

A School for the Common Good

Does Horace Mann Still Matter?

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by Lawrence Baines

A new book entitled *Horace Mann's Vision of the Public Schools: Is It Still Relevant?*^{*} would seem tailor-made for review in an issue of educational HORIZONS that examines "A School for the Common Good." *Horace Mann's Vision* does succinctly summarize current controversies in education including technology, school finance, and No Child Left Behind, and the writing is informed. However, aside from the first twenty-seven pages, this odd little book has little to do with Horace Mann or his vision. Instead, the focus on educational hot topics leaves only a sentence or two of conjecture per chapter about what Horace Mann "might have thought" tacked on.

Typical is chapter 6 on "academic grouping." Hayes writes, "In 1990, 92 percent of the schools had academic tracking" (p. 46), and "There has been a very evident trend that is reducing the number of schools using the practice of tracking students" (p. 47), but the only data presented in support of the decline in tracking come from a textbook published a decade ago.

Stylistically, Hayes is fond of using bullets and citing long passages from writers other than Mann. Bullets have their place (I use them later in this essay), but not to the point that they constitute half of all text. In chapter 6, a chapter scarcely longer than eight pages, Hayes uses a total of sixteen bullets and cites five long passages from books or journal articles. None of the extended passages are taken from Mann's work. Hayes closes chapter 6 by citing Diane Ravitch's *Left Back* (2000) and simply noting, "I expect that Horace Mann would agree" (p. 53).

Too bad. Many Americans today are more likely to associate Horace Mann with insurance (an insurance company for teachers formed in 1945 uses Mann's name) than public education. So rather than ruminate on a well-intentioned book only peripherally related to Horace Mann at best, I decided this was the opportunity to revisit Mann and his vision.

^{*}By William Hayes. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006. Paperback, 171 pages; ISBN 1578863643.

Who, then, was Horace Mann, and why are his ideas so relevant to us today?

* * *

One of the pivotal moments of Mann's life came at age fourteen, when his brother Stephen drowned in a terrible accident. In Stephen's eulogy, a Calvinist minister preached that, because Stephen Mann had yet to be confirmed, his soul would suffer damnation. The incident dramatically affected Mann's view of religion; he eventually became a Unitarian—as did his contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was seven years younger.

Also like Emerson, Mann lost his father at an early age and a wife to poor health after only two years of marriage. Both men remarried and had families with their second wives, who showed remarkable patience with the “eternal flame” that each man kept for the memory of his first wife. Both Mann and Emerson knew Abraham Lincoln and Nathaniel Hawthorne; in fact, the sister of Mann's second wife (Mary Peabody) was married to Hawthorne.

As a young man, Mann became a lawyer, then a senator for the state of Massachusetts. At the height of his popularity as a politician, he was invited to take an advisory position in education for the state government. The position did not pay well, nor did it have any real power. Furthermore, the experiment of the common schools had just been launched; schools were in disarray and disrepair across the state. Despite the challenges, Mann resolved to reform common schools to the point that they would provide an education superior in all ways to the best private schools of the day. He used his position in the government as a bully pulpit to persuade the citizens of Massachusetts that the future of their state was integrally tied to the education of all children, not just the best and brightest. Mann considered education the antidote to a plethora of social ills—poverty, crime, poor health, ignorance, sloth, and greed.

In his lifetime, Mann helped create the first public institution for the mentally ill (Massachusetts State Hospital for the Insane), promoted the idea of colleges specifically designed for the training of teachers, established libraries within schools, and presided over a college (Antioch) that was one of the first to offer open admission to men and women of all races. However, perhaps his greatest contribution was the idea that American children should be provided with a free, nonselective, academically challenging, fair, and morally just system of schooling. In his appeals to the public, he posited schools as a way to unify and edify a diverse nation.

In a government like ours, each individual must think of the welfare of the State, as well as of the welfare of his own family, and, therefore, of the children of others as well as his own. It

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becomes, then, a momentous question, whether the children in our schools are educated in reference to themselves and their private interests only, or with a regard to the great social duties and prerogatives that await them. . . . However loftily the intellect of man may have been gifted, however skillfully it may have been trained, if it be not guided by a sense of justice, a love of mankind, and a devotion to duty, its possessor is only a more splendid, as he is a more dangerous[,] barbarian. (Mann 1965, 88)

One of the obstacles to implementing Mann's philosophy has always been that the wealthy have little incentive to abandon their privately run, well-appointed institutions, within which they wield significant power, for the motley vibrancy of the democratically controlled public school. Still, Mann managed to communicate that all Americans, especially the most affluent, had a shared social responsibility for the future of the country. "If one class possesses all the wealth and the education, while the residue of society is ignorant and poor, it matters not by what name the relation between them may be called: the latter, in fact and in truth, will be the servile dependents and subjects of the former" (Mann 1965, 124). Certainly, the phenomenon of "bright flight" from urban schools has demonstrated that the sense of societal obligation can be ephemeral, especially when it comes to the nitty-gritty of school choice. However, the demise of public schools cannot be attributed solely to the negligence of the rich, but also to the changing landscape of the poor.

In nineteenth-century America, few social services were provided by the government, so the poor worked long hours, usually as subsistence farmers or as workers in unregulated industries. With regard to child labor, the most progressive state in the nation was Massachusetts, which in 1842 had the temerity to limit the work days for children under fourteen years of age to a "mere" ten hours. Few other states followed Massachusetts' drastic lead, and it took almost one hundred years, until 1938, for the first federal child labor law to be established.

For the poor children of the nineteenth century, even a decrepit public school run by an untrained teacher could constitute a marked, immediate improvement in the quality of life. An additional boon was that schools offered the promise of a way out of poverty. However, by suggesting that children be required to attend school, Mann earned the wrath of many poor families who needed the income from their children to survive.

Today, a smaller percentage of Americans is poor and the view of schools as the way out of poverty seems less certain. For high school students who read about a peer signing a 100-million-dollar contract to play professional sports and who see the neighborhood drug dealer wheel around in a new Lexus all day, the prospect of twelve years of hard aca-

democratic work in exchange for a chance at a demanding job at a moderate salary may seem like a sucker's deal. Surviving without a high school diploma or making a living by working for minimum wage still may be within the realm of possibility, but it takes a great deal of effort and a willingness to work (Ehrenreich 2002). Although some of the poor still regard the public school with reverence, many would be among the first to abandon it were an alternative more strongly linked to upward mobility available.

The truth is that an increasing number of public schools, especially in urban areas, are faltering. Rather than trying to save them, urban dwellers are joining forces with prosperous suburbanites to circumvent public schools by demanding private school vouchers. At the same time, anti-tax advocates are undermining the survival of public schools by loosening the ties between property tax apportionments and funding. Recently, even the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination, drafted a resolution urging its sixteen million constituents to flee the public schools (*Toledo Blade* 2006).

Apparently, the moral imperative of public schools as the great democratic, humanistic leveler of social class is losing momentum. The foundation on which Mann based his argument for the common school as a place that would "obliterate factitious distinctions in society" (in Cremin 1957, 87) is the very reason many Americans pull their children from public schools. That is, many parents do not want a level playing field; they do not want their children to go to school with children who look different or might have different beliefs; and they do not want the identities of their children threatened or amalgamated into a melting pot. An unfortunate outcome of the multicultural movement has been the valuing of ethnic, religious, or personal beliefs over the welfare of the whole.

In the twenty-first century, Mann would be aghast at those and several other developments. To name a few:

- Mann was concerned with the pursuit of academic excellence and believed instruction should be adapted to meet individual needs, but state standardized exams assess the same minimal competencies of all students. The teacher is expected to adhere and teach to the standards, not to individual talents.
- Mann was convinced that because teaching was "the most difficult of all the arts, and the profoundest of all sciences" (in Cremin 1957, 21), teachers needed to be well-prepared, knowledgeable leaders of impeccable virtue—but more and more teachers are entering the profession through alternative certification without any specialized university training or previous experience with children (Baines, forthcoming). Apparently the Democratic Party,

a long-time supporter of teacher education, is considering an education platform that recommends jettisoning teacher preparation altogether (Wessel 2006).

- Mann favored a rigorous program of physical fitness, but today's children are heavier and more sedentary than ever before (Centers for Disease Control 2006).
- Mann believed the most important purpose of public schools was to provide children with moral guidance. Although Mann vehemently opposed using schools for religious indoctrination, he believed that tolerance, generosity, respect for others, and diligence could be learned. To judge by what receives the most public attention, test scores provide the sole indicator of success for a school. At the urging of various special-interest groups, morals have been purposefully excised from the curriculum, though "character education" has a few adherents in selected areas of the country (Murphy 2002).

As described by Downs (1974), the state of the public schools before Horace Mann became Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education (1837-1848) holds an eerie similarity to public schools today.

Parents who were able to pay for their children's education sent them to the academies and private schools, while those lacking financial means patronized the public schools. Class distinctions, a new phenomenon in Massachusetts, arose. The best teachers and the best pupils turned to the private schools. The most intelligent and the wealthier members of the community sent their children to the academies, concurrently losing interest in and resisting adequate tax support for public schools. In the popular mind the common schools came to denote "pauper schools," attended by children of the poorer classes only. (p. 35)

What has been missing in twenty-first-century debates about public education is a high-profile, fearless advocate for public schools in the mold of Horace Mann. Although the U.S. Secretary of Education's post would seem a logical bully pulpit, the office's incumbent, Margaret Spellings, is a former lobbyist gifted in the pragmatics of political compromise, not in drumming up support for the educative value of an open and free system of schools. In fact, much recent federal intervention in education seems to assume a "pauper schools" trajectory for public schools over the next few decades.

Reading Mann's personal journals and letters (Mann 1937; Messerli 1972) makes clear that the great reformer often felt ambivalent about his role as the "father of public education." He lived in shabby dwellings for

most of his life, worked relentlessly, never made much money, and gave away what little he had. Unlike Emerson, who came to earn huge sums of money on the lecture circuit, Mann lectured and wrote pro bono (Gibbon 2002). Yet two months before his death, he still had the chutzpah to tell the graduating class at Antioch College (where he was president), "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity" (Mann 1965, 243).

Although it is difficult to maintain optimism about the fate of public schools, every once in a while we can detect a spark of Mann's philosophy rising from the ashes of today's schools. One such spark has come from an eighteen-year-old Senegalese refugee named Amadou Ly, who recently helped his East Harlem high school science team win accolades in a nationwide robotics competition (Bernstein 2006). Ly, who has lived on his own without either parent since he was fourteen, has become one of the stars of the East Harlem team. If the young man has anyone to thank for the free and open schools of New York City, it's not the president or Mayor Bloomberg or Senator Hillary Clinton or Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. The only folks Amadou Ly need thank are his teachers and Horace Mann.

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