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Pluralism to Establishment to Dissent: The Religious and Educational Context of Home Schooling

James C. Carper

Although estimates of the number of children currently taught by their parents in a home setting vary considerably—from 750,000 to 1.7 million—no one doubts that their numbers have grown rapidly since the mid-1970s, when only 10,000 to 15,000 children were educated at home (Lines, 1998; Ray, 1999). Home schooling is not, however, a new approach to educating the young in this country. It was commonplace in religiously pluralistic colonial America and virtually disappeared with the establishment and expansion of common school systems in the 19th and early 20th century, but it has experienced a renaissance since the mid-1970s, particularly among evangelical Protestant “dissenters” who, ironically, once

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staunchly supported what historian Mead (1963) called America's "established church"—the public school.¹

Educational Pluralism in Early America

Prior to the central, transforming event in our educational history—the advent of mandatory, state-supported and state-controlled common schooling in the middle decades of the 19th century—the rich religious diversity that characterized overwhelmingly Protestant colonial and early national America (Roman Catholics numbered only about 25,000 in 1776) was matched by an equally rich diversity of educational arrangements. With few exceptions—namely, when they were unable or unwilling to direct their children's upbringing—parents fashioned an education that was consonant with their religious beliefs (Cremin, 1970; Noll, 1992).

For the better part of the 17th and 18th centuries, the family was the primary unit of social organization and the most important educational agency. In the words of Puritan divine Mather (1699), "Families are the nurseries of all societies, and the first combinations of mankind" (pp. 3–4). Historian Mintz and anthropologist Kellogg (1988) echoed Mather's observation regarding the colonial family:

Three centuries ago the American family was the fundamental economic, educational, political, social and religious unit of society. The family, not the isolated individual, was the unit of which church and state were made. The household was not only the locus of production, it was also the institution primarily responsible for the education of children, the transfer of craft skills, and the care of the elderly and infirm. (p. xiv)

Whether parents taught children at home primarily out of necessity or out of religious conviction is difficult to ascertain.²

In general, then, parents—particularly the father in the 1600s—bore the primary responsibility for teaching their children (and often those from other families who had been apprenticed or "fostered out") Christian doctrine, vocational skills, and how to read. That responsibility was not al-

¹ Although the resurgence of home schooling in the 1970s was in large measure led by advocates of progressive pedagogy such as John Holt, the movement rapidly became dominated by evangelical Christians. Despite the increasing diversity of the movement in the 1990s, it remains closely identified with conservative Christianity.

² Although contemporary home schooling has been the subject of much research, comparatively little is known about its past (Carper, 1992).

ways carried out equally or effectively. According to historian Lewis (1989), "The effectiveness of home schooling varied depending particularly upon region and gender; literacy was much higher in the North than the South, and for males than females" (p. 126). Although many 17th- and 18th-century White parents sent their children to school for short periods of time—at least in the northern colonies—much education took place in the household. Indeed, a majority of colonial children may have acquired rudimentary literacy skills at home.

In contrast to current schooling arrangements, the colonial mode of schooling was unsystematic, unregulated, and discontinuous. The initiative for school attendance resided with parents, not the state, as Reese (1983) pointed out,

Early school laws of Massachusetts, which called for the creation of various levels of schools in response to population growth, were widely ignored and unenforceable. Whether in New England, the Middle Colonies, or the South—and regional differences would long prevail in schooling—schools were an irregular, incidental, and unsystematic part of a child's life. (p. 3)

Although schooling in colonial America was unsystematic and primarily the product of local community or church efforts and parental initiatives, it was not neglected. According to Cremin (1970), school opportunities increased more rapidly than the population during the 1700s, even though the "increase was neither linear over time nor uniform from region to region" (p. 500). By the eve of the American Revolution, most White children (more boys than girls) attended school at some point in their lives. Schooling, however, was not controversial. In great measure, this was because most schools mirrored the religious beliefs of their patrons and, like churches, were expected to assist parents in the education of the young. They were to complement rather than replace parental educational efforts in the home (Cremin, 1970; Kaestle, 1973; Vinovskis, 1987).

The diversity of educational institutions and the blurred line between "public" and "private" schools were the most salient features of colonial schooling. The colonial education landscape was dotted with an incredible variety of institutions: from the town schools, dame schools (in which women taught reading skills in their homes for a small fee), and private-venture schools of New England; to the various denominational (e.g., Lutheran, Quaker, Presbyterian, and Reformed), charity, and pay schools in the Middle Colonies; to the old-field schools and Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts missionary efforts in the South; to academies that appeared throughout the provinces after 1740 (Cremin,

1977; Kaestle, 1983). Classifying these schools as purely public or private is problematic, as Bailyn (1960) argued: "The modern conception of public education, the very idea of a clean line of separation between 'private' and 'public,' was unknown before the end of the eighteenth century" (p. 11). To most colonials, a school was public if it served a public purpose, such as promoting civic responsibility. Public education did not require public support and control.

Toward the end of the colonial era, the family began to lose its position as American society's most important economic and social unit. The slow shift of family functions, including education, to nonfamilial institutions occurred initially in the settled areas of the eastern seaboard. According to Mintz and Kellogg (1988),

By the middle of the eighteenth century, a variety of specialized institutions had begun to absorb traditional familial responsibility. To reduce the cost of caring for widows, orphans, the destitute, and the mentally ill, cities began to erect almshouses instead of having such cared for in their own homes or homes of others. Free schools and common pay schools educated a growing number of the sons of artisans and skilled laborers. Workshops increasingly replace individual households as centers of production. (p. 23)

Although parents increasingly looked to schools to carry out what had once been primarily a family function, the colonial approach to education continued virtually unchanged throughout the late 1700s and early 1800s. Despite proposals for more systematic, state-influenced schooling offered by luminaries such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush, the colonial mode of schooling suited to the Protestant pluralism of the period persisted well into the 19th century. Whether or not sponsored by a church, the vast majority of schools at that time embodied some variation of Protestant Christianity, and parents decided whether children would attend them.

By the 1820s, private and quasi-public schooling (e.g., district schools) were widely available to White Americans in most settled parts of the United States, except the South. These educational opportunities were due primarily to the efforts of churches, parents, local governments, voluntary associations, entrepreneurs, and communities, not state mandates. In some areas, school attendance was nearly universal. Despite some references to common pay schools as "private" and charity schools systems as "public," these terms still lacked their modern connotations. Public funding of privately controlled institutions was still common (Gabel, 1937). With the exception of some charity schooling, most schools

embodied the belief system of their clientele. In sum, the structure of schooling reflected the Protestant “confessional pluralism” of the time, and public policy generally recognized and even encouraged diversity. Parents viewed schools as extensions of the household that would reinforce their educational efforts.

Establishing the Public Schools

The middle decades of the 19th century marked a period of intense educational debate and reform that led to major changes in educational beliefs and practices in the United States—namely, the genesis of the modern concept and practice of public schooling. Distressed by the social and cultural tensions wrought by mid-19th-century urbanization, industrialization, and immigration (which included a large number of Roman Catholics from Ireland) and energized by what Kaestle (1983) called the values of republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism, educational reformers touted the messianic power of tax-supported, government-controlled compulsory schooling. Common schools, they believed, would mold a moral, disciplined, and unified population prepared to participate in American political, economic, and social life. Some reformers viewed the common school as a substitute for the family. Horace Mann, for example, often referred to the state and its schools as “parental” (Carlson, 1998). Private schools, on the other hand, often were cast as undemocratic, divisive, and inimical to the public interest (Glenn, 1988; Kaestle, 1983; Randall, 1994).

As de Tocqueville (1835/1966) recognized in the 1830s and several generations of historians have since confirmed, public schooling was nurtured by a robust evangelical Protestant culture that emerged from the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s and was nourished by the Second Great Awakening—a series of religious revivals stretching from the late 1790s through the Civil War. With few exceptions, notably several Lutheran and Reformed bodies that opted for schools designed to preserve cultural and/or confessional purity, Protestants were generally supportive of common schooling. Indeed, many were in the vanguard of the reform movement. They approved of early public schooling because it reflected Protestant beliefs and was viewed as an integral part of a crusade to fashion a Christian—which, to the dismay of Roman Catholics, meant Protestant—America (Kaestle, 1983; Noll, 1992; Smith, 1967). According to church historian Handy (1971), elementary schools hardly had to be under the control of particular denominations because “their role was to prepare young Americans for participating in the broadly Christian civilization toward which all evangelicals were working” (p. 102).

Rather than countenance sharing public funds with Roman Catholic schools, such as requested by Bishop John Hughes in the early 1840s in the face of Protestant practices of the New York Public School Society (such as using the King James version of the Bible) or schools associated with Protestant groups, evangelicals united behind the “nonsectarian” (in reality, pan-Protestant) common school as the sole recipient of tax monies for education. Therefore, Catholic schools and those of other dissenters from the common school movement were denied not only legitimacy but tax dollars as well. Latent anti-Catholicism was rekindled by the immigration of the 1840s and 1850s; by Roman Catholic bishops’ assertions of missionary intent in the United States; and by the provocative statements of Pope Pius IX (from 1846–1878), such as the *Syllabus of Errors* in 1864—an anthology of earlier condemnations of, among other things, liberty of religion and separation of church and state, which were looked on unfavorably in the United States. To a significant degree, then, this anti-Catholicism closed prematurely the debate on whether the education of the public could be accomplished by a variety of schools reflecting diverse moral and religious viewpoints funded by tax dollars or whether it required the creation of a government school system embodying a supposedly common belief system with a virtual monopoly on the public treasury—in other words, an educational counterpart to the traditional established church (Baer & Carper, 1998–1999; Carper & Weston, 1990; Curran, 1954; Glenn, 1988; Hicks, 1990; Hunt & Carper, 1993).

It is indeed ironic that as Protestants embarked on the “lively experiment” of religious freedom and denominationalism (Massachusetts became the last state formally to separate church and state in 1833), they, with few exceptions, abandoned an educational arrangement well suited to the Protestant pluralism of the previous 200 years, allied themselves with Unitarian reform leaders like Mann, and cast their hopes for a Protestant Kingdom of God in America with a new established church—the common school. Little did they know that in the future this pan-Protestant institution would embody a belief system at odds with their evangelical faith, which, in turn, would lead many conservative Protestants in the last decades of the 20th century to embrace educational arrangements of an earlier period (Carper, 1992).

Early Dissenters From the Public School Establishment

By 1890, about 86% of children aged 5 to 14 years were in public schools, and private schools accounted for another 11% (Wattenberg, 1976). Why did most parents turn their children over to the public schools? Why did they

give up some of their educational prerogatives to the government? (I say some because, despite the ever-increasing institutionalization of children for educational purposes, families no doubt taught and continue to teach propositions and skills as well as dispositions.) First, parents sent their children to school, usually of their own volition, because they believed that schooling offered status and opportunity for economic advancement. In other words, there was a "payoff" for relinquishing some parental authority (Kaestle, 1983). Second, with several notable exceptions (e.g., Roman Catholics), most 19th-century parents supported the public schools' goals of Christian character building and literacy training as well as the means of attaining them (Handy, 1971; Tyack & Hansot, 1981). Third, despite the oft-decried centralizing innovations (e.g., the establishment of state and county superintendencies), 19th-century public education was intensely localistic. In 1890, for example, more than 75% of American children attended school in rural areas. Even as late as 1913, around 50% of American schoolchildren were enrolled in 212,000 one-room schools (Cuban, 1984; Gulliford, 1984). Many of these schools enrolled children from only four or five families. Thus, parents looked on the school as an extension of family and community educational and religious preferences rather than an instrument of state authority. Finally, it is likely that some parents were simply pleased to have the public school relieve them of part of the responsibility of raising their children, a task made more arduous by the separation of the father and the workplace from the household.

Not all 19th-century parents shared in the often tension-filled consensus regarding common schooling. There was dissent regarding curriculum, structure, and the belief system embodied in the common school, much as there is today. Among others, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed Protestants established alternative schools to maintain tightly knit communities in which the family, church, and school propagated the same doctrines of the faith (Carper & Hunt, 1984). For economic, religious, pedagogical, and, probably most commonly, geographical reasons, some children were schooled to a greater or lesser extent at home. Indeed, Gordon and Gordon (1990) argued that during the better part of the 19th century, literature on "domestic" or "fireside" education was widely available to those interested in the "family school" movement. We do not know how many children were schooled at home by either parents or relatives. Several, however, we know much about. In addition to the oft-cited 18th-century luminaries like Washington, Madison, and Franklin (Dobson, 1995), well-known 19th-century figures who were taught by their parents include Thomas A. Edison, who was instructed at home after school officials labeled him "addled"; Jane Addams, who received most of her precollegiate formal

education at home due to poor health; Andrew Taylor Still, a colleague of abolitionist John Brown and founder of osteopathic medicine, who was largely educated by his father; and Alexander Campbell, founder of the Disciplines of Christ, who received part of his education from his father (A. Johnson, 1928–1936; see also McCullough, 1987; Moore & Moore, 1984). Lesser lights, such as Daniel Dawson Carothers, Chief Engineer of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad from 1904 to 1909, who received his primary schooling from his mother before attending an academy, eventually may be “discovered” in obituaries, memorials, diaries, and family records (Rawn et al., 1909).

20th-Century Dissenters

In addition to the well-known efforts on the part of states like Wisconsin, Illinois, and, most aggressively, Oregon to regulate or outlaw nongovernment schools, the late 1800s and early 1900s also witnessed the gradual decline of evangelical Protestantism as the dominant theme in America’s public religion and the growing influence of the Enlightenment Pillar of our civic faith. Pointing out the disruptive effect on American Protestantism of, among other things, Darwinism, higher criticism of the Bible, the fundamentalist–modernist controversy, and growing cultural and religious diversity, sociologist Hunter (1983) argued, with only slight exaggeration, that in the course of roughly 35 years (1895–1930), “Protestantism had been moved from cultural domination to cognitive marginality and political impotence. The worldview of modernity [often termed secular humanism or civil humanism] had gained ascendancy in American culture” (p. 37).

Public education was affected, albeit gradually, by this shift in America’s public religion. For example, prior to the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling on Bible reading in *Abington Township v. Schempp* (1963), 11 states already forbade it on the grounds that it was a “sectarian” practice. Furthermore, Bible reading in some form was practiced in fewer than half of the nation’s public school districts (Dierenfeld, 1962; Stokes & Pfeffer, 1964). Christianity also became less visible in the public school curriculum after the turn of the century. For example, in his analysis of the religious content of American history textbooks, Shannon (1995) documented a gradual shift from a Christian or theistic worldview to a more secular, “democratic” orientation between 1865 and 1935.

Although the Supreme Court’s decisions on prayer and Bible reading (*Abington Township v. Schempp*, 1963; *Engel v. Vitale*, 1962; *Murray v. Curlett*, 1963) merely marked the culmination of more than a half-century-long pro-

cess of “de-Protestantization” of public education (Nord, 1995), many conservative Protestants have interpreted the official removal of these symbols of the evangelical strain of the American civic faith as “yanking” God out of the public schools. Rather than making the schools “neutral” on matters related to religion, they have concluded that these decisions contributed to the establishment of secular humanism as the official creed of American public education. This belief, in turn, has led them to scrutinize public education to a greater extent than ever before. Once crusaders for the establishment of public education, conservative Protestants are now, ironically, among its most vociferous critics (Carper, 1984). They have awakened to the fact that public education is now officially “agnostic” vis-à-vis Christianity.

Since the mid-1960s, disgruntled conservative Protestants have responded to the “established church” and its secular “theology” in several ways. Like their Reformation ancestors of the 16th century, some have attempted to “purify” the public schools by protesting the use of curricular materials (e.g., literature series) that they believe advance “secular humanism” or by attempting to reincorporate theistic symbols (e.g., posting the Ten Commandments) and perspectives (e.g., intelligent design theories about the origin of the cosmos) in the public schools (Bates, 1993; P. E. Johnson, 1995). Others have forsaken their historic commitment to public education and founded independent Christian schools. The most radical dissenters, “educational anabaptists” if you will, have carried the reformation one step further. They have abandoned institutional education for home schooling in an attempt to restore what they believe to be education in its purest form—parents teaching their own children. As was the case with 16th-century anabaptists, these radical dissenters have been criticized and in some cases persecuted by public school establishmentarians (Mayberry, Knowles, Ray, & Marlow, 1995). Even fellow dissenters in the nongovernment sector have questioned home schooling.

Despite occasional friction between independent Christian school advocates and evangelical home schoolers, these dissenters have much in common. Both are profoundly dissatisfied with what they perceive to be the secularistic worldview embodied in the public school curriculum, unsatisfactory behavioral and academic standards, and an unsafe environment. Although the rapid growth of independent Christian schooling preceded that of home schooling by about a decade, both sectors of nonpublic education now claim more than 1 million students each (and although the home school population is certainly becoming more religiously diverse, the vast majority remains conservative Christian). Both are broadly middle-class movements comprised of persons who are deeply committed to their faith and their children. Few families with children in either are likely to return to the “established church.”

Indeed, in the case of the home school sector, conservative Christians are likely to be joined by increasing numbers of dissenters whose beliefs are rooted in other faith systems, such as Islam or “romantic libertarianism.” How this growing diversity will affect the home school movement and its relation to the state remains to be seen. After numerous clashes with public school officials and state authorities in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, home schoolers now are tolerated—and, in some cases, even accommodated—by the education establishment, and they enjoy legal status and considerable freedom in all 50 states. Nevertheless, parents who teach their children at home must be wary of reforms to improve education, particularly the current wave of “accountability” measures that impose uniform content and performance standards on public schools. Such measures could be extended beyond state school systems. As dissenters of the past discovered, “edicts of toleration” can be revoked in favor of “edicts of conformity.”

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