



Schooling America

HOW THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS MEET
THE NATION'S CHANGING NEEDS

Patricia Albjerg Graham

Schooling America

HOW THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS MEET
THE NATION'S CHANGING NEEDS

Patricia Albjerg Graham

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2005

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further Oxford University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2005 by Patricia Albjerg Graham

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY, 10016
www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Graham, Patricia Albjerg.

Schooling America / Patricia Albjerg Graham.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-19-517222-5

ISBN-10: 0-19-517222-1

1. Education—United States—History—20th century.

I. Title.

LA209.G65 2005

370'.973'094—dc22 2005008495

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For Loren

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

List of Illustrations vii

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

ONE

Assimilation: 1900–1920 7

TWO

Adjustment: 1920–1954 51

THREE

Access: 1954–1983 98

FOUR

Achievement: 1983–Present 153

FIVE

Autonomy to Accountability 201

Conclusion 249

Further Reading 257

Index 265

Illustrations

Victor Lincoln Albjerg, 1900	8
Cleveland education poster, 1917	17
Victor Lincoln Albjerg with his eighth-grade graduating class, 1908	30
Students at the North Bennett Street Industrial School, 1917	42
Students constructing maps of South America, 1942	54
Weekly schedule, City and Country School, New York City, 1922-1923	59
First-graders in Raymond, Indiana, 1939	86
Classroom in Veazy, Georgia, 1941	89
Mother teaching children in Louisiana, 1939	89
Cartoon: "Be Sure to Give Mine Special Attention," 1955	105

Students engaging in the “New Math,” 1960	121
Students at Maury High School, Norfolk, Virginia, 1959	129
Francis Keppel with James B. Conant, 1963	133
Harold Howe II speaking to President Lyndon B. Johnson	139
President Ronald Reagan and the panel that prepared <i>A Nation at Risk</i>	154
Albert Shanker, 1988	172
Students taking test, North Carolina, 2004	186
Sample question from the Massachusetts teacher certification exam	194
Purdue University campus, West Lafayette, Indiana, ca. 1900	210–211
Mattress-making course at the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, 1902	220
World War II veterans registering at Harvard, 1947	223
Students protesting at the University of California, Berkeley, 1964	238

Acknowledgments

FINDING WHAT TO INCLUDE in a book and deciding what it means are the essential steps of historical writing. These are the author's responsibilities, and I accept them, including whatever errors or misinterpretations persist. Elizabeth City, who is completing her doctorate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has contributed to this project in countless ways with her sparkling intelligence, remarkable skill at finding obscure items, and seemingly effortless good humor. For nearly fifteen years, Wendy Angus has assisted me (as well as several other faculty members) with grace, accuracy, and reliability for which I am enormously grateful. Research librarians, archivists, and administrators, particularly Katherine Markee, special collections librarian at Purdue University, as well as several staff at Franklin College have also been very helpful. Most of all, thanks to the Harvard Graduate School of Education's superb research librarians, especially the incomparable Patrice Moskow.

Many students, faculty, school practitioners, researchers, parents, and citizens have increased my understanding of various elements of the American educational scene, both past and present. Here I want to give special thanks to Blanche Brick, Anthony Bryk, Michael Caprio, Richard Chait, David K. Cohen, Yves Duhaldeborde, Chester Finn, Howard Gardner, Milton Goldberg, Claudia Goldin, Marguerite Graham, Elisabeth Hansot, Nathan Hardee, James Harvey, Paul Hill, Jennifer Hochschild, Harry Judge, Daniel Koretz, Ellen Condcliffe Lagemann, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Marvin Lazerson, Deborah Leff, Richard Light, Bridget Terry Long, Mary Patterson McPherson, Katherine Merseth, Richard Murnane, Jerome T. Murphy, Susan Blankenbaker Noyes, Gary Orfield, Robert Peterkin, Diane Ravitch, Julie Reuben, Robert Schwartz, Marshall Smith, Catherine Snow, Catharine R. Stimpson, David and Edith Tatel, Michael Timpane, David Tyack, Carol Weiss, Patricia White, Keith Whitescarver, John Williams, Ellen Winner, Lillian Wright, and William Wright.

In addition to the assistance of those listed above, I have also revisited some of the material included in my previous books and articles, including *Progressive Education from Arcady to Academe* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967); *Community and Class in American Education* (New York: John Wiley, 1974); *S.O.S.: Sustain Our Schools* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); with Richard Lyman and Martin Trow, *Accountability of Colleges and Universities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); "Women in Academe," *Science* 160 (25 September 1970): 1284–1290; "Carleton Washburne: A Biographical Essay" in Robert Havighurst, ed., *Leaders in Education NSSE Yearbook* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); "Schools: Cacophony about Practice, Silence about Purpose," *Daedalus* (1984): 29–57; "Assimilation, Adjustment, and Access: An Antiquarian View of American Education,"

in Maris Vinovskis and Diane Ravitch, eds., *Learning from the Past: What History Teaches Us about School Reform* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); "Educational Dilemmas for Americans," *Daedalus* (1998): 225–235; "Educational Reform—Why Now?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 146: 3 (September 2002): 256–263; and "The Long Haul," *Education Next* (Spring 2003): 20–23.

While working on this book, I have realized that I would never have written it if Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Jaroslav Pelikan of the Annenberg Institutions of Democracy project had not made an arrangement with Oxford University Press's trade division and its executive editor, Timothy Bartlett, to include public schools as one of the five volumes in their series and then talked me into writing it. I have appreciated their invitation and suggestions. I also thank the staff at Oxford University Press for helpful assistance in the final transition from manuscript to book.

My longest, deepest and most important conversations have been with my husband of more than fifty years, Loren R. Graham, for whom the American public schools provided a path from poverty through a state university to professorships at Columbia University, MIT, and Harvard University. A goal of writing this book has been to help schools and colleges do as well by others as they did by him.

This page intentionally left blank

Schooling America

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

SCHOOLS IN AMERICA have danced to different drummers during their long history. Sometimes the drumbeat demanded rigidity in all programs; sometimes it wanted academic learning for only a few. Sometimes it encouraged unleashing children's creativity, not teaching them facts. Sometimes it wanted children to solve the social problems, such as racial segregation, adults could not handle. Sometimes it tacitly supported some schools as warehouses, not instructional facilities. Sometimes it sought schooling to be the equalizer in a society in which the gap between rich and poor was growing. Sometimes the principal purpose of schooling seemed to be teaching citizenship and developing habits of work appropriate for a democratic society, while at other times its purpose seemed to be preparation for employment, which needed the same habits of work but also some academic skills. Now, the drumbeat demands that all children achieve academically at a high level and the measure of that achievement is tests. The rhythm and tempo of the drumbeats have shifted relatively frequently,

but the schools have not adjusted to the new musical scores with alacrity. They are typically just beginning to master the previous drummers' music when new drummers appear. Many, though not all, of the new beats have been improvements both for the children and for the nation.

All drummers have sought literacy in English for American children, though very modest literacy levels have been acceptable in the past. Drummers have always sought a few students who attained high levels of academic achievement, including children from disparate social, economic, and racial backgrounds. Beyond that consensus, however, what we have wanted from schooling has changed dramatically over time. These expectations for schools typically have been expressed through criticisms—often virulent—of current school practices, and the responses that followed inevitably were slower and less complete than the most ardent critics demanded. These are the shifting assignments given to schools.

The following chapters of this book describe these shifting assignments given to schools and then to colleges during the last century: "Assimilation: 1900–1920"; "Adjustment: 1920–1954"; "Access: 1954–1983"; and "Achievement: 1983–Present." Each goal has been partially reached, although never as quickly nor as completely as its proponents wished. Certainly this is true of the current one, achievement, for we are reminded daily of the academic inadequacies of our youth. The fifth chapter, "Autonomy to Accountability," inserts into this discussion of schooling the experience of American colleges and universities over the last century. Many Americans believed until the middle of the twentieth century that completing high school sufficed for schooling. During the last half-century, however, we have come to believe that schooling is not complete without college, and a majority of our high school gradu-

ates now pursue post-secondary education. College is becoming nearly as universal as high school was in the mid-years of the twentieth century. Colleges have become the schools for adults and now exhibit much the same range of accomplishments and difficulties as do the elementary and secondary schools.

The story begins with the schools' response to the need to assimilate hordes of European immigrants' children at the beginning of the twentieth century and continues to the present demand to assure the academic achievement of all students. American schools and colleges have valiantly, though sometimes reluctantly, adapted their institutions to meet the needs expressed by their critics. In this democratic nation schooling became the core upon which Americans have relied to assure the continuity and evolution of their government, their economy, and their social values. Since authority to maintain the nation resides with the people, not a monarchy, church, or military, then the people must be imbued not only with knowledge but also with virtue in order to assume that profound responsibility. As early as 1816 Thomas Jefferson warned, "If you expect a nation to be ignorant and free and in a state of civilization, you expect what never was and never will be."

In Jefferson's time few supports existed to eliminate ignorance and promote freedom and civilization. Schools seemed the best institutional bet to accomplish this formidable civic task. By the early twentieth century American schools led the world in providing opportunities for instruction in both academic subjects and civic values.

American schools moved gradually and hesitantly in the first half of the twentieth century away from serving the nation's needs toward serving children's needs. Both, of course, are necessary. Early on we sought through schooling to unify the country's population by instilling a primary allegiance to the United States and

by teaching skills to enable prosperity. By the 1920s we shifted our emphasis to schools that sought primarily to help children grow up. Increasingly these institutions rejected the excessive rigidity of the formal curriculum and developed teaching methods that emphasized children's interests and social development, sometimes without ensuring the mastery of traditional subject matter. For children in families with rich cultural resources of their own the lack of academic emphasis in school was not harmful, but for children without such traditions, it was devastating, depriving them of access to knowledge.

By the middle years of the twentieth century, critics, including both the literate public and professors, assailed the academic weaknesses of much schooling, designed as it was to foster the "life adjustment" of many American youth. Unlike in Europe, where all but the academically inclined left school by adolescence, in America the majority of students completed secondary school, so a rigorous academic curriculum was seen by some American educators as beyond the reach of most students. Academic critics and hopeful parents demanded access to special programs for "gifted and talented" students. Others demanded access as well, particularly blacks who sought admission to schools from which their children had been lawfully excluded on the basis of their race. Access to enhanced instruction in schools with many low-income students became codified with the first major federal education act in 1965. Additional pressure for access to special arrangements intended to equalize opportunity mounted for bilingual children, for handicapped youth, and, finally, for girls previously excluded from boys-only sports.

Critics reemerged in the early 1980s, now led by businessmen who found themselves confounded in competition with Japanese and European companies and who attributed some of their difficulties to the academic in-

adequacy of their workforce. Broad coalitions of business leaders, public policy spokespersons, academics, and educators called for strengthened academic instruction for all American youth, particularly for those, often poor and minority, whose test scores trailed affluent Americans and many Europeans and South Asians. How universal academic achievement was to occur immediately without substantial changes in the adolescent youth culture, which no one seriously advocated, or without a fundamental reorientation of school life, which few successfully defined, became the conundrum of the times. It remains so today.

The dilemma for school people, thus, has been how to respond to the public's different and sometimes conflicting demands upon the schools. On the whole, the American people have believed the schools are theirs, and they, not the teachers or administrators, are the ones who should establish priorities for the schools. Public education in America has meant that the public controlled the schools, and the schools should thus serve the public's needs. This conviction that the public should control education stems from Jefferson's observation that a democracy is dependent upon a knowledgeable and virtuous public.

Achieving a knowledgeable and virtuous public has not been easy. Traditionally we have been satisfied with the excellent academic performance of a few, including some rich and a few poor, some white and a few of color. For the remainder we have settled for much more modest academic achievements. Yet for nearly all we have emphasized the "virtue" dimension of the curriculum, stressing fair play, honesty, loyalty to the country, respect for others, teamwork, and, occasionally, ingenuity, creativity, and even kindness. For the first half of the twentieth century this mix served us reasonably well. America became a world power during World War II, after all, when only a tiny fraction of our children

had achieved academic eminence and when the United States had few leading research universities of international standing.

But at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Americans are concentrating their educational energies on improving the academic achievement of all our youth. Were that genuinely to happen it would be a wondrous accomplishment both for the youth and for the society. Somehow we hope that greater academic achievement will bring us a more productive society and perhaps even one that is more just. It is hard to imagine, however, how higher test scores alone will do that. Schools that are reorganized to engage and support all children in successful learning as well as schools that themselves exemplify the virtues that we have sought to imbue in the young do have such possibilities. Creating such schools and providing them for all children is our present challenge. Our democracy demands that we meet this challenge.

In America we are deeply indebted to our educational institutions for developing the population that makes our nation work. Yet, we are ambivalent about their contribution, unsure how many of our national successes and failures are attributable to our children's schooling. Certainly schooling can be influential, but even more significant in youths' development is the education they receive in their homes, their communities, and through the media. Those influences, while more important, are much more difficult for a society to regulate, and thus our attention remains upon the educational institutions, whose policies we can regulate but whose practices are vastly more difficult to change.

Assimilation

1900-1920

ALIVELY, TOWHEADED, EIGHT-YEAR-OLD BOY shivered with dread and excitement on a cool morning in September 1900 in Ottertail County, Minnesota, as he headed for his first day of school. His older brother, Mads, and his older sister, Esther, had already attempted this venture, and neither had liked it at all. For many, not only the first day of school but latter days as well were a harrowing experience. Subsequently his six younger brothers and sisters would make the same journey, and most of them would not like it either. His father offered one piece of advice in Danish, the only language spoken in the family, "When the teacher looks at you, stand up and say, 'My name is Victor Lincoln Albjerg.'" That was his preparation for schooling in America. His parents' concession to his need for Americanization was his middle name; they offered few others. Victor Lincoln Albjerg was my father.

Little Victor followed his father's advice precisely, and when the teacher turned to him, he rose and replied as his father had instructed. Derisive laughter



My father, Victor Lincoln Albjerg, 1900.
Courtesy of Patricia Albjerg Graham

from his fellow students and a frown from the teacher greeted him. Confused and embarrassed, he sat immediately, and understood why Mads and Esther had sought to avoid school. Obviously the teacher had asked him something other than his name, but, since she spoke English and he spoke only Danish, he had no idea what she had said. The teacher, on the other hand, recognized that her preeminent task was to teach her pupils English, and to do so she forbade them from speaking their family language to each other in the school or schoolyard. The sharp rap of the birch rod met such infractions.

Despite his inauspicious beginning, Victor prospered in the school, more than his father wished. Victor's father believed in schooling only within "thrifty limits," by which he meant a modicum of English and arithmetic and perhaps a bit else but not enough to give students an appetite for further book learning that might take them away from their local environment. As his father feared, Victor, unlike his brothers, did not want to return to the family farm. As he expressed it, "I wanted to be somebody—a rural schoolteacher." In 1909 at the age of seventeen he became one, earning forty dollars per month for the three-month term at a nearby one-room school.

The nine Albjerg children exemplified what most Americans then wanted the schools to do: assimilate youngsters into American life. Fundamentally the curriculum was the same for native-born and immigrant children, though the latter had the additional obstacle of learning English as a foreign language rather than as their native tongue. And there were lots of immigrant children eligible for schooling as between 1890 and 1920 more than 18 million people came to the United States, largely from eastern and southern Europe, where few had experienced significant schooling. Many, though not all, saw their children's schooling as the primary means of success in their new land.

The immigrant youngsters presented an immediate concern because their families could not be counted upon to instill either the English language fluency or the values associated with American patriotism that native-born, white families were assumed to provide. Thus, many Americans considered schooling for immigrants even more important than for others, an expectation seen most vividly in the South, where schooling for white, native-born youth was substantially less than that provided in other parts of the country where immigrants

settled in much larger numbers. Blacks in the South, of course, had even fewer educational opportunities.

Most Americans, both native born and newly arrived, thought that only a few children needed extended education, and only one Albjerg, Victor, received it. But all needed familiarity or, at least, acquaintance with the English language, with American customs and “patriotic lore,” some arithmetic, as well as with traditions of honesty, hard work, and fair play. This was the curriculum of assimilation, promising all children both virtue and knowledge with greater emphasis on the former than the latter.

Such schooling then sufficed to provide students with the skills to participate as citizens and to support themselves. Seven of the nine Albjerg children remained in Ottertail County for most of their lives, a common pattern. Yet despite their lack of extended schooling, all were self-sufficient, even frugal Esther, who never married and spent her entire life speaking Danish, caring first for her parents and then for other elderly neighbors.

On the whole the system worked well. The schools’ role was to meet the needs of the society by preparing children for participation in it. The needs of children were subordinated to the needs of the society. Generally schools did not consider seriously children’s social, psychological, or even academic development, and expected them to adapt to the routines established by the school. That would all change by the 1920s when the reaction against school rigidity prompted a profound shift of school focus from the needs of the society to the needs of children.

The mix of virtue and knowledge seemed about right for the early twentieth century. To help students attain these goals the schools increasingly engaged in hidebound instructional practices that many children found unappealing, as Victor’s brothers and sisters did.

Most left these unappealing institutions after only a few years of attendance. That was what both Americanization and assimilation meant, a little schooling for a lot of children.

AMERICANIZATION AS ASSIMILATION

William Torrey Harris, U.S. commissioner of education, forcefully alerted his fellow citizens to the challenges that mass immigration brought in 1877: "If we do not 'Americanize' our immigrants by luring them to participate in our best civilization . . . they will contribute to the degeneration of our political body and thus de-Americanize and destroy our national life." "Americanization" was a process, much as vulcanization of rubber was: conversion of a raw product into a tough, durable, usable, valuable good that benefited the whole society.

Harris's views dominated American expectations for education well into the twentieth century as a 1912 article in the *Wall Street Journal* explained:

Our public schools are filled with a conglomerate mass of foreigners and children of foreigners sprung from generations of ignorance and untrained intelligence. To make good citizens of these through a few years of schooling is a stupendous task. Anything that can be devised to enhance mental and physical condition, which as a rule carries with it moral tone, should be considered worth trying. What this country needs at this time more than all else is the elevation of its citizenship.

Elevating the mental and physical condition of the young with some additional moral tone became the curriculum of assimilation.

On the assumption, and it was a big one, that the immigrants and their children wanted to become "Americanized," then this curriculum benefited them as well.

The individuals who made the arduous emigration to the United States, however, came for a variety of reasons, particularly poverty or political or religious discrimination in their homelands. America for them offered the opportunity to build a better life, certainly for their children and possibly for themselves. Such entirely legitimate reasons for emigrating did not mean, however, that they wished to give up their native language, cuisine, customs, and religion, what we would call today their culture. That was the tension Victor Albjerg's father, Niels, expressed when he spoke of schooling within "thrifty limits." The old Dane wanted his children to get enough book learning at school in order to get by in America but not so much that they would exchange the primacy of their family identity for a more cosmopolitan American identity. Some other immigrants sought more educational opportunities for their children, but Niels was not alone in favoring limited learning.

Native-born white Americans generally agreed that assimilating other white immigrants was an urgent national priority. Distant memories of the difficulty of melding the thirteen original colonies into one nation persisted. More recent memories of the fratricidal Civil War reminded Americans of the importance of gaining the loyalty of residents and potential citizens to the United States.

As early as the 1840s, the Massachusetts commissioner of education Horace Mann had argued vigorously and persuasively that public education in the common school was desirable both for America and for Americans. Many people north of the Mason-Dixon line agreed with Mann. What Mann and his supporters meant by "common" was that the schools be universal, enrolling all children, both those of the "common people" (the poor) as well as those of the leaders of the community, and providing a similar curriculum for all. Until Mann's

time, children of affluent families typically attended schools that charged tuition while children of the poor enrolled in "charity schools." Mann wanted the support of all families for their children to study in "common schools," subsidized by taxes.

The "common" school being considered at the time was almost exclusively what we would today call an elementary school, so the issue of a universal curriculum was not as controversial as it would become when later educators considered what to teach in high schools. The thrust of Mann's argument, which he began articulating before the massive immigration of the late nineteenth century, was that publicly supported schools needed to be improved and needed the support of the affluent in the community, not just the poor. Mann invoked competition with the Prussians, considered the best-educated people in Europe, to stimulate American interest and compliance. Public education needed to become the standard for the nation, Mann argued, not various private schools driven by assorted ideologies and economic interests. This argument echoed that of the Founding Fathers, namely that a democracy relying on the will of the people needed to be sure that the people were both informed and loyal or the nation itself would suffer.

When massive numbers of Europeans immigrated from various countries beginning in the 1890s, common schools, as public schools were often called, were well established in cities, towns, and in most northern rural areas. Typically they concentrated on the first eight grades with most students dropping out before completion. They did, however, provide the basics of English literacy for those students who spent some time in them.

Americans at this time were moving in increasing numbers from rural areas to towns, where more schools were available and where many jobs required higher

levels of literacy and numeracy and the habits of punctuality, teamwork, and accommodation to institutional structures, each of which was considered a "virtue." From the nineteenth to the twentieth century, a nation that had been made predominantly of small business people, farmers, and people who worked the natural resources of the land and sea (loggers, fishermen, miners) became an urban, industrial society, which required substantially more skills and attitudes taught in schools. By 1920 half of the U.S. population lived in communities of 2,500 or more, and three-quarters of the immigrant population resided in cities. Administrators of large cities, such as New York, Chicago, Boston, or Detroit, estimated that two-thirds to three-quarters of their populations were either foreign born or children of foreign born.

Many immigrants remained in rural areas, particularly the Scandinavians and Germans who settled in the Midwest. These groups were less in the public eye and, therefore, triggered less nativist concern about assimilation than did their immigrant brethren from southern and eastern Europe. The latter were likely to be Roman Catholic or Jewish and to have come with limited educational attainments and even less money. As they were the most numerous, the most different, the most needy, and, especially, the most visible to journalists at major newspapers in cities, they were the focus of the assimilationists' attention. Some programs existed to help adults adjust to their new home, but the focus and the hope was for the children.

Political leaders, clergy, journalists, and the public generally agreed on which institutions of the society should lead in the effort to assimilate the immigrant population and which should not. Schools were to accomplish this effort while other entities remained bastions of immigrant homogeneity. Neighborhoods remained constellations of ethnic compatriots. Ethnic,