

Public Schools private schools and the Civil War

Public education advocates often point to the interdependence of the public common school system and democracy. There is critical concern that if the common system is abolished or greatly diminished, democracy will become ineffective, thrusting our social order into a state of isolation, detachment, and segregation.

Prior to the Civil War, the northern states had established the common school system or were in the process of doing so. The southern states typically were not developing a common school system.

Some leaders in education during the mid to late 19th century suggested that the lack of a common school system in the South fueled the launch of the Civil War.

In the 11th Annual Report of the State Commissioner of Common Schools to the Governor of the State of Ohio for the school year ending August 31, 1864, State Commissioner E.E. White contrasted education in the North and South: "The smoke of the first onset having cleared away, the fact was manifest that the line between open loyalty and active treason was the common school line." (p.63) In the 12th annual report, State Commissioner White, on page 3, wrote, "What human agency but universal education can heal the ravages of the dreadful conflict and be to newborn liberty its abiding strength and shield? The one imperative necessity of the American Republic is, that the common school will be planted upon every square mile of its peopled territory, and that the instruction imparted therein be carried to the highest point of efficiency". on page 5.

State Commissioner J.A. Norris on page 5 of the 13th Annual Report stated: "The confidence of the people in each other has been most dangerously shaken and the fact is generally recognized that common schools are among the most efficient instrumentalities to restore their confidence." Further, Norris, on Page 6, said, "In the organization of American states no maxim of civil policy has been more clearly recognized and universally applied than that civil and religious liberty cannot be mandated in the absence of universal intelligence and morality in the body politic and that to secure these ends, 'thorough and efficient system of common schools must be sustained, at public expense, and under state regulations. This is no longer a debatable question but is a settled principle of public policy."

In North Carolina Calvin H. Wiley, the first Superintendent of Common Schools in the mid-19th century, argued that the South's lack of a robust public school system contributed to sectionalism and ultimately helped to fuel the Civil War.

Wiley believed that without the common school system to instill shared civic values, the South became more susceptible to radical ideologies and disunion. He lamented the South's failure to invest in public education, suggesting that this neglect weakened the region's social fabric and made it easier for secessionist sentiment to take root.

Wiley discussed public education as a nationalizing force that would bind diverse communities together through common knowledge and Democratic principles.

President Grant was an adamant supporter of public education and opposed the use of tax money for private schools of any kind. In the fall of 1875, in a speech in Des Moines, Iowa on September 29, 1875, Grant extolled the virtues of the common School. He said, "Let us all labor to add all needful guarantees for the more perfect security of free thought, free speech, a free press, pure morals, unfettered religious sentiment, and equal rights and privileges to all men, irrespective of nationality, color, or religion. Encourage free schools and resolve that not one dollar of money shall be appropriated to the support of any sectarian school. Resolve that neither the state or the nation, or both combined, shall support institutions of learning other than those sufficient to afford every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common school education unmixed with sectarian, pagan, or atheistical tenants. Leave matters of religion to the family altar, the church, and the private school supported entirely by private contribution. Keep the church and the state forever separate."

In 1875 Congressman James G. Blaine proposed a federal constitutional amendment to bar government aid to sectarian institutions. The amendment passed in the house, but failed in the Senate. The amendment, in part, read, "No State shall make any law respecting the establishing of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; and no money raised by taxation in any state, for the support of public schools, or derived from any public fund thereof, not any public lands devoted thereto shall ever be under the control of any religious sect nor shall any money so raised or lands so devoted be divided between religious sects or denominations. (Congressional Record, 44th Congress, first session 14 December 1875). (The Ohio Constitution adopted 24 years earlier had a very similar provision.)

The Blaine amendment passed overwhelmingly in the house (180 to 7), however did not receive the necessary two-thirds vote in the Senate. Subsequently the essence of the language of the Blaine amendment was incorporated in 37 state constitutions.

Those who believe this amendment was motivated by an anti-Catholic bias should consider that the Blaine proposal was an expression of a need to prop up support for the public common school open to all youth. By that time in American history, the public common school had demonstrated that it had the potential of healing the nation subsequent to the Civil War.

The Blaine Amendment did not single out the Catholic parochial schools for ineligibility for public tax support; the concept applied to all religious groups. Religious leaders played the victim card, suggesting the failed federal amendment and subsequent successful state amendments were rooted in anti-Catholicism. The Catholic leadership was successful in playing that card. Many folks became convinced that the Blaine amendment was rooted in anti-Catholic bias. The fact is that the Blaine amendments were rooted in the belief that a robust common school system is necessary to nurture democracy; that it is essential to a unified nation. The public common school system helped heal the wounds of war as well as educate the citizens.

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State and national political leaders have taken a wrong turn by giving tax support to private schools, while neglecting the public common school system.

The nation needs a robust public school system to bring the citizens of this nation together. It is time for healing. It is time for politicians to bring people together instead of separating them. The common school has the capacity to do just that!