

6 Problematic Quotes from the Founder of America's Education System

Horace Mann is known as the “father of American public education.” Motivated by a desire to both further the moral improvement of mankind and preserve the American republic, Mann led the Common School Movement that eventually resulted in the public education system America knows today.

As children bear the marks of their parents, so America's education system today inevitably bears some of the marks of its “father.” There is much in Mann and his writings that is commendable and inspiring that still positively impacts our education system today. However, there are also elements in his thought that are reflected in some of the problems that system is now facing.

On the latter point, consider the following 6 problematic quotes from Mann's writings and how their sentiments are manifested in America's present educational dilemmas:

1. “Men are cast-iron, but children are wax.”

Mann gave up his practice of law because he wanted to mold people, and he found that adults are not as malleable as children.

Today's education system is increasingly accused of indoctrinating children at young ages with ideologies at odds with those of their parents.

2. “The new-born infant must have sustenance and shelter and care. If the natural parents are removed or parental ability fails, in a word, if parents either cannot or will not supply

the infant's wants,—then society at large—the government having assumed to itself the ultimate control of all property—is bound to step in and fill the parent's place."

Mann strongly believed that schools needed to act *in loco parentis* – "in the place of the parents" – if a child's parents were not up to the task of proper child-rearing.

Today's education system is taking on the task of child-care at earlier ages. Many school systems provide not only lunch, but breakfast for their students.

3. "If all the children in the community, from the age of four years to that of sixteen, could be brought within the reformatory and elevating influences of good schools, the dark host of private vices and public crimes which now embitter domestic peace and stain the civilization of the age might, in ninety-nine cases in every hundred, be banished from the world."

Mann had a very utopian belief in the capabilities of formal education to improve the human race.

Today's political leaders too often rely on education as a panacea for the reduction of poverty, injustice, and crime in society.

4. "There is a public evil of great magnitude in the multiplicity and diversity of elementary books. They crowd the market and infest the schools."

Mann was not a big fan of diversity – hence the name the "common school movement." He believed that national unity depended upon uniformity.

Today's education system is becoming increasingly centralized

and bureaucratic, both in its methods and curriculum.

5. "All those who are worthily laboring to promote the cause of education are laboring to elevate mankind into the upper and purer regions of civilization, Christianity, and the worship of the true God; all those who are obstructing the progress of this cause are impelling the race backwards into barbarism and idolatry."

Mann was notoriously intolerant with, and impatient of, opposition to his ideas.

Those who take issue with aspects of today's education system are often quickly dismissed as not caring about children, being "teacher-bashers," and being opposed to progress.

6. "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, – the balance-wheel of the social machinery."

As eminent education history Lawrence Cremin wrote of Mann, "Throughout he was concerned with the greatest *general* proficiency of *average* students."

Today's education system is often derided for "dumbing down" the curriculum and "lowering the bar" in order to close the gap between students who excel and those who don't.

In trying to improve America's education system today, should we reevaluate the legacy of Horace Mann?