

The Rosy—and False—Narrative of American Public Schooling

Humans tend to romanticize the past. In many ways it helps us see the good in what has been and what is now, but in other ways it disguises the truth.

The history of American public schooling is a notable example of viewing history through rose-colored glasses. In my college and graduate school education classes, I read books and articles about how American public schooling was intended to be a great equalizer, to provide opportunity and social mobility to every child regardless of background. But I also learned that the rosy stories I had been taught about American history, from Christopher Columbus to Thomas Jefferson, had a darker side not often revealed. Did the origin of American schooling have a similar shadow?

It turns out it did. The myth we have been told about the history of American public schooling as a national treasure that nurtures our democracy is untrue. The reality is that 19th century politicians and citizens were fearful of and overwhelmed by rapid societal change, as thousands of immigrants streamed into American cities in the mid-1800s.

Between 1830 and 1840 U.S. [immigration](#) quadrupled, and between 1840 and 1850, it tripled again. Particularly troubling to lawmakers at the time was the fact that many of these new immigrants were Irish Catholics who threatened the dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant cultural and religious customs. “Those now pouring in upon us, in masses of thousands upon thousands, are wholly of another kind in morals and intellect,” mourned the Massachusetts state legislature regarding the new Boston immigrants.

Universal, taxpayer-funded “common schools” became the

mechanism to rein in these masses and “Americanize” them to societal norms. Interestingly, many of the Irish Catholic immigrant families didn’t want to send their children to these so-called “secular” schools that continued to reflect prevailing Protestant ideals and texts. So the solution for lawmakers was simply to make them attend.

1852 marks the onset of what public schooling advocates herald as universal, taxpayer-supported public schooling for all children regardless of background. What is often missing is the acknowledgement that the 1852 compulsory schooling law, passed in Massachusetts and subsequently replicated in all states, was the first to mandate school attendance under a legal threat of force.

Many families rebelled. Catholics, for example, created their own private, parochial schools. Outraged by this action, lawmakers throughout the country began in the 1880s to pass laws known as Blaine Amendments that prohibited any public funding for private schools. These laws remain today in many states, and are at the heart of the debate around school choice, particularly, vouchers that would enable parents to receive public money to use at private schools.

Beyond limiting access to funding, citizens and lawmakers sought additional ways to outlaw private schools and compel children to attend public schools. In 1922, Oregon passed an expanded compulsory schooling law requiring all children to attend a public school, thus prohibiting attendance at parochial and private schools. In 1925, in the landmark case of *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Oregon law as unconstitutional. In delivering the opinion of the Court, Justice McReynolds [wrote](#):

“...the Act of 1922 unreasonably interferes with the liberty of parents and guardians to direct the upbringing and education of children under their control...The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose

excludes any general power of the State to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations."

In her October *Atlantic*, "[The War on Public Schools](#)," Erika Christakis takes aim at current efforts to place education decision-making back in the hands of parents and away from the state. She says these school choice efforts, like charter schools and vouchers, threaten American public schooling. Christakis writes: "So what happens when we neglect the public purpose of our publicly funded schools? The discussion of vouchers and charter schools, in its focus on individual rights, has failed to take into account American society at large. The costs of abandoning an institution designed to bind, not divide, our citizenry are high."

Binding society by force, to inculcate a particular cultural doctrine, is not what builds a free, tolerant, and thriving democracy. Perhaps something erected on questionable moral and historical grounds should be removed.

[\[Image Credit: City of Boston Archives-Flickr | CC BY 2.0\]](#)