

REPORT of the Workingman's Committee of Philadelphia on the State of Public Instruction in Pennsylvania [Excerpts Edited For Use In Class]

REPORT of the Joint Committees of the City and County of Philadelphia, appointed September, 1829, to ascertain the state of public instruction in Pennsylvania, and to digest and propose such improvements in education as may be deemed essential to the intellectual and moral prosperity of the people.

It is true the state is not without its colleges and universities, several of which have been [supported] with liberal supplies from the public purse. Let it be observed, however, that the funds so applied, have been appropriated exclusively for the benefit of the wealthy, who are thereby enabled to [provide a quality] education for their children, upon lower terms than it could otherwise be afforded them. Funds thus expended, may serve to engender an aristocracy of talent, and place knowledge - the chief element of power - in the hands of the privileged few; but can never secure the common prosperity of a nation nor confer intellectual as well as political equality on a people.

The original element of despotism is a MONOPOLY OF TALENT, which consigns the multitude to comparative ignorance, and secures the balance of knowledge on the side of the rich and the rulers. If then the healthy existence of a free government be, as the committee believe, rooted in the WILL of the American people, it follows as a necessary consequence, of a government based upon that will, that this monopoly should be broken up, and that the means of equal knowledge, (the only security for equal liberty) should be rendered, by legal provision, the common property of all classes.

In a republic, the people constitute the government, and... [they] frame the laws and create the institutions, that promote their happiness or produce their destruction. If they be wise and intelligent, no laws but what are just and equal will receive their [approval], or be sustained by their [votes]. If they be ignorant... they will be deceived by mistaken or designing rulers, into the support of laws that are unequal and unjust.

It appears, therefore, to the committees that there can be no real liberty without a wide diffusion of real intelligence; that the members of a republic, should all be alike instructed in the nature and character of their equal rights and duties, as human beings, and as citizens; and that education, instead of being limited as in our public poor schools, to a simple acquaintance with words and [basic mathematics], should tend, as far as possible, to the production of a just disposition, virtuous habits, and a rational self-governing character.

When the committees contemplate their own condition, and that of the great mass of their fellow laborers; when they look around on the glaring inequality of society, they are constrained to believe, that until the means of equal instruction shall be equal[ly] secured to all, liberty is but an unmeaning word, and equality an empty shadow, whose substance to be realized must first be planted by an equal education and proper training in the minds, in the habits, in the manners, and in the feelings of the community...

The committees are aware that any plan of common and more particularly of equal education that may be offered to the public, is likely to meet with more than an ordinary share of opposition. It is to be expected that political demagogueism, professional monopoly, and monied influence, will conspire as [they always do] against everything that has promised to be an equal benefit to the whole population. Nevertheless, the appearance, that something will now be done for the intellectual as well as... the physical improvement of the state [is] certainly very promising.

Horace Mann Pleads For Public Libraries

Horace Mann, the most influential educational reformer of his day, sacrificed a lucrative law practice for a life of public service. His influence radiated out from Massachusetts, where he did much to improve the common schools by securing better buildings, higher salaries, and superior teaching methods through teachers' institutes and normal [teacher] schools. A born reformer and a Puritan at heart, he also fought against slavery, lotteries, the liquor traffic, profanity, intemperance, smoking, and ballet dancing. In this famous lecture on public libraries, Mann posits a relationship between ignorance and vain opinionatedness.

A library will produce one effect upon school children, and upon the neighborhood generally, before they have read one of the books, and even if they should never read one of them.

It is in this way: The most ignorant are the most conceited. Unless a man knows that there is something more to be known, his inference is, of course, that he knows everything. Such a man always usurps the throne of universal knowledge, and assumes the right of deciding all possible questions. We all know that a conceited dunce will decide questions extemporaneously which would puzzle a college of philosophers or a bench of judges. Ignorant and shallow-minded men do not see far enough to see the difficulty.

But let a man know that there are things to be known of which he is ignorant, and it is so much carved out of his domain of universal knowledge. And for all purposes of individual character, as well as of social usefulness, it is quite as important for a man to know the extent of his own ignorance as it is anything else.

To know how much there is that we do not know is one of the most valuable parts of our attainments; for such knowledge becomes both a lesson of humility and a stimulus to exertion. Let it be laid down as a universal direction to teachers, when students are becoming proud of their knowledge, to spread open before them some pages of the tremendous volumes of their ignorance.

Now those children who are reared without any advantages of intelligent company, or of travel, or of books—which are both company and travel—naturally fall into the error of supposing that they live in the center of the world, that all society is like their society, or, if different from theirs, that it must be wrong. They come, at length, to regard any part of this vast system of the works of man, and of the wisdom of God, which conflicts with their homebred notions, as baneful, or contemptible, or non-existent...

Now, when this class of persons go out into the world and mingle with their fellow men, they are found to be alike useless on account of their ignorance, and odious for their presumption. And if a new idea can be projected with sufficient force to break through the incrustations of folly and prejudice which envelop their souls... they appear as ridiculous, under its influence, as did the mouse which was born in the till of a chest, and, happening one day to rear itself upon its hind legs and to look over into the body of the chest, exclaimed, in amazement, that he did not think the universe so large!

A library, even before it is read, will teach people that there is something more to be known.