

Education in America Before the Education System

Before America's public education system was created around 1840, the vast majority of Americans were illiterate and walked around with dirt on their faces.

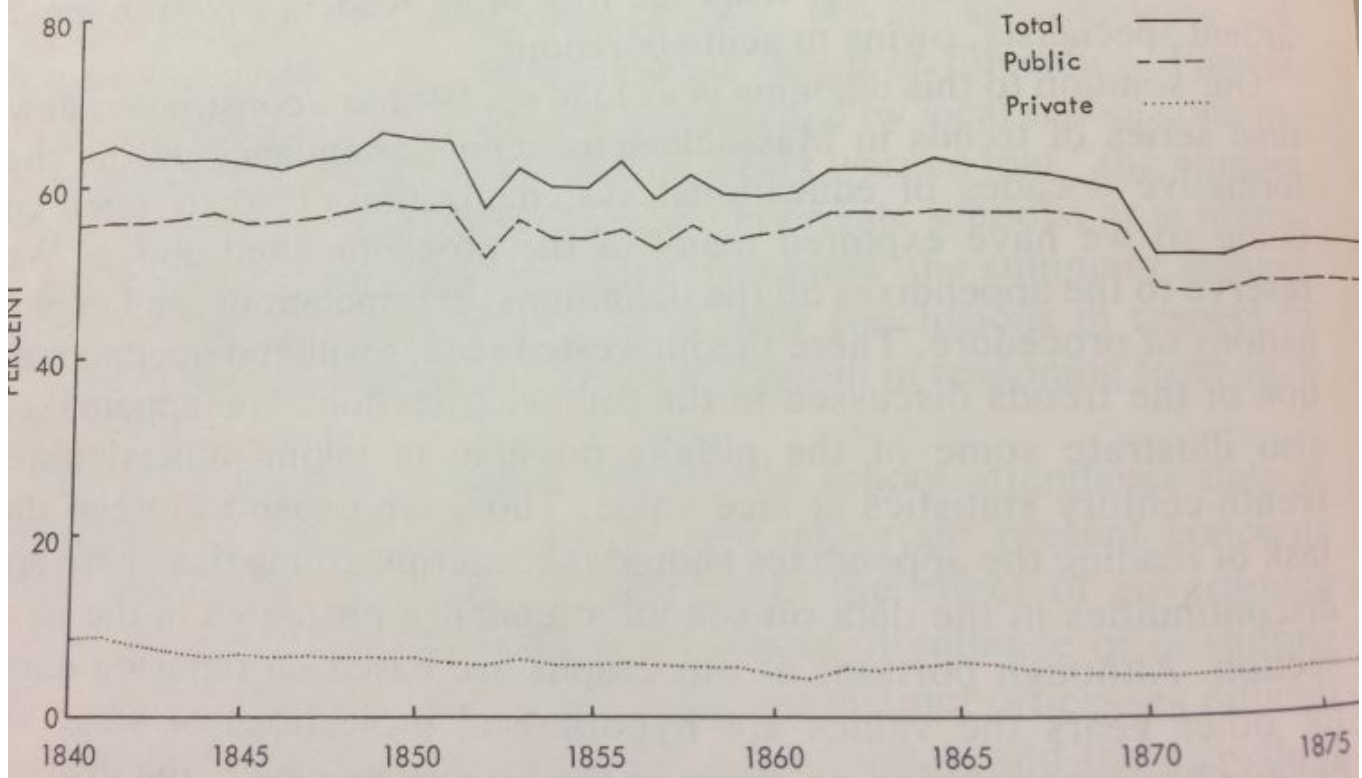
At least, that seems to be the impression shared by most people today.

But it turns out that education, like nature, abhors a vacuum. In the decades after the American Revolution—much like the decades before, and most of human history—a number of different educational options existed that did not depend upon a centralized, bureaucratic system.

Before the creation of this system, beginning in Massachusetts, America educated its children through a variety of options: charity schools (run by either churches, town councils, or voluntary benevolent societies), pay schools, infant schools, dame schools (run by women out of their homes), grammar schools, academies, female seminaries, independent day schools, etc.

Using statistical analysis, [Drs. Carl Kaestle and Maris Vinovskis](#) have discovered that school enrollment rates (for both boys *and* girls) had actually been *growing* in Massachusetts and New York in the decades after the American Revolution, and leveled off for the next 40 years *after* the creation of a more centralized system!

Figure 2.1. Percentage of persons under 20 years of age enrolled in Massachusetts schools, 1840–80 (from Tables A2.2–A2.5)



In addition, the years 1800 to 1830 saw a significant increase in length of the school year and average attendance.

One of the leading education scholars in the U.S., Dr. Charles Glenn of Boston University, describes the educational climate in early America as follows:

“Popular—or elementary—schooling in Massachusetts in the years that followed the Revolution was provided by an assortment of local arrangements that do not fit into our present categories of ‘public’ and ‘private’ education. The schoolmaster might be hired by a town or district committee of citizens, or might set up school on his or her own initiative, especially in the larger communities. In either case, the school would be supported largely by the fees paid by parents, though various arrangements were made to pay the fees of the children of families for whom this would have been a burden...”

The educational reformers of the 1830s and subsequent decades

*derided such arrangements for schooling as hopelessly inadequate, but recent research suggests that they were rather effective. **Literacy and basic mathematical skills were nearly universal, and those students whose social status or natural ability made secondary education possible were prepared for such further study.** It was effective, that is, in providing the instruction necessary for the farmer, craftsman, or small tradesman of the day and in laying a basis for further study for those who were in a position to go on."*

As Glenn explains, the shift to a centralized education system was largely fear-based. Horace Mann and the leaders of the Common School Movement successfully stirred up concerns among the public that large-scale immigration and too much educational diversity would destroy America's unity and sense of identity (sound familiar?).

Kaestle and Vinovskis' research led them to conclude that Americans before 1840 also cared very much about national unity and the preservation of the republic, "but believed that schooling in their society was ample and that most children received the kind of rudimentary intellectual and moral training the public theorists had in mind, even though much schooling was neither publicly controlled nor free."

I frequently remind people that "publicly-supported education" has always existed. But a highly centralized and bureaucratic public education system like the one we have today is a relatively recent phenomenon in history. And as history testifies, it's not necessary to ensure an educated public.

In fact, given [the widely-held belief that American education has declined significantly in the past century](#), one sometimes wonders if such a system might actually be an obstacle to public education.

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