invented," said Hiram Orcutt. Also, the benches for little children were always closest to the fire, so that in addition to boredom, cramped muscles, and demands for silence, they had to contend with waves of heat radiating from the stove. Heman Humphrey remembered that "many of the smaller children had to sit all day with their legs dangling between the bench and the floor. Poor little things! nodding, and trying to keep their balance on the slabs, without any backs to lean against." Drowsiness was a constant tendency. A dramatic anecdote is found in the memoir of John Burroughs, who grew up in the Catskill Mountains of New York: "One afternoon the oblivion of sleep came over me, and when I came to consciousness again I was in a neighbor's house on a couch, and the smell of camphor pervaded the room. I had fallen off the seat backward and hit my head on the protruding stones of the unplastered wall behind me and cut a hole in it, and I suppose for the moment effectively scattered my childish wits."⁵

After children had learned the alphabet, they began memorizing words of one syllable and practicing vowel exercises like "ab, eb, ib, ob, ub, ac, ec, ic, oc, uc, ad, ed, id, od, ud." They practiced writing on slates and eventually with quill pens in copybooks. Students also worked their way through elementary readers, spellers, and arithmetics. The textbooks of Englishman John Dilworth were the best sellers until Noah Webster's nationalistic texts displaced them during the early nineteenth century. Some district schools and old-field schools offered older children

a smattering of grammar, geography, and other subjects, but generally students were occupied with reading, writing, and arithmetic. Elementary arithmetic usually stopped at the mysterious "rule of three," a formula for solving ratios. The Old and New Testaments were common reading books in the early nineteenth century, and some district schools even used catechisms.

Despite many similarities of architecture, curriculum, and local financing, rural schools also reflected the nation's diversity. Rural schools were tied to their communities; as those communities varied, so did their schools. In some areas, teachers taught in foreign languages. Schools included different religious exercises according to local majority preference. Academies that dotted the countryside sometimes had distinctive religious or ethnic affiliations.

Within a single district elementary school, diversity of another sort challenged teachers. Most teachers attempted to group children into "classes" based on the level of their primers, but this was often frustrated by the diversity of texts owned by parents. By jealously defended tradition, children studied from the texts their families sent with them to school. A historian of Wisconsin education concluded that "each child would bring to school whatever the family happened to have, often books that had been brought along by his parents when they came to Wisconsin. There were sometimes as many different textbooks in use in a school as there were children in attendance." This complication, together with the diversity of pupils' ages, especially in winter session, presented teachers with the pedagogical challenge of the district school: how to keep order and accomplish something in schoolrooms that typically had forty to fifty and sometimes sixty children, when there was no convenient way to group them. Theodore Dwight described the confusion that could result. In a school he visited in Connecticut in the 1830s "the teacher was mending pens for one class, which was sitting idle; hearing another spell; calling a covey of small boys to be quiet, who had nothing to do but make mischief; watching a big rogue who had been placed standing on a bench in the middle of the room for punishment; and, to many little ones, passionately answering questions of 'May I go out?' 'May I go home?' 'Shan't Johnny be still?' 'May I drink?'"⁶

In the face of these challenges, some teachers did well and some did poorly. There is no way to generalize about the success of teachers in the rural schools of the early republic. Yet memoirs do allow some generalizations about the ways in which teachers coped with large groups of children. Partly from necessity and partly from conviction, teachers made memorization the children's major task. Despite a certain amount of talk about the need for children to understand what they were learning, the routine portrayed in school memoirs seldom deviated: children studied at their desks in preparation for rote recitation in front of the teacher. "Repetition, drilling, line upon line, and precept upon precept, with here and there a little of the birch—constituted the entire system," recalled Samuel Goodrich. "We did an immense amount of memorizing," said Elizabeth Buffum. "At twelve years of age I had recited *Murray's Grammar* through perhaps over a dozen times without a word of explanation or application from the book or the teacher."⁷

Occasionally memoirs refer to teachers who used the older children to teach the younger children, a sensible procedure given the circumstances. In large cities this innovation, called the "monitorial" system, became quite popular in the 1820s, but in rural district schools, the use of older children as instructors seems to have been rare. With the teacher in full charge of all recitations, it is no wonder that silence was demanded from the pupils studying at their seats. "I believe it was generally understood," wrote William Alcott, "that I was a *smart* teacher, by which was meant that I kept the school very quiet; and this, in those days, was regarded by many, as the very summit of pedagogic excellence." One of Warren Burton's teachers, Mehitabel Holt, also succeeded by keeping order. "Her punishments were horrible, especially to us little ones. She dungeoned us in that windowless closet just for a whisper. She tied us to her chair-post for an hour . . . a twist of the ear, or a snap on the head from her thimble finger, reminded us that sitting perfectly still was the most important virtue of a little boy in school."⁸

Mehitabel Holt may have been stricter than some, but she was not unusual in her use of corporal punishment. Most district and old-field schoolteachers as well as their urban counterparts used

and defended physical punishments to keep order. Alcott, who had some qualms about whipping children, tried in his fourth year of teaching to restrict himself to boxing ears, striking hands, and shaking heads. After that experiment he decided that the rod was better, because it involved less risk of injury to the student: "I defend its use by parents and teachers who are reduced to the dreadful alternative of inflicting pain, or see a child go on to suffering or to ruin. And I know of no method of inflicting pain so excellent." Acceptance of corporal punishment was widespread. Eliphalet Nott, who grew up in Connecticut in the 1780s, said, "If I was not whipped more than three times a week, I considered myself for the time peculiarly fortunate." In 1819, six-year-old James Sims was sent to a boarding school in South Carolina where new boys were always flogged, usually "until the youngster vomitted or wet his breeches."⁹

Although the type and amount of physical punishment varied from teacher to teacher, harsh and frequent punishments seem to have been characteristic of early nineteenth-century schools. Nonetheless, there are three qualifications to this generally brutal picture. First, some teachers were simply compassionate, gentle individuals who kept school without hitting children. Second, although not all women teachers abstained from corporal punishment, they were less likely to beat their students than men, partly because of gentler feminine stereotypes and partly because the older boys were often stronger than they were. It was for this latter reason that female teachers were in many districts employed only during the summer sessions, when the older children were generally working. As more and more communities began to employ female teachers, fewer schoolchildren were beaten. Third, a campaign for discipline through moral persuasion, though resisted by many male teachers, struck a responsive chord in others. Eliphalet Nott vowed, "I would not be like other men in regard to their treatment of children. . . . I made up my mind to substitute in my school moral motives." He claimed that his successful experiment in moral suasion attracted sufficient notice to propel him into the principalship of the prominent Plainfield Academy. Nott made it sound easy, but for most teachers it was difficult. A writer in the *New York Teacher* in the 1850s complained, "I

have taken 'moral suasion' as my motto, but find my scholars have become so accustomed to the rod that they do not know what school is without it." He said that he found a piece of consoling advice in the *Wisconsin Journal of Education*: "Govern from a sense of right and justice when you *can*, from a feeling of fear when you *must*."¹⁰

Most teachers of the early nineteenth century did not stay with it very long. Little training was required, the wages were low, and the short sessions required teachers to combine jobs. Teachers doubled as farm laborers, tavernkeepers, prospectors, and craftsmen. There are no systematic records of the teachers of district schools before the 1840s, but memoirs and local records indicate minimal formal qualifications and high turnover of both male and female teachers. Women were rarely employed in the rural South in the early national period and were still a minority in northern district schools, limited to summer terms in most districts and excluded in others altogether. For females, teaching was usually a brief interlude between their own schooling and marriage. Some teachers, of course, had more formal education than others. Some male teachers in the North were college students earning their tuition money on the side. The town records of Dedham, Massachusetts, for example, document a procession of Harvard students teaching their winter schools. Still, the small number of colleges supplied only a fraction of the teachers needed for district schools, most of which were quite remote from college towns. Local common-school graduates, or those with a bit of academy training, sufficed where college students never trod.

In the South and in Pennsylvania, itinerant schoolmasters were often portrayed as drunken, foreign, and ignorant. James Sims of South Carolina endured two cruel Irishmen, he said, before a school was begun in 1822 by "the first native American teacher that we had among us." A contemporary in North Fayette, Pennsylvania, recalled an Irish teacher who had his dram at the tavern before school opened, and a neighbor in Plum said that a master named Patrick Murty loved his grog. "But at a time," he added, "when each took his dram three times a day, and thought it did him good, this peculiarity in Patrick was but little noticed, and Master Murty was the wonder of the county. Many young men

of the day came from a distance to him to learn the art of surveying lands." Equally appreciated was an Irish teacher before 1820 in Harrison township, Pennsylvania, recalled by a former student: "Of an afternoon, when scholars were getting dull and time was hanging heavy, he would take off his coat, roll up his sleeves, get out in the middle of the floor, and dance them as beautiful a jig as you ever saw in your life."¹¹

Despite such appreciative memoirs, teachers of district schools had quite a bad reputation in the eyes of would-be reformers, who wished to require more rigorous examinations by local communities, closer supervision, higher pay, and, eventually, normal-school training. We must treat the complaints of reformers cautiously, but by the 1840s, reports of the ignorance of common-school teachers were widespread. New York's Superintendent of Common Schools said in 1843 that some district schools had not been inspected in twenty years and that some local communities had certified teachers who could not even add. Some teachers, he said, were not only ignorant but intemperate. According to Vermont's new Superintendent of Common Schools, one successful district-school teaching candidate believed that the Mississippi was the largest river in New England and that 1847 was the number of years that had elapsed since the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. A midwestern school crusader claimed in 1842 that "at least four-fifths of the teachers in the common schools in Illinois would not pass an examination in the rudiments of our English education, and most of them have taken to teaching because they hadn't anything in particular to do."¹²

In the eyes of state education officials and other reform-minded commentators, district and old-field schoolteachers were not serving educational needs very well. From the point of view of rural communities, however, it seems that these transient, low-paid, inexperienced teachers served local needs quite well. The chief goal of northern district-school committees and southern subscription-school organizers was to provide children with rudimentary instruction at low cost under firm community control. Local taxpayers showed little interest in enhancing the professional status of teachers or increasing the length of school sessions. The viability of the locally controlled district school from the time of the

Revolution at least until the 1830s is underscored by the modest impact of educational reforms at the state level prior to 1840. The notion of a state system of education—that is, of a central authority with coercive power to establish, finance, and regulate schools—did not gain much ground in the early national period. The simplest reason it did not, aside from a strong tradition of local control, was that most communities were satisfied with their district schools. The district school met the educational needs of rural people, broadly literate but not highly educated, whose communities still depended to a considerable extent upon family and church for the inculcation of moral values and upon work for occupational training. These communities controlled their schools in ways that would become impossible as regulation became more centralized and teachers more professional.

Parents had considerable power in early rural education. They directly controlled what textbooks their children would use; through the district school committee or old-field subscription groups, they controlled what subjects would be taught, who the teacher would be, and how long school would be in session. Through the system of boarding the teacher around the district, parents could monitor the teacher's personal life and give their opinions about how the school should be run. Unless the teacher's own parents or relatives lived in the district and provided lodging, the parents of the district school's students usually fed and lodged the teacher in rotation. There were, of course, benefits to this system. "On the whole I liked it," said Heman Humphrey of Connecticut. The cooking was not always the best, nor the sheets quite clean, he admitted, but "it was a good school for us. By going into all the families we learned a great deal." Hiram Orcutt, who taught and boarded around a district in Rockingham, Vermont, acknowledged the advantages of getting to know the parents but resented the lack of privacy for rest or study, and he complained of the "criticism of ignorant and meddling fathers and mothers." District residents wanted teachers who would rule the school with an iron hand and withstand the pranks and rowdiness of the boys, but they wanted teachers who would also be amenable to their suggestions and hear their complaints.¹³

District schools were tied to their neighborhoods in yet another way. The schoolhouse was the only public building in many rural

districts, and it was the scene of meetings, exhibitions, and contests, often involving the districts' adults. In larger villages, lyceums featuring traveling lecturers were sometimes held in schoolhouses. More typical and widespread were various forms of school exhibitions and evening schools. Heman Humphrey recalled the spring exhibitions held for parents at the end of the winter session in Connecticut district schools: "The anticipation of them kept up an interest all winter, and stimulated both teachers and scholars to do their best in the way of preparation. As the time approached, we had evening schools for reading and rehearsing the dialogues." Periodic spelling bees, singing schools, and other activities also brought the neighborhood residents to the school. The spelling bee, or spelling school, was probably the most popular of district school gatherings. It was sometimes held for pupils only, sometimes for everyone in the district, and sometimes as a contest between pupils of different districts in a town. William Mowry recalled spelling bees in Rhode Island fondly: "Oftentimes 'pieces' would be spoken and, after school was over, games would be played. When the sleighing was good, the best part of the whole entertainment would be found by the youngsters in an extended sleigh-ride."¹⁴

From transient teachers, crowded rooms, and stifled toddlers to community spelling bees and delightful sleigh rides, the rural school of the early nineteenth century reflected the close local control, the broad parental participation, the parsimony, and the limited educational needs of rural communities in the early American republic. Rural district schools were much the same in 1830 as they had been in 1780. Yet the period from 1780 to 1830 was a time of considerable social change, change sometimes slighted by historians because of the more startling growth of urban population, transportation networks, immigration, and manufacturing after 1830. Nonetheless the earlier decades saw expansion of the white male franchise, the building of canals, a rapid increase of population in the large cities (though they were yet a small part of the whole), the geographical spread of small-scale manufacturing, continued commercial development, and rising nationalism in literature and diplomacy. What impact did these social changes have on rural education?

Capitalism affected the rural areas of the North as profoundly

as it affected the cities. As transportation and communication expanded, many farmers turned from diverse, self-sufficient production to single, cash crops. As a result, rural people had more contact with markets, both as producers and as consumers. The shift was gradual in some communities, dramatic elsewhere; it was resisted by some rural people, welcomed by others. Some areas suffered. Farmers on the stony soil of New England struggled to match the productivity of newly accessible midwestern grainfields. Merchant capitalists, eyeing expanding markets for goods like shoes and straw hats, increased the scale of production by organizing networks of household piecework. On the fringes of incipient industrial centers, rural women and teenagers spent long hours stitching and weaving for cash before water power and ingenious machines displaced their labors. The world of cash was a world of literacy and numeracy. For better or for worse, rural communities were being knit into networks of exchange and communication. This could only foster education, especially in a nation with widespread political participation for white men and a clear field for new institutional development, a nation whose Protestant ministers competed for allegiance through print and pulpit while they recommended Bible study for salvation and moral guidance.¹⁵

These forces affected the North more than the South. Sketchy figures from Massachusetts and New York for the early national period suggest that total school enrollment rates were higher in rural than in urban communities and were rising during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In Massachusetts towns, the increase in enrollment levels began in the second half of the eighteenth century, but the lack of systematic data makes it difficult to estimate the magnitude. Similarly, lack of information makes impossible any numerical comparisons of enrollments in the Midwest or the South prior to 1840. Estimated statewide enrollment levels for New York State were 37 percent of children under age twenty in 1800 rising to 60 percent by 1825, at about which time they levelled off. In both New York in 1800 and Massachusetts in 1826, enrollment levels were clearly related to community size, the smaller towns having the highest percentage of their children enrolled. This correlation was not lost upon contemporaries. A

writer in the *New York Enquirer*, after seeing some New York State school returns for 1828, remarked that the "education among the young population between the ages of five and fifteen is twice as extensive in the country counties as in the city." The consequence for the city was clear. "It is the want of early education which produces nine-tenths of the misery, vice, distress and immorality we see around us." Rural district schools, then, account for rising common-school enrollment rates in the early national period. Long before the common-school reform movement and the creation of state free-school systems, beginning at least as early as the late eighteenth century, the proportion of children attending school each year was rising, particularly among girls and particularly in the Northeast.¹⁶

How specifically can we link the expansion of educational enrollments in these mundane, locally controlled district schools to the larger religious, political, and economic features of social change in the early republic? The long-standing Protestant commitment to literacy must have been a factor in support of schooling, and there were widespread revivals among the Calvinist churches in the 1740s and again around the turn of the century, coincident with the apparent expansion of district schooling. Nonetheless, direct links between religion and school enrollment are difficult to prove. Similarly, it is plausible that the heightened political interest of the Revolutionary era, with the subsequent drama of constitution making, boosted common schooling, but it is difficult to demonstrate the effect of these developments upon schooling in the hinterland, where the enrollment increases occurred.

As with religion and politics, the notion that economic development would have an effect on education seems plausible, but the facts are obscure. It seems logical that wider geographical horizons, more impersonal markets, more printed communication, and a gradually increasing proportion of wage-earning workers in the labor market would foster the development of schooling for literacy, morality, and a more mobile world. But explicit connections between economic development and education by contemporaries were infrequent and vague. Nowhere was the contribution of education to economic growth emphasized or

spelled out in detail. Even in treatises on political economy written by Americans in the 1820s and 1830s, education was a minor theme. If education was an ingredient in expansive capitalism, the connection escaped capitalists in the early national period.

While the fundamental religious, political, and economic causes of expanded common schooling in this period are difficult to trace, some proximate causes are less elusive. The expansion of enrollments in the rural areas and small towns of the Northeast seems most directly explained by the increasing acceptance of the district system of control and by the increasing provision of schooling for females. In New England and the Middle Atlantic region, the district system of school control came about as population dispersed from town centers. Outlying neighborhoods resisted paying for schools that were distant from their homes and began to demand control of separate funds for their own schools. In many communities, this resulted first in the "moving" school, an arrangement whereby a single teacher taught brief sessions in several dispersed locations. Later these neighborhoods hired their own teachers, receiving their share of local funds from the town, supplementing them by subscription in the neighborhood, and in many cases gaining the power to staff and supervise their schools. These arrangements developed over a long period from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, encountering resistance in some communities and none in others. The decentralized system received legislative sanction in various laws—Connecticut in 1760, Vermont in 1782, Massachusetts in 1789, and New York in 1814—but the practice existed before the laws.

In Rhode Island, for example, a law of 1799 directed that towns be divided into school districts, but the districts had been developing on a town-by-town basis from the mid-eighteenth century on, in response to population dispersal and neighborhood development. Barrington divided into three districts shortly after it became a separate town in 1770. In Middletown the east and west districts shared a moving schoolmaster in 1745, and in 1754 the two districts, called "squadrons," were given the power to manage their school affairs separately. In Pennsylvania, where no legislation touched upon district schools until well into the

nineteenth century, the same sort of neighborhood system arose informally. Recalling conditions of the early nineteenth century, a Lancaster County resident said, "Whenever a neighborhood felt the need of a schoolhouse, one was erected at some point convenient to those who contributed towards its erection. The patrons selected trustees, whose duty it was to take charge of the school property and to select a teacher for the school." The staunchly defended American tradition of neighborhood schools had its origins in the period roughly from 1750 to 1835, which saw a proliferation of district schools and their legal recognition at the local and state level. Bridging our modern categories of "public" and "private" in their means of support and control, these schools brought formal education closer to people's homes and greatly increased the total amount of schooling.¹⁷

Rising enrollment rates during this period were also affected by the increasing acceptance and provision of education for girls. Even though Protestantism assigned the same arduous route to salvation for women as for men, and thus the same need for literacy, women's political rights were nil in the early colonial period, and institutional provisions for their education ranged from discriminatory to nonexistent. It is very difficult to characterize popular attitudes toward female education because of the great range of opinion on the issue, but it is clear that a view favorable to schooling for girls was becoming more popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and this development must account for a substantial share of the rise in enrollment in the northeastern United States. The advocacy of girls' education was based on two general propositions: first, that although women's intellects were different from and perhaps inferior to men's, females nonetheless were as capable as males of attaining a common education, and second, that they needed a good common education, not in order to fill the same roles as men, but because as wives and mothers they needed sound intellectual and moral training. Benjamin Rush argued the special importance of the mother's role in the new republic. In his *Thoughts Upon Female Education*, published in 1787, he urged a practical and moral education for mothers. "The equal share that every citizen has in the liberty and the possible share he may have in the government of our country make it necessary that our

ladies should be qualified to a certain degree, by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government." In succeeding decades, DeWitt Clinton, Emma Willard, and others took up these arguments and promoted education for the crucial domestic role assigned to women.¹⁸

The two principal arguments—women's capacity for education and their important responsibilities in educating children—were cited frequently as reasons for increasing girls' access to schooling in the early national period. Many elementary schools in the North admitted girls for the first time in the late eighteenth century, although access was often limited and segregated. In 1766, Medford, Massachusetts, admitted girls to its schools in the afternoon, after the boys were dismissed. New London, Connecticut, in 1774 offered girls instruction from 5:00 to 7:00 a.m. in the summer. Boston established summer writing schools for girls in 1782, and Newburyport extended the girls' educational season to six months per year in 1804, still gathering the girls separately, from 6:00 to 8:00 in the morning. In 1827 an anonymous correspondent wrote to the *Salem Register* that Salem was one of the worst places in Massachusetts for the provision of female education. In small villages, the essayist declared, boys and girls were now admitted equally, and the importance of female education was "unanimously acknowledged." Acceptance of girls' schooling occurred more rapidly in small towns than in cities. It thus coincided with, and contributed to, rising rural enrollment rates. Increasing amounts of formal education for girls is reflected not only in increased enrollment rates but in literacy rates as well. Recent research suggests that there was a substantial rise in adult female literacy in the Northeast between 1780 and 1850, indicating substantially increased education in the period before 1830. Less is known about female schooling and enrollment levels in the middle and southern regions, although in Pennsylvania, Quakers and Moravians were active in expanded female education in the last half of the eighteenth century, and in the South, as in the North, there were an increasing number of female academies in this period.¹⁹

By the second and third decades of the nineteenth century,

several states were aiding local district schools by distributing interest from permanent state school funds. Sufficient information to assess the impact of state funding on enrollments in this early period does not exist. Although payments from the funds provided only a small part of total school costs, state assistance probably encouraged the upward trend in enrollment. New York State, having repealed its 1795 common-school assistance law in 1800, created a state school fund in 1805, the income of which was distributed to towns, beginning in 1815. Connecticut's fund, created in 1795, suffered from bad management in its early years, but by 1810 it was providing annual assistance to local schools. Delaware created a fund in 1796 that was distributing some interest by 1817. In several states, funds created in the early decades of the century did not distribute any income until the 1830s or later. In other states, such as Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, state school funds were not created until after 1830 and therefore had no influence upon enrollments in the early national period.²⁰

District schools were closely tied to their communities. Inexpensive and under tight local control, they satisfied most white rural Americans' desires for elementary education. Enrollment rates increased during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the district system spread and people increasingly accepted female education. These trends were reinforced, no doubt, by the value placed on educated citizenship in a Protestant republic, the value placed on literacy in a society characterized by more written communication, easier travel, and more complex economic networks, and by the value placed on discipline in a volatile society whose leaders were attempting to reconcile political liberty with mobility, ethnic diversity, and expansive capitalism.

6

The Common-School Reform Program

AT a banquet in Gettysburg in 1826, a young councilman named Thaddeus Stevens raised his glass and toasted: "Education. May the film be removed from the eyes of Pennsylvania and she learn to dread ignorance more than taxation." In the next decade, as Stevens rose in Pennsylvania politics, he and others worked to fulfill that hope. Spurred by examples from Europe, where "the hitherto pent up sluices of knowledge" were being thrown open, Pennsylvania legislative leaders embarked upon the development of state-sponsored schools. In 1838, despite evidence that many Pennsylvanians still opposed taxation for education, the Superintendent of Common Schools declared optimistically that the state's policy was now to make education "as general and as unbought as liberty." During the late 1830s the same question was decided more or less in the affirmative in other northern states. Calvin Stowe, in his widely reprinted *Report on Elementary Public Instruction in Europe*, told the Ohio legislature that "the whole world seems to be awake and combining in one simultaneous effort for the spread of education, and sad indeed will be the condition of that community which lags behind in this universal march." In 1840, Governor William Seward of New York, riding a crest of Whig victories, told the legislature that "the improbability of our race is without limit" and that a reform of the educational system had been too long "postponed, omitted, and forgotten." He proceeded to introduce legislation to establish a state superintendent of instruction, county superintendents to carry out the

state's programs, state-aided district libraries, improved education for black children, and other changes.¹

These free-school advocates, as well as Mann of Massachusetts, Pierce of Michigan, and others, were born in the Northeast around the turn of the century. They were from families of modest resources, and they rose in the world through education and hard work. They believed firmly in the major tenets of native Protestant ideology. Along with kindred workers throughout antebellum America, these men were the "fathers" of public common schooling. They aimed at more schooling for each child, more state involvement, more uniformity, and a more pervasive public purpose for schooling.

As members of a self-conscious reform movement, common-school leaders in the various states communicated frequently, sought the support of other public figures, imitated the latest educational innovations of fellow reformers elsewhere, and devised means for the popular dissemination of their ideas. Like other antebellum reformers, common-school advocates called their efforts a "crusade." They built upon the strong tradition of schooling in America, and they justified their pleas for more organization and expenditure with appeals to the central propositions of their ideology. The program of common-school reform was remarkably similar across the country. Although the innovations and the leading spokesmen were often associated with New England, the Middle Atlantic and midwestern school advocates simultaneously developed similar programs, often with an eye on Europe rather than on New England. In the South there were many voices for common-school reform, pleading the same causes—free schooling, improved facilities, better classification, longer school years, better teacher training, and other improvements. In the 1840s, southerners consulted Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and other northern educational leaders, while they also produced their own reports on European education, staged their own education conventions, and fought for common-school funding in their legislatures. Advocates and opponents existed in all regions. On balance, the systematization of state-sponsored common schooling prevailed in the Northeast and the Midwest, while in the antebellum South, the reformers never quite mustered the politi-

cal and economic support necessary to establish free common schools.

The agenda for reform in the North can be read in state school reports of the 1840s and 1850s, which contain a litany of complaints about local school conditions. Short terms, irregular attendance, bad facilities, shortsighted and penurious district control, poor teachers, insufficient supervision, lack of uniformity, and indifferent parental support were among the chief complaints. Enrollment itself was already high in many areas of the North, but educators periodically expressed concern about children who were not enrolled. Data from Massachusetts and New York suggest that by 1840 the percentage of children annually attending school was equal to about half of all persons under age twenty and that it changed very little during the succeeding twenty years. The figures are crude, however, indicating only that a child was listed on the school rolls at some point in the year; also, such data are not very comparable from state to state. Furthermore, the rise in enrollment rates may have been partly due to better reporting by local officials. Nonetheless, attempts to construct parallel time series on enrollments in other states suggest that the New York and Massachusetts pattern of high, stable enrollments was also true by 1850 for the northernmost of the midwestern states, Michigan and Wisconsin, while in Iowa, Illinois, and Ohio, the 1850s witnessed substantial increases, bringing them up to levels (around 50 percent of all children aged 0–19) comparable to Michigan, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and New York by 1860. Communities in Pennsylvania and New Jersey appear to have been slower to provide widespread local schooling before state intervention. Rates in these states rose from around 20 percent in 1840 to 40 percent in 1860, still somewhat below the level that had become roughly consistent across the upper North. These data support what is apparent from the reformers' own statements—that enrollment was not the central concern of the common-school movement. An enrollment level of 50 percent, the northern norm by 1850, meant that half of all children under twenty years of age attended school sometime during the year. Since many under five and many over fifteen did not attend, the enrollment rate must have been considerably over 50 percent among the children from age five to

age fifteen. Indeed, investigation of enrollments for eight towns in Massachusetts in 1860, for Washtenaw County, Michigan, in 1850, and Chicago in 1860 reveal rates of 85 to 90 percent at the prime common-school ages, seven to thirteen, for all ethnic and occupational groups.²

Concern for nonattenders was focused on particular pockets like urban slums and factory tenements, and on particular groups, like the children of freed blacks. In 1830, Charles Andrews, head of New York's African Free School, estimated that there were 1,800 school-age black children, not counting those already in domestic service. Of these 1,800 children, 620 were enrolled at the African Free School and about 100 at private schools, leaving 1,080 to "prowl the streets . . . growing up in habits of idleness and its attendant vices." By midcentury, poor immigrant youth had replaced blacks as the most worrisome of the nonattenders. In the 1860s, urban charity workers took a survey of New York City's horrid Five Points district. Concentrating on 382 families who lived in the tenements of a single block, they discovered that only about ten of the 600 children of the block attended any school. Two-thirds of the adults could neither read nor write. The children, they said, "are too dirty, too ragged, and carry too much vermin about them, to be admitted to the public school."³

In factory towns, children often followed their parents to the mills as early as age ten, and legislation making education for factory youths compulsory was generally unenforced before the Civil War. Some of these children, then, were among the small percentage who did not attend school even at the usual common-school ages. Educators warned about these factory children and about the untended younger siblings of families in which both parents worked. The Peltz Committee reported in 1837 on the conditions of child labor in Philadelphia's cotton mills. The working day for children and adults alike ranged from eleven to fourteen hours. One-fifth of the employees were under age twelve, and no provision was made for their education. Of all the employees under eighteen, only one-third could read or write. Manufacturers complained that a shorter work day would harm business, but the committee argued that "in a republic, where so much

depends upon the virtue and intelligence of the people, it is far better that we should forego pecuniary advantages, rather than permit large masses of children to become the miserable victims of an oppressive system." But dreary conditions of industrial child labor persisted into the second half of the century.

A mule spinner in Fall River, Massachusetts, testified in the early 1870s that his schedule was typical of English immigrant families who worked in textile mills. He rose at 5:00 a.m., made breakfast for his family, and then went to the mill with his wife and twelve-year-old daughter. They got back home about 7:30 at night. His ten-year-old daughter got herself dressed in the morning, ate leftovers from the table, and went to school. Her father joined her at home for the noon meal. In the afternoon, after school, she went to the mill, got the key from her father, and went home to await the arrival of the rest of the family for supper. On Sunday the children went to Sunday school, while the father did chores and his wife took in washing. When asked why he did not go to church, he said, "I really have not time, because if I went to church, my woman would have all the work to do, and it would take her all the day Sunday, and that would be seven days' work."⁴

Investigations led to legislation requiring a few months of education for young children working in factories in several states, including Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. But later inquiries found all such laws to be without teeth. A Massachusetts legislative committee of 1866 heard the following testimony from millworker John Wild:

Q.: Do you know that your children are working contrary to the law?

A.: I didn't know there was any law.

Q.: Did you know that if I should go to Fall River and prosecute their employer, he could be compelled to pay a fine for employing your children?

A.: No, sir, being no scholar.⁵

Such were the protections of early child labor laws. Employers were divided; some rejected employment of very young children and abided by the schooling provisions, while others ignored the

laws altogether. Nor was it only ignorance of the laws that made parents violate restrictions on child labor. Factory workers needed the additional income. Finally, school reformers like Horace Mann knew that the proportion of young children in factory labor was small. They were more concerned about youths wandering around city streets than those occupied in the mills, and they were reluctant to advocate compulsory schooling for either group. Instead they exhorted employers to comply voluntarily with labor laws and encouraged local school committees to find ways to increase enrollment among truant youth. The continued availability of jobs for teenagers helped keep school enrollments level rather than rising in industrial areas.

If school reformers were not willing to compel teenage attendance, neither were they on a campaign to recruit toddlers into the public schools. Indeed, they actively worked against the enrollment of very young children. In the 1830s and 1840s, educators throughout the country came to believe that the practice of allowing three- and four-year-olds to attend common schools was wrong. For the sake of their health and the good order of the school, these toddlers belonged at home. As we have seen, very young children had traditionally attended rural district schools with their older siblings, and in urban areas a flurry of enthusiasm for separate infant schools had developed in the 1820s and early 1830s. During the antebellum school-reform period, these practices fell into disfavor. There were several reasons for the gradual exclusion of young children from schooling. Domestic writers argued that young children belonged at home with a real mother, not a surrogate. A rising interest in the causes and possible prevention of insanity led to further speculation about the harmful effects of early schooling. "I am forced to believe the danger is indeed great," wrote physician Amariah Brigham in his influential book, *Remarks on the Influence of Mental Excitement upon Health* (1832). "Very often in attempting to call forth and cultivate the intellectual faculties of children before they are six or seven years of age, serious and lasting injury has been done both to the body and the mind." Finally, professional education journals of the day publicized the naturalistic theories of Pestalozzi and Fellenberg, who argued the need for balanced and unforced development of

mind and body. These theories also pointed in the direction of a later entry age for schoolchildren.⁶

Toddlers in ungraded district schools had been a feature of a more casual world, in which the school and the family were not sharply demarcated. Reformers, with much support from teachers, saw the arrangement as not only casual but also ineffective and inappropriate. The arrangement had been largely custodial anyway; it fit neither the ideology nor the structure of the reformed common school. Mothers were supposed to be at home, devoted to the education of their young children. Schools were supposed to classify children for more effective moral and intellectual instruction. Toddlers didn't fit in the new graded schools. School officials expressed this view at the simplest level through their complaints that little children were a nuisance. Jesse Miller, the state superintendent of Pennsylvania's schools, recommended in 1848 that communities raise the school entry age from four to six, saying that the younger pupils "necessarily incommode and retard the progress of the pupils who are more advanced." In some communities by persuasion, in some by regulation, younger children were gradually eliminated from the schools.

Probably only a small minority of children in the North missed going to school altogether. Enrollment says nothing, however, about the quality or quantity of education a child received. Reformers placed their emphasis on matters of quantity and quality. Their general goal was to increase regularity of attendance, that is, to increase average daily attendance among those enrolled, and to increase the length of the school year. They believed that coercive legislation on either issue would be an unacceptable incursion on the family and on local government. But through persuasion and publicity, both average attendance and length of school terms were increased. Both, of course, added to the number of days of schooling the average child received per year in this increasingly schooled society.

Teachers, school-committee members, and state officials complained of the disruptive effects of irregular attendance. "Next to the want of uniform text books of the proper kind," said Pennsylvania's superintendent of common schools, "the teacher meets with no greater obstacle." His counterpart in New York agreed:

"The loss of time, the loss of ambition, and the consequent relaxation of effort . . . which are the fruits of irregular attendance, may be a life-long injury to the pupil," but also "much of the time and labor of the teacher is lost; irregularity of attendances divides and distracts his attention." Different communities tried different tactics to get a higher percentage of enrolled children into school each day. In 1858 the Superintendent of Chicago's schools called irregular attendance "the most dangerous evil that exists in connection with the free school system." In addition to exhorting parents to send children more regularly, Chicago school administrators tried monthly attendance reports to be signed by parents and a rule threatening habitually absent children with expulsion.⁷

Reformers also placed great emphasis on increasing the length of the school year. Rural communities often operated school for eight to ten weeks in summer and a similar period in winter. Common-school reformers wanted longer sessions, both to increase the amount of schooling children received and to enhance the possibility of making teaching a regular profession. Pennsylvania's superintendent complained in 1848 that the average length of the school year was less than five months. "This is an evil of no trifling character," he said, for it was impossible to attract competent teachers unless longer-term employment could be offered. During the antebellum period, there was a gradual trend toward longer school sessions in the North, due to reformers' urgings, an expanding economy, and an increased popular acceptance of more schooling. Children in 1860 attended school longer and more regularly than their parents had in 1830.

The mere fact that more children were going to school more days per year did not satisfy common-school reformers. The quality of the schools did not measure up to their standards. Next on the reformers' agenda came the evils of the district system. They believed that expenditures, teacher training, and the organization of schools could not be improved without changing the tradition of small-scale local control. In fact, district control of schools was not as firmly rooted in history as some of its defenders claimed. Town-wide control of schools in New England had only given way to smaller district control in the eighteenth century as population scattered and neighborhoods pressed to have their own

schools closer to home. The same process of decentralization was repeated in some frontier states. In Michigan, official control of common schools rested from 1817 to 1827 with a state body, the university; control by district was enacted in 1827 and endorsed in the state constitution of 1835. Wisconsin entered statehood with a system dividing authority between districts, towns, and the state, but the school code of 1849 transferred most powers to the districts. The district system was obviously popular at the local level; the common-school reformers' challenge to it was the most controversial aspect of their program. Nonetheless, most state officials, writers on education, and school promoters in legislatures supported larger-scale school units and more supervision from above. The effort to centralize control thus proceeded along three parallel lines: consolidating districts into town systems, developing mechanisms for state supervision and regulation, and encouraging the transition from private to public control of schools. The evils of district control became a major theme of state school reports of the 1840s and 1850s. Reformers claimed that control by tiny districts led to the hiring of incompetent teachers because the examining committees were incompetent. The system also led to short school terms, dilapidated school buildings, and lack of equipment because small districts resisted taxing themselves or were indifferent to innovation and sound professional practice. Some also argued that district control perpetuated unequal common-school facilities because districts had unequal wealth and varying degrees of willingness to tax for schools. Consolidation, they said, would both raise and equalize school expenditures.

Vermont's first state superintendent, Horace Eaton, said in 1846 that small districts were the "paradise of ignorant teachers." He urged rural Vermont to follow the example of New York and Massachusetts, where districts were larger. If towns would not consolidate, he urged "at least that limits be set to the prevailing mischievous tendency to multiply school districts." The next year, John Pierce of Michigan lauded the "union school" made possible by town consolidation. Union schools brought together children from several districts, allowing grading of pupils, more advanced instruction, and larger, more homogeneous classes. Ohio's report of 1854 labelled district schools inefficient and ineffective and gave

thirteen reasons for the superiority of graded schools. In his 1861 report, the Illinois superintendent called for the consolidation of one-room schoolhouses in rural areas and estimated that switching to town control would reduce the number of districts in Illinois from 10,000 to under 2,000.

Cities, of course, had sufficient numbers of children and taxpayers to satisfy the demands of organizational reform; they pioneered in establishing graded schools and high schools, and in developing professional supervision. Consolidation was primarily a rural issue in this period. But there were different kinds of rural communities. Aside from the population size itself, there were different rural settlement patterns. Where a rural community already had a village population center, it was more likely to adopt school consolidation than a comparably sized township of scattered farms. Wisconsin education reports spoke optimistically about the cities and the rural villages but referred disparagingly to the scattered farming communities. Villages had the necessary concentration of population; they also had a smattering of non-farm population, and with it usually an element of boosterism. Some people in these villages wanted their communities to grow, to be modern, and to link up with developing networks of commerce and other nonlocal institutions. This brought the dialogue about educational reform into the local scene. In dispersed rural areas, a strong countertrend still operated, especially in frontier states: as population continued to disperse, school districts multiplied and residents clung tenaciously to control of their nearby school.

Common-school reformers of the antebellum period also attempted to influence local education through the creation of state education agencies and the use of state funds. Among the early legislative accomplishments of reformers in all the northern states was the creation of the office of a chief school official, usually called the superintendent of common schools. Sometimes the office was joined with that of the already existing secretary of state. Historians have often focused on these spokesmen for educational reform, and many of the prominent common-school advocates, including Mann, Barnard, and Pierce, served terms as state school officers. The heroic view of Horace Mann was well summarized

by George Martin, a later state school superintendent. Mann, he said, was the "Puritan of the Puritans." He was "born to be a champion . . . the stuff that martyrs are made of. . . . He fought the battle of educational reform in Massachusetts through to the end and conquered."⁸

It is difficult to disentangle the unique contributions of these state leaders from general trends in pedagogy and educational systematization that would have prevailed anyway. There is no doubt that they were influential people in their time. They were consulted, quoted, and invited to speak. They shepherded education bills through legislatures and established the rudimentary administrative structures of nineteenth-century school systems. However, some skepticism about the decisive role of heroic state officers is warranted. Calvin Wiley of North Carolina helped persuade his legislature to create a state superintendent's office, to which he was appointed in 1853. He worked as hard as Mann and Barnard, exercised great talent, and mustered the same arguments; yet he came up with different results—less state influence, lower attendance levels, shorter school terms, and lower expenditures. North Carolina was not Massachusetts. The reformers pushed virtually the same program in every state, but the results were shaped by social structure, politics, demography, and resources. The office of state superintendent was not conducive to heroism, though historians have lionized some of its early occupants. Even in education-minded states like Michigan and Massachusetts, the position was weak and vulnerable. Educational improvement had the powerful sanction of native Protestant ideology, and responded to myriad problems of economic growth and population diversity; but centralized state power over such a reform program was not a foregone conclusion, and the attempt to hasten educational improvement through state action politicized the reform movement in its first blush. Legislative battles were waged in many states over the creation of state superintendencies, county superintendencies, and consolidated districts.

Between battles, the state superintendent's job was largely clerical and exhortatory. His task was to gather, summarize, and report annually the statistics on educational practices in the state. He was expected to write essays about good educational practice

and to recommend improvements. Most educational legislation in the period was limited to defining the relative roles of district, town, county, and state officers and providing for the maintenance and distribution of small state school funds. Some states experimented with county superintendencies to bolster the state officer's supervisory capacity, but this innovation was everywhere controversial, and local committees retained ultimate authority over expenditure levels, length of school terms, curriculum, texts, and the hiring and firing of teachers. State superintendents were more like preachers than bureaucrats. They traveled about their states, visiting schools, giving speeches, organizing teachers' institutes, gathering data, and spreading the common-school reform gospel. Some of them wanted more coercive authority, and they worked to create a rough hierarchy of professional supervision, but their regulatory power was more form than substance. The Wisconsin state superintendent was charged with hearing appeals in educational disputes, but he complained in 1859 that town superintendents refused to comply with his rulings. In 1857 the Illinois superintendent argued the "utter futility of attempting to operate a Free School System, without proper supervisory agents." School systems were like railroads, he said. They needed "head superintendents, with ample assistants, to attend to their general movements, and watchful agents stationed everywhere."

The history of the county superintendency in the 1840s and 1850s illustrates both the bureaucratic aspirations of the common-school reformers and the mixed results of their attempts to systematize local schooling. Ohio secretaries of state complained throughout the early 1840s that local school officials were so "ignorant" and "sluggish" that they could not "make a report with the form in front of them." They argued for county superintendents to interpret laws, explain procedures for reports, encourage uniformity of textbooks, and examine teachers applying for jobs. But when a state law made the hiring of superintendents a local option in 1848, only one county voted to do so. Legislators in both New York and Vermont established the position of county superintendent during the 1840s and then abolished it in response to the criticism that they were an unnecessary expense. In some states, the reformers met with success. In Pennsylvania, despite

some local hostility, the state superintendent reported in 1857 that county officers had improved teachers' qualifications, promoted teacher institutes, fostered uniformity of texts, generated parental interest, and prompted local officials to be more conscientious. Like the state superintendent, the county superintendent's role was more to persuade than to coerce.

The third element in the reformers' program for centralization of control was the campaign against private schooling. The goals of a common-school system—moral training, discipline, patriotism, mutual understanding, formal equality, and cultural assimilation—could not be achieved if substantial numbers of children were in independent schools. For the school reformers of the antebellum period, the phrase "common school" implied an effort to draw all children into public free schools, and they fought the old connotation of "common" schools as ordinary and undesirable. Horace Mann complained that private schooling drew off the support of "some of the most intelligent men," and Orville Taylor said of exclusive schooling, "this is not republican. This is not allowing all, as far as possible, a fair start in the world." Barnard argued that private schooling "classifies society at the root, by assorting children according to the wealth, education, or outward circumstances of their parents, into different schools; and educates children of the same neighborhood differently and unequally." Moreover, argued the reformers, private schools soaked up resources from the public schools. "In those towns where private seminaries have been located and well sustained," said John Pierce, "the free schools will be found, without exception, to be in a miserable condition."⁹

During the antebellum period there was a substantial shift from private to public schooling in the cities. Public school facilities improved and there was a general tendency of urban governments to extend public control of institutions as the population increased. In New York City the percentage of students in private schools dropped from 62 percent in 1829 to 18 percent in 1850. In Salem the percentage in private schools was 58 in 1827, and still 56 in 1837. By 1846, however, Salem's public schools enrolled all but 24 percent of the city's schoolchildren. In the newer cities of the West, the same process occurred. Milwaukee reported 61 percent

private enrollment in 1845, but by 1848, when they reported a much larger total enrollment, the private percentage was down to 46. The Illinois superintendent claimed in 1868 "that the public schools are steadily weakening and decimating private schools, and that they will ultimately crowd them almost wholly from the field." The only substantial countertrend against this gradual shift to public schooling in the cities was the development of Roman Catholic schools, but they were not numerous in most areas until after the Civil War.¹⁰

In the large cities, schools tended to be either entirely free or entirely supported by parental fees. By 1840 the categories corresponded roughly to our modern definitions of "public" and "private." The goal of the reformers, therefore, was to increase the public sector at the expense of the private. Rural areas and smaller towns had few entirely private schools, but their district schools commonly charged some form of tuition. This was done by charging parents "rate bills" for some part of a term, or by extending the regular public term with a "select" or "subscription" school, usually taught by the same teacher and open only to children whose parents would pay the cost. Most school reformers opposed any parental assessments for schooling, and they waged a campaign against the rate bill and the subscription schools from lecture podiums, in annual reports, and in legislatures. It was not simply a disagreement between those who supported more education and those who supported less, though there was that element in it. It was also an argument about whether the state should assume educational responsibilities previously reserved to parents. Eventually the school reformers prevailed. Most northern states abolished rate bills by law in the 1850s and 1860s, although some communities ignored the laws and continued assessing rates. Full tax support for southern public education, even in principle, was a phenomenon of the 1870s and later.

As the public schools of the North became wholly free, the cheaper independent pay schools, previously patronized by ordinary families, declined. A certain percentage of more wealthy families, however, could not be recruited to the cause. Samuel Galloway, in charge of Ohio's schools, complained in 1849 that the "better class of families" would not send their children to

public schools. A certain "better" class continued to evade the net of the reformers and support private schooling. Some less wealthy groups also persisted in supporting private schools for cultural and religious reasons, but in general, working-class and middle-class support of cheap pay schools gave way with the advent of improved and free public schools.

The same transition from private to public began in secondary education in the North in the mid-nineteenth century. Reformers' antagonism to independent academies and their enthusiasm for the creation of high schools were part and parcel of the common-school reform program. The public high-school cause paralleled the drive to make elementary education free and publicly supervised. Reformers argued that free public high schools were part of the democratization of education. High schools also fit the bureaucratic impulse in antebellum education reform, bringing the secondary level of schooling into a more coordinated system.

The image of elite military academies or New England boarding schools of the twentieth century tempts us to exaggerate the exclusive character of the academies of the early nineteenth century. Educational reformers contributed to that stereotype. In their campaign against these independent schools, they emphasized the social class bias of academies while ignoring the same selective character of the early public high schools. Even a free secondary school was bound to have a clientele skewed toward the middle class, both because informal class discrimination existed and because many working-class families could not afford to forgo the earnings of teenage labor. For blacks, of course, discrimination was often formal and absolute. Various obstacles to secondary education remained for women, but their opportunities were expanded by academies, and they gradually came to predominate in public high schools.

In their heyday, academies had offered an opportunity for secondary education to children of families with modest means. Ambitious youths, encouraged by common-school teachers, managed to attend academies with support from relatives or by working part of the year. For some native males, like Horace Mann and John Pierce, this path led to college and careers as lawyers or Protestant ministers. Some, including Mann and Pierce, later became critics of academies, but their complaints should be weighed

against the rosier picture of some contemporaries. Hiram Orcutt of Connecticut reminisced warmly: "Most of these institutions were unendowed and short-lived, but they were then a necessity. . . . The open door of the old academy, its economical arrangements, and its earnest and devoted teachers invited and encouraged the young men and women of the neighborhood to come up higher." Because a needy student could scrape through, because academies were dispersed in rural areas, and because many received charters and financial assistance from the states, some people argued that the academies were "public" schools. Certainly they fell between the modern categories "public" and "private." Communities sometimes voted subsidies to local academies, or provided a building; the composition of boards of incorporated academies often differed little from those that governed common schools. Indeed, in the 1820s the trustees of several incorporated academies in New York State were also the trustees of the common-school districts in which their academies were located. Erasmus Hall Academy in Brooklyn got local public aid in return for teaching some poor students without fee, and the Pennsylvania legislature gave several academies aid on the same condition in the 1820s. In New York a legislative committee declared in 1838 that academies were related to the common schools "as part of the same system of public and popular education."¹¹

Some defenders of academies lived up to the aristocratic image. Edward Hitchcock, president of Amherst College, gave a speech in 1845 in which he lauded academies as perfectly suited to the genius of Protestant, "pure Saxon" Americans. He pointed out that by "Americans" he did not mean the "motley crew—annually disembogued upon our shores." As for the charge of elitism, said Hitchcock, "it is easy to get up a prejudice against men thus thoroughly educated, as if they were aristocratic; but when the people come to look around for those who are to maintain their highest interests, whether in church or state, they are very apt to select those very men." The haughty tone of men like Hitchcock may have lost the academies some popular support. But the establishment of high schools depended more upon the acceptance of full public funding for the education of middle-class children as well as those of poorer parents.¹²

High schools fit the reformers' program of a hierarchical, graded,

coordinated system of public schooling. In New York City, educators spoke of the need for a high school "as part of a perfect system," and when it was founded in 1849, they called it "the splendid crown of our Common School system," and "an integrant branch of the whole system for the enlightenment of the people." Connecticut's superintendent, Seth Beers, argued that a high school in a town would enable the teachers of the district schools to teach elementary subjects more thoroughly by relieving them of the smattering of advanced subjects forced upon them by the wide age range of district-school students. H. H. Barney, principal of Cincinnati's high school, loved the symmetry of a school system capped with a high school. The construction metaphor was continual. Independent academies and denominational schools made a "wretched, misshapen, loose-jointed system." Boston's schools, he said, were "so complete and symmetrical in structure that the human being there receives the first rudimental instructions, and is then led along and upward by gradations as simple and beautiful as its own growth, until it steps forth an American citizen complete."¹³

Urbanization, along with the reformers' arguments and the attractiveness of high schools to people in middling occupational groups, combined to create a gradual trend toward the provision of public high schools. Massachusetts, New York, and Ohio led the way, and within those states the innovation more or less followed urban lines. High schools were urban institutions; they required a sufficient concentration of taxable wealth as well as enough students who wanted secondary schooling. After Boston created its English High School in 1821, many Massachusetts cities followed in the 1820s and 1830s, including Worcester, Salem, Springfield, Lowell, and Newburyport. By 1865, 70 percent of the population of Massachusetts lived in towns with public high schools. In New York State the busiest period of high-school establishment was in the 1850s and 1860s. In the five years following the Civil War, the number of high schools in the state increased from twenty-two to fifty-nine, while the number of academies declined from 190 to 132. The state's high schools surpassed academies in number of institutions by 1875 and in number of students by 1880. In other northern states, the development was similar.¹⁴

Only a small minority of teenagers attended secondary schools of any kind in nineteenth-century America. The establishment of public high schools performed a largely symbolic function in the reform program. They established the opportunity for free local education through the secondary level, even though few used it, and they represented the upper levels of an increasingly graded and coordinated system of public education. These symbolic functions—both democratic and bureaucratic—are clear from the debates about the creation of high schools. Their actual functions are less clear. We are only beginning to understand the social origins and social destinations of high-school graduates. In 1851 Hiram Barney lauded Boston's English High School as "the perfect example of the poor and the rich meeting on common ground and on terms quite democratic," and the principal of that school said "about one-third of my pupils are sons of merchants; the remaining two-thirds are sons of mechanics, professional men and others. Some of our best scholars are sons of coopers, lamplighters, and day laborers." More precise studies of high schools in Chicago, New York, and Salem in the 1850s partially confirm that picture. Sons of clerks, merchants, proprietors, craftsmen, and professionals attended these high schools. A few factory workers' sons appear on the rolls, but the lower working class is severely underrepresented. The trend in graduates' careers was toward white-collar work, both clerical and professional, regardless of whether the boys' fathers worked in manual or nonmanual jobs. The New York graduates of 1858 included a brass turner's son who became a lawyer, a machinist's son who became a lawyer, and a wheelwright's son who became a bookkeeper. Some fathers with such artisan labels may have been substantial craftsmen or even proprietors of their own businesses; however, because of changes from craft to factory production, some members of this upper artisan group may have felt anxious about their positions and their sons' futures. In any case, the high-school graduates' career lines suggest that for a small, middling segment of the population, public secondary schooling fostered intergenerational change from manual to non-manual occupations, and it may have helped confirm or improve white-collar status for those whose fathers were already in the white-collar ranks. Coeducational and separate girls' high schools

soon provided females with possibilities for secondary education in the cities.¹⁵

The common-school reform program put considerable financial strain on local school districts. In addition to longer school terms, the shift to more public schooling, the abolition of rate bills, and the addition of high schools to the system, antebellum school reformers campaigned for better equipment and better facilities. They ridiculed the crude and simple materials used in rural district schools, and they bemoaned the lack of solid, well-ventilated schoolhouses. New York State school reports charted a gradual increase in schools with decent privies, and Wisconsin reports recorded the increase in brick and stone construction over log or frame houses. Still, complained Wisconsin's Superintendent Barry in 1856, "ninety-nine out of every hundred of them should be torn down or greatly improved." In rural Trempeleau County, teachers complained about the overcrowded "shacks" in which they taught, most without the aid of blackboards, outline maps, or other innovations of the day.

Many rural residents responded to expensive reform demands simply by rejecting them, voting down increased school taxes, and sticking to their ramshackle schoolhouses, old-fashioned slates, short sessions, and tattered family textbooks. Other communities, however, did not wish to appear backward or uninterested in their children. It was hard to ignore a county superintendent like the one in Trempeleau County, who reminded residents that while they were spending \$3.33 per pupil, the average town in Massachusetts was spending \$22. Meanwhile, in Massachusetts, Horace Mann annually published a list of all the towns, ranked by per-pupil expenditures. In 1851 the school committee of Palmer, Massachusetts, called it a "mortification" that they were lowest of all 316 towns in per-pupil expenditures. "Mortification" was exactly what Mann had in mind.¹⁶

To some extent, school reform rode the back of economic expansion. In industrial or agricultural communities where productivity was rising, it was not necessary to raise the rate of school taxation on assessed wealth in order to increase the per-pupil expenditures for education. But sometimes school reformers were fighting fiscal retrenchment, declining farm prices, and traditional

resistance to school expenditures. Thus they emphasized that some innovations could actually save money. Their favorite example was the introduction of inexpensive female teachers. Samuel Lewis of Ohio said that counties employing females "are able to do twice as much with the same money as is done in the counties where female teachers are almost excluded." The ratio of female to male teachers' wages varied quite a bit from town to town and from state to state, but there was little movement toward equalization during the antebellum period. On the average, female teachers' wages were 44 percent of males' in Michigan in 1845, and the same in 1863. In Wisconsin the ratio was slightly more favorable: 53 percent in 1850, increasing to 62 percent in 1860. In Massachusetts the salary ratio remained around 40 percent throughout the period, while the proportion of females in the teaching force increased from 56 percent in 1834 to 78 percent in 1860.¹⁷

Opposition to female teachers centered on their alleged inability to teach higher subjects or to control rowdy older male pupils. "Where the mind in its maturing state and fuller development . . . is led onward to the higher departments of literature and science," said the Wisconsin state superintendent, "it is obviously better to employ male teachers." In rural areas the problem of disciplining older boys was limited mostly to the winter term, when there was little farm work to keep teenagers busy. In upstate New York, a county superintendent said in 1850 that "weaker districts" might benefit from hiring women, but that if they did, the more advanced students would need "the more extended advantages of a central town school." The entering wedge for female teachers, therefore, was the education of young children in common schools. The employment of female teachers for younger children was consistent with antebellum notions about domesticity and education. Advocates of female teachers could see the benefit of transferring the savings to other improvements, and they also wished to encourage the more tender, loving pedagogy they associated with female teachers. "Heaven has plainly appointed females as the natural instructors of young children, and endowed them with those qualities of mind and disposition, which pre-eminently fit them for such a task," said the Connecticut Board of Education in 1840. Indiana's first state superintendent exclaimed simply in 1853, "Blessed

be he who invented female teachers." The female has "patience and perseverance, quick sensibilities and sympathy with youthful minds," said a Pennsylvania state superintendent in 1857, illustrating the appeal of the domestic stereotype. "Except in the family, she nowhere so truly occupies her appropriate sphere, as in the school room." Barnas Sears, Horace Mann's successor, said in 1851 that the female teacher "paints to the imagination, where the male teacher defines and reasons. She can more easily bridge over the chasm between the natural life of infancy or childhood, and the artificial thing called a school."¹⁸

The two arguments in favor of female teachers—their cheapness and natural superiority as instructors of young children—appear together so often that it is difficult to determine which was the more important as a motive. Discussions of the issue by rural school committees suggest that women would not have been hired had they not been available more cheaply. Still, if economy and exploitation were the whole story, one might expect the poorest districts, or those that spent the lowest percentage of assessed wealth on education, to convert to women teachers soonest. This was not the case; the picture is more complicated. One factor, obviously, is that the poorest and most penny-pinching districts were often small, rural communities that clung to traditional practices. Ideas about proper female roles died hard; thus a purely economic explanation of the feminization of teaching is inaccurate. A second factor has to do with scale and organization. In the towns and cities, reformers advocated the employment of female teachers as part of the general program for improving and reorganizing the schools. In 1841 the mayor of Salem, Massachusetts, recommended "the system of placing a large number of scholars under the care of male principals with female assistants—the most economical as well as the effective mode of instruction—and of securing the advantages of a division of labor by converting what are now separate schools into co-ordinate departments, under teachers to whom separate duties shall be assigned." In 1853 the Phillips School in Salem had 343 students, with a staff of seven female assistants plus a male principal teacher. The city as a whole employed eight males and sixty females. The modern school principal was a byproduct of the shift to female teachers. The term

originally applied to the "principal teacher," who, in the twentieth century, shed his teaching function.

At first glance, it might seem that the feminization of teaching and the professionalization of teaching were in tension, since few people thought of women as having professional status. However, the two trends were compatible and reinforcing. Having created more bureaucratic and highly organized schools, reformers wished to soften the experience for younger children, to bridge the widening gap between family culture and school culture. Educational reformers decided that gender differences coincided with a proper division of labor in education. Having solved the female teacher's problem of discipline by providing a male overseer, they soon learned that supervision had many uses in large schools and that the prospect of such responsibilities might keep men in the profession. On all these grounds, hiring female teachers made sense. In cities and towns, the feminization of teaching was seen as one of several related organizational innovations, tied to grading, efficiency, and supervision. In the country districts, it was seen primarily as an economy move, first for the summer sessions and gradually, after women had proven themselves to skeptical school committees, for winter sessions as well.

In 1800 most teachers had been male, with the exception of the women who conducted neighborhood dame schools or private lessons in female accomplishments. By 1900, most teachers were women—about 70 percent of the precollegiate instructors nationwide. For the North, the period of fastest change in this momentous shift came in the antebellum period. It proceeded fastest in the cities but soon affected almost all districts. It was based on an argument of efficiency but was bolstered by other cultural and pedagogical arguments. It had important effects on the profession—fixing the subordinate role of the classroom teacher, reinforcing the hierarchical organization desired by professional male educators, and underscoring the new, softer approach to educating young children.

The feminization of teaching also had important effects on the lives of the women who taught. The number of women who had some experience in the classroom was quite large, for although the percentage of all women who were teachers at any given time was

small, their careers were brief, so it took a very substantial number of young women, each teaching for a few years, to fill the teaching positions of the expanding public schools. Horace Mann estimated that the average length of time in teaching was 2.6 years in Massachusetts in 1845. In southeastern Michigan in 1860, 77 percent of all female teachers were between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four, suggesting the short-term nature of teaching as an occupation for females. In Dane County, Wisconsin (which included Madison, the capital), 27 percent of the female teachers were eighteen or younger in 1860, though there were no male teachers that young. As a superintendent in another county said, female teaching candidates seemed to be just "emerging from a state of childhood." For a brief span, then, at a young age, teaching gave a large number of women a chance to work—for unequal pay and often in subordinate and difficult positions—but nonetheless, to have a daily, nonmanual occupation, outside the home, for wages. For some women it meant a chance to live away from home between parental dependence and marital dependence; however, most female teachers in fact lived with their parents while they taught. In Martha Coons's study of Dane County, Wisconsin, 82 percent of female teachers were single and living with their parents. About 7 percent were married; the remaining 11 percent were single and boarding away from home. In Ann Weingarten's similar study of southeastern Michigan, 67 percent were single women living with their parents, only 1 percent were married, and the remaining 32 percent lived independently. These data suggest that the short duration of female teaching careers was due to the fact that very few women taught after they married.¹⁹

It is difficult to estimate the impact of a brief term of teaching on the thousands of women who served in antebellum classrooms. Some women testified to its crucial importance in their lives, and some few, of course, made long careers of teaching. In her book *The Evolution of a Teacher*, Ella Gilbert Ives described what it was like to be a student in the 1860s at Mount Holyoke College, "the Mecca for school committees in quest of teachers." She quoted Frances Willard, the temperance crusader, who had declared "not to be at all, or else to be a teacher, was the alternative presented to aspiring young women of intellectual proclivities when I was

young." Perhaps this is why some women, starved to use their minds and their talents, were willing to make statements that seem so abject today. At a meeting in upstate New York in the 1840s, Emma Willard, the educator, proposed a resolution to be adopted by the men in the audience, to the effect that they would aid common schooling by asking women in their communities to take on educational activities "properly belonging to their own sphere in the social system." She then asked the ladies to resolve "that if the men, whom we recognize as by the laws of God and man, our directors, and to whose superior wisdom we naturally look for guidance, shall call us into the field of active labor in common schools, we will obey the call with alacrity." Unfortunately, no one recorded whether her tongue was in her cheek on this occasion, but both resolutions passed unanimously.²⁰

Despite the discriminatory wages and the moralistic public scrutiny that faced female teachers, some recognized the expanding field as an opportunity. Catharine Beecher said it most directly: "A profession is to be created for women. . . . This is the way in which thousands of intelligent and respectable women, who toil for a pittance scarcely sufficient to sustain life, are to be relieved and elevated." However, Beecher thought it was better tactics to present the idea as a way to solve the problems of public education "rather than to start it as an effort for the elevation of woman. By this method, many embarrassments would be escaped, and many advantages secured." Beecher hinted here that some of the talk about women's natures and destinies was self-conscious posturing. As much as she may have believed sincerely in the domestic ideal, her remark about female teachers suggests that she also knew that the price for a measure of independence and public activity was acquiescence in the prevailing ideology.²¹

While common-school reformers advocated female teachers, they also urged a variety of other changes to bolster the status of teachers of both sexes: longer terms for year-round employment, better wages, improved teacher training through normal schools and teachers' institutes, more communication through professional journals and organizations, and improved hiring practices. These reforms, they believed, would simultaneously raise the quality of common-school education and the status of common-school teach-

ers. Orville Taylor pleaded in 1835: "Teaching should be made a distinct profession. The teacher's employment should be made as honourable and as separate as the physician's, the divine's, the lawyer's. . . . Let teaching be made a profession, and let teachers be united for their mutual improvement." Early state teachers' organizations, always male-dominated, provided a platform for school professionals and visibility for promising men on the rise. Sometimes they had an impact on policy, as when the Illinois Teachers' Association controlled the early normal school, when the Wisconsin teachers endorsed the introduction of county superintendents, or when Ohio's College of Professional Teachers publicized the need for a state superintendent of instruction.²²

Education journals proliferated during the antebellum period. In some cases they were independent publications, in others they were the organs of state superintendents or teachers' organizations. They promoted the common-school reform program, including increased expenditures, more schooling, improved pedagogy, and the professionalization of teaching. Some state superintendents provided every district school committee with a copy of a state or national journal, to promote innovation and public support. Still, these journals were not read by most classroom teachers. In 1855 one-fourth of Massachusetts' teachers subscribed to the *Massachusetts Teacher*. The editors of the *Maine Journal of Education* complained in the 1850s that their journal was an "orphan" because ordinary teachers were "too indifferent to support it," and in Ohio, an estimated 18,000 of 21,000 teachers in 1863 never looked at the state journal. Using very crude figures, Sheldon Davis, a historian, estimated that about 10 percent of the nation's teachers received an education journal in the early 1850s, rising to perhaps 20 percent by the end of the Civil War. Nonetheless, this was an influential minority of teachers, and the impact of the journals may have been multiplied in discussions and through the sharing of copies among several readers. Henry Barnard's compendious *American Journal of Education* was so expensive that it probably never had more than 500 paid subscribers, but it became a standard reference work in pedagogical libraries and was frequently cited among education professionals.²³

Another means of disseminating educational reform ideas was

the teachers' institute. Often organized at the county level and endorsed by state superintendents, these meetings consisted of several days' speeches and discussion conducted by some prominent professional educator. David Camp, later the superintendent of Connecticut's common schools, described the teachers' institutes he helped conduct in the 1840s. They lasted four days and featured model lessons and discussions of classroom technique during the day, with guest lecturers in the evening, such as the Reverend Horace Bushnell, author of *Christian Nurture*. When William Mowry landed his first job as principal of a graded school in Massachusetts in 1850, he decided to attend a teachers' institute conducted by Barnas Sears, the new secretary of the state Board of Education. He took notes at the lectures, and he said he "kept the book containing them on my desk for the whole year . . . it had a marked influence on my subsequent teaching." In Illinois the superintendent of public instruction said in 1858 that annual institutes should be to teachers "what the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca was to the ancient Arab—the source whence he renews the spirit and life of his existence." Henry Barnard called teachers' institutes an "education revival agency." They became one of the most popular innovations of the reform program. In 1849, Maine officials reported that 36 percent of their teachers, both male and female, attended institutes. In Wisconsin, superintendent Azel Ladd began campaigning for institutes in 1852, "to mitigate the disadvantages" of teachers being "so diversified in qualifications." The state began supporting teachers' institutes in Wisconsin in 1859. In that year about 1,500 teachers attended institutes in fourteen cities, perhaps 20 percent of the state's teaching force. At the same time in Michigan, about 15 percent of all teachers, male and female, attended institutes.²⁴

As teachers' institutes became more popular in the Midwest, reformers in the East pressed for better teacher training through the establishment of normal schools (the term originated in France and meant that teachers should be trained to perform according to high standards or "norms"). Impressed by the professional status of Prussia's normal schools, reformers began to place a high priority on the establishment of similar institutions in America. Horace Mann supported normal schools vigorously. Shortly after

he took office as secretary to the Board of Education, Mann attended a meeting at the home of Edmund Dwight, a wealthy industrialist, to discuss the possibility of persuading the legislature to support a normal school. He returned home with a promise from Dwight of a \$10,000 private gift for the project, on condition that the legislature match it. In his diary he exulted, "I think I feel pretty sublime! Let the stars look out for my head!" The Whig legislature took advantage of the gift and established the nation's first normal school at Lexington in 1839. Even though the reform forces barely weathered a legislative assault on this "Prussian" institution in 1840, they soon established additional normal schools at Barre and Bridgewater. Classroom instruction at the Lexington normal school, as at most early teacher training institutions, was in academic subjects like geography, grammar, moral philosophy, botany, history, algebra, and political economy. Thirty-five students studied under a single instructor, Cyrus Peirce, regarded by Mann as a master teacher. Teacher training was accomplished in four ways: through the example of the instructor, through his incidental remarks about teaching methods during the regular lessons, through his weekly lectures on the art of teaching, and through practice teaching in the model school, under Peirce's observation. Thus, although the stated curriculum differed little from an academy, teacher training pervaded the day's activities. Henry Barnard called Lexington "the most interesting educational experiment now making on this side of the Atlantic."²⁵

In New York, the state regents and legislators decided that existing academies could do the job of teacher training. The superintendent of common schools, John Spencer, rejected normal schools as an "unnecessary expense." Although Spencer's successor supported the establishment of a normal school at Albany, which opened in 1844, New York continued to rely largely upon normal departments within its academies for teacher training during the nineteenth century. Indeed, academies throughout the nation often ran teacher-training departments comparable to the normal schools. For example, a student in the normal department of the academy at Canandaigua, New York, in the 1830s said that the program included "studies and recitations of the common branches; a daily drill upon the best methods of teaching; lectures

upon the theory of teaching, and also upon geology, natural and mental philosophy, physical geography and history, upon warming and ventilation, the laws of health, teachers' associations, schoolhouses and blackboards, also upon the teacher's social habits and duties as a member of the community." He added that graduates of the program "were eagerly sought for the best class of winter schools."²⁶

New Yorkers continued to debate which alternative the state should support, while the elite of their teaching force received training at the Albany normal school, at the normal departments of academies, and at periodic teachers' institutes. Most teachers, though, had no such training at all. When the teacher training departments of New York's academies graduated 284 students in 1837, there were about 10,000 school districts, most with frequent vacancies in winter and summer teaching slots. In Michigan, the normal school opened in 1853 and was attended by a few hundred students a year. By 1860, when the normal school had been operating for seven years, about 3 percent of the state's female teachers and about 4 percent of the state's male teachers had attended the normal school. Nonetheless, common-school reformers were confident by 1860 that they had their sights on the right institution for professional training. The post-Civil War era saw the proliferation of normal schools throughout the nation, but it was a very gradual development. By 1900, for example, 40 percent of the public-school teachers of Massachusetts had attended normal school.²⁷

Journals, teachers' associations, institutes, normal schools—these first instruments of professionalization probably affected the top 10 to 20 percent of the teachers of the antebellum period, the men and women who were more likely to stay in teaching beyond a few years, who were more likely to teach in the larger towns, and who were more likely to have the ambition to rise in the profession. The great majority of teachers, it seems, were either untouched by the new professional communications, or read a bit about education in popular journals, or learned about new practices from school visitors and annual reports sent to the districts. The potential professional networks existed, but the rapid turnover of teachers remained an obstacle to professionalization. In Trempealeau

County, Wisconsin, the turnover rate was as high as 80 percent in the 1860s. The average teacher had less than two years' experience, and many positions were filled by a "brigade of irregulars," who had not taken the certification exam but applied for licenses the weekend before school was to start, in the absence of qualified candidates. The county superintendent labelled these teachers "vampires" and "barnacles." In Clinton County, New York, in 1843, three-fourths of the teachers were twenty-one or younger, and over 70 percent were new to the district in which they were employed. It was a short-lived occupation. Rapid teacher turnover inhibited professionalism, training, and higher pay for teachers. The reformers tried to break a vicious circle: low pay attracted transient, unqualified teachers, who seemed to merit low pay. But the reformers knew that higher pay rates had to be accompanied by longer sessions and an end to alternating men in winter with women in summer. "It is unreasonable to expect, that a person who is qualified to teach, will pursue a profession, if he can only find employment for three or four months in the year," said one Pennsylvania state superintendent.²⁸

Henry Barnard linked teacher turnover to the slow progress of another favorite reform, the grading of schools and students. "The evils of a want of proper classification of schools . . . are aggravated by the almost universal practice of employing one teacher in summer, and another in winter, and different teachers each successive summer and winter." The graded school had numerous organizational and pedagogical implications, and it directly challenged the traditional structure of rural schooling. Grading could transform the organization of the school by classifying pupils roughly into levels of achievement. In the antebellum period, the word "grade" applied not to a particular level within a school, but to the practice of having a coordinated set of schools at different levels. The phrase "grade school," meaning elementary school, is also a later usage. Thus, to say in the 1850s that a town's schools were "graded" meant that they were divided into such levels as infant, primary, grammar, and high school. The purpose, of course, was to divide children by level of instruction so that teachers would not have to deal with such a wide range of ages and lessons. In large schools this effort led to internal gradations as well. The

schools of Utica, New York, were an example of a budding graded system. In 1854, Utica had fourteen primary schools, each divided into higher and lower levels, six intermediate schools, and one advanced school, divided into male and female sections. Educators congratulated themselves that this sort of system was the beginning of proper classification.²⁹

Barnard identified the key assumption behind the graded system: "The great principle to be regarded in the classification, either of the schools of a town or district, or of the scholars in the same school, is equality of attainments, which will generally include those of the same age." Although in most graded systems children had to pass some sort of examination to move from one school to the next, the net effect of grading the schools was to stratify children by age. This had a profound impact upon the social experience of schooling for children. In the ungraded, one-room district school, students had been in close contact with older and younger children, sometimes in a cooperative relationship. In the new graded schools of the antebellum period, students increasingly related only to other children their own age, and often in a deliberately competitive situation. Educators lauded competition as a "natural and commendable motive," certainly better than the fear of physical punishment. George Emerson, writing in the *Common School Journal*, urged teachers to try to "prevent the competition becoming personal," but he concluded that the graded system was desirable because in "a system of several connected schools, examination for each higher one may be rendered a strong motive to study."³⁰

Reformers believed that graded schools were not only a great pedagogical invention, consistent with principles of efficiency and division of labor, but that they spurred industry and were therefore morally sound. Furthermore, they believed that they were an essential expression of democracy in education. In his *Report on the American System of Graded Free Schools* (1851), Hiram Barney argued that free schools graded into levels would give all children the opportunity to advance according to their merits. All would be on an equal footing. Happily, said Barney, the graded system was even finding some acceptance in rural districts and in the South. Nonetheless, many rural areas still refused to consoli-

date and grade their schools, adding to the reformers' growing impatience with rural schooling and their admiration for the more complex urban systems.³¹

Reformers coupled the drive for classification with a desire to see more uniformity in classroom programs. They did not want lock-step conformity, to be sure. They were for innovation, change, and the adaptation of schools to local circumstances; but they also thought that there were desirable standards of quality and that consistency was a virtue. Having made the assumptions that more schooling was better, that modern teaching aids like blackboards and outline maps were essential, and that some methods were demonstrably better than others, it was easy for them to see their desire for uniformity as a desire for higher quality. The most common issue of uniformity arose from the fact that parents provided textbooks for their own children. Students often had different texts in a given subject, even at the same level. This made it doubly difficult for the overworked teacher to group children for instruction, or to plan lessons. Diversity of textbooks undermined efficiency and professional expertise.

In Vermont the legislature attempted to impose a law for textbook uniformity, but a local official warned in 1846 that it would take "time and skill to bring about this change without giving occasion to opposers of the state regulations to arm themselves against the law," and in 1851 the state superintendent wearily advised that Vermont should guarantee to people "the peaceful possession of their schoolbooks." In New York a law specified that town committees, on the advice of teachers and the town superintendent, were to "determine what textbooks shall be used in each study, and require every child thereafter coming to the school to be provided with the designated books." Despite the law, implementation of the practice was very slow. A Wisconsin law of 1849 gave the state superintendent the power to "recommend" texts, but in a rural state, with transient teachers, it was nearly impossible to require uniform textbooks until school districts began to purchase the books themselves, a practice not authorized until 1874. Pennsylvania passed a law in 1854 calling for uniformity of texts, but it was widely ignored. If educators could not even get children at the same level in the same school to use the

same spelling book, dreams of further uniformity in public school curriculum had to be postponed. A few states prescribed subjects for study, but such laws also turned out to be exercises in persuasion, not regulation. In the larger cities, however, one could see visions of the bureaucratic future. For example, the board in New York City decided in the 1840s to employ a supervisor to identify the best practices in the city, directing that they then be approved by the board and taught to other teachers. In the post-Civil War era, city superintendents would forge stronger procedures for uniformity, invoking visions of clock-like school systems, only to be criticized by a new generation of critics around the turn of the century who argued for more flexible systems sensitive to individual student differences. In the antebellum period, reformers did not argue for more diversity.³²

Normal schools, education journals, professional supervision, uniform textbooks, higher teacher wages, and other antebellum reforms were designed to bring a measure of consistency and quality to a collection of local institutions that the reformers considered uneven and largely inadequate. Theirs was a program of assimilation, centralization, and standardization, a program of government encouragement and organization designed to make public education in different communities increasingly similar as well as more substantial, and to make schooling more responsive to the political, economic, and cultural tasks that Anglo-American Protestant educational leaders believed were necessary to preserve and improve their society. On the purposes of common schooling, there was much popular agreement, and when they argued for their innovations, school reformers invoked the necessity of universal schooling in a republic of diverse peoples. There was less agreement on the specific proposals of the reformers. They encountered inertia and resistance on matters of centralized control, nonsectarian religion, full tax support for common schools, and the establishment of new institutions like high schools and normal schools. Nonetheless, they had achieved many of their objectives by 1860 in the North, and they congratulated themselves on a successful campaign.