The 1930s: Education: Overview

American Decades, 2001
From U.S. History in Context

Ideals and Realities

Long before the 1930s the public school was a symbol of American democracy. In many ways it represented the promise of America: a place where hard work and achievement were rewarded, where brilliance was mined from the ore of raw talent—a necessary starting point on the road to success. Pedagogues from Thomas Jefferson to John Dewey argued that the future of the school and the future of democracy were one, that the school was the only nonauthoritarian institution capable of instilling the self-discipline necessary for a self-governing nation. The distance between the American ideal of school and the reality of American schools in the 1930s, however, was striking. Lip service for education was freely available, but financial support for schools and good salaries for teachers went begging. A financially pressed public prioritized its limited resources, and the schools lost out. Early in the decade a blue-ribbon panel of the National Economic League issued a list of "Paramount Problems of the United States"; in 1930 the condition of education was fourteenth among their concerns; in 1931 it was twenty-fourth and in 1932 thirty-second. During the Depression most Americans decided they could not afford their love affair with the school.

The Bottom Line

The goals and ideals of education in the 1930s were in sharp conflict with the economic bottom line, as businessmen repeatedly pointed out. In the 1910s and 1920s American business had been one of the foremost champions of public education, especially of the high school, which was busy training at taxpayer expense the stenographers, secretaries, and clerks of the future. In the 1920s businessmen had generously loaned money for new school buildings and reaped handsome profits as building contractors and school provisioners. During the Depression, however, businessmen had a change of heart. Schools needed tax dollars to survive; businesses needed tax breaks to pay their debts. C. Weston Bailey, president of the National Board of Fire Underwriters, spoke for many when he complained of "exorbitant taxes and bureaucracy" in education and demanded a "prompt stopping of this riot of waste." Businessmen's groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Committee for Economy in Government, and the National Economic League argued that Americans could no longer afford universal public education. The most extreme among them wanted the schools closed, while the moderates argued that the schools should restrict their instruction to trade skills and job training. They also wanted their school loans paid back, and they wanted school boards to maintain their lucrative provisioning contracts. In Chicago businessmen had their way: the school board fired fourteen hundred teachers, cut the salaries and increased the teaching loads of the remainder, and repaid their building debts to businessmen—even as they retained provisioning contracts, and businessmen received federal bailouts. Georgia and Alabama closed schools, leaving thousands of children without access to formal education. Iowa lowered teachers' salaries 30 percent, to forty dollars a month. By 1933 there were two hundred thousand unemployed teachers; 2.2 million children were out of school; and two thousand rural schools in twenty-four states failed to open. Whatever transcendent values the school had in the American imagination, they were not sufficient to
protect education from the Depression.

**Meritocracy**

Businessmen were the foremost advocates of school retrenchment during the 1930s, not only because they were pressured by the Depression, but also because they embraced a particular outlook regarding the role of schools in American society, one shared by many educators. Businessmen and some educators argued that the role of the school was to select the gifted few from the dull mass, to sort out a capable elite from the incapable many. Given this presumption, education could be ruthlessly slashed: the gifted, the able, those struggling to achieve, would claw their way to success regardless, and the rest would take their place as the underlings of industrial society. In theory anyone, from any class or race, was capable of succeeding in this meritocratic model of education. In practice, however, there were enormous class and racially based barriers to educational success.

**Class Barriers**

Success in education meant graduation from college. Graduation from college meant access to high-wage jobs and wealth. But college was not open to many. Admission requirements retained from the nineteenth century often stressed a knowledge of archaic languages, such as Latin or Greek, or mastery of subjects such as algebra, not taught in all public schools. The children of wealthy businessmen, trained in private, expensive college-preparatory academies, were well prepared for college-admission tests. Children attending public high schools often were not. Businessmen argued that financing academic training in the high schools was a waste of money: children from working-class, immigrant backgrounds were born for manual labor, and their high-school education should be in metalworking, not Latin. That a child educated in metalworking would be unable to pass an examination in Latin was obvious. Less obvious was the fact that in this manner gifted children from impoverished backgrounds would be prevented from competing with less-talented children from wealthy backgrounds.

**Racial Barriers**

The manner in which education served to reinforce the economic status quo was illustrated perfectly in the education of African Americans. American education was racially segregated in the 1930s precisely because of the white presumption that blacks were inherently incapable of learning at an advanced level. Segregating white schoolchildren from black schoolchildren meant that white pupils presumably would not be "held back" in the classroom by less-capable black pupils. Black schools, especially in the South, were thus underfunded and rudimentary. There were a mere handful of black high schools throughout the South. Two hundred thirty southern counties did not have a single high school for black students in 1932—even though every one of these counties possessed a high school for whites. In sixteen states there was not a single state-supported black institution that offered graduate or professional programs. Northern white philanthropists, sometimes explicitly acknowledging that their goal was to prevent "competition between the races," often insisted that their charity be used to build black "industrial schools/" training African Americans for manual labor. Only
African Americans and some white progressive educators dissented from the mainstream assumption that tax money spent on black education was a waste of money. Black communities throughout the country built schools for themselves and hired instructors for the most difficult subjects. Black academics such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Horace Mann Bond, and E. Franklin Frazier attacked intelligence testing and educational discrimination that validated the status quo. They were combating years of neglect and racism. In 1930, 15 percent of rural adult African Americans had no formal schooling, and 48 percent had never gone beyond the fifth grade. White school boards paid white teachers an average annual salary of $833; black teachers, who had larger teaching loads, were paid only $510. Ironically, the Depression improved the situation of black education in many ways. In northern schools, school boards began to abolish segregated education as a way of saving money; in the South educators fearful of the possible consequences of unschooled, unemployed youths succeeded in getting school districts to build high schools for blacks—if for no other reason than to keep them off the streets. Thanks to such programs and to literacy campaigns mounted by New Deal agencies such as the National Youth Administration (NYA), by 1940 five hundred thousand illiterate blacks had been taught to read and write. The number of African Americans attending high school doubled; the number of high-school graduates tripled; and the percentage of blacks attending school became equal to that of whites.

**Progressive Education**

Segregation, of course, validated its own racial premises: substandard education was given to blacks because they were presumed to be incapable of intellectual achievement; substandard education then kept blacks from achieving academic success, Progressive educators sought to break this vicious circle of educational failure by changing the criteria for educational success for both poor blacks and poor whites. Progressives argued that colleges should restructure their curricula and admissions requirements to reflect the modern, scientific, multicultural character of American society. They argued that requirements tied to the older collegiate traditions of "gentlemanly education," such as Latin and the classics, ought to be deemphasized in favor of the sciences. In 1934 the Progressive Education Association began a large, expensive experiment, an eight-year study designed to convince colleges to modernize their curricula, which they did after World War II. Progressives also advocated restructuring primary-and secondary-school courses of study, in general favoring a broader evaluation of scholastic performance than strict academic excellence. Often progressives disagreed about how this broadening of education was to take place, but in general they sought an expansion of education to everyone, a leveling of differences in the quality of education provided, and the creation of real opportunities for impoverished students.

**Conflict**

Expansion, however, was a hard sell during the Depression, especially given business emphasis on retrenchment. During the first half of the decade progressive educators were thwarted at every turn by conservatives and businessmen. Capital outlays for education actually shrank to levels of twenty years earlier. Teachers turned militant, organizing, affiliating with trade unions, and taking their case to the people. They also became politically active, joining the New Deal and left-wing crusades to equalize political and economic power in America. The leading educational philosophy of the decade was a variant of progressivism known as social reconstructionism, which advocated political action for
American teachers. After 1935, and something of a return to prosperity, progressives increasingly got their way in the nation's schools, often by enlisting the public in school-funding drives and publicizing the function of the school in a democratic society. In 1936 big business was crushed at the polls, and the public equally rejected business demands for retrenchment in education. In defeat, however, conservatives raised the level of invective directed against the schools, accusing progressives of socialist and communist indoctrination and precipitating a "red scare" whose full effects were not felt until after World War II. Nonetheless, American schools were back on the track set for them by progressive educators, the path on which progressive education gradually improved the character of American democracy, widening opportunity for all and imparting fundamental instruction in civic obligation and self-government.


**Source Citation**


**Gale Document Number:** GALE|CX3468301121