

What was the Common School Movement?

“... the Yankee and Protestant dominated school committee agreed [to public funding the Irish schools] because they believed it offered the best means of controlling and ‘elevating’ the children of Irish immigrants.” *Dr. Gray Fitzsimons, January 22, 2014*

Excerpts from *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* by Carl F. Kaestle.

- The idea behind the Common School Movement was that “schooling should stress unity, obedience, restraint, self-sacrifice, and the careful exercise of intelligence. The survival of the republic depended on the virtue of its citizens... the moral quality of the society was therefore to be improved by improving the moral quality of individuals... ‘The child uneducated in knowledge and virtue is educated in the school of depravity. And what is true of the individual is true of communities.’” P. 81
- “The fact that state intervention [local and state level] in education succeeded in this period while earlier it had failed, and the fact that it coincided with accelerating urbanization, industrialization and immigration, suggests that there were causal connections between education reform and social changes in the years 1830 to 1860. ... [We] must look at the interrelated changes in the economic, demographic, cultural, and political characteristics of American society to assess the impact each may have on the emerging systems of public education.” P. 64
- “In Lawrence, Massachusetts, another factory town, the Irish were paid low wages, consigned either to tenements or a shanty town, and then criticized for their unhealthy ‘habitations, habits, and peculiar modes of living.’ Anxious natives proposed public schools to combat ‘idleness, truancy, falsehood, deceit, thieving, obscenity, profanity, and every other wicked and disgraceful practice.’” By 1848, the Irish Catholics in Lawrence were running their own school, and by 1855 the city’s school superintendent was bemoaning the growth in the Irish community, and the growth in Irish schools (privately funded) that provided an alternative to the public schools for the immigrants. P. 162
- Reflecting the same sentiment in New York, the state assembly committee warned, “‘We must decompose and cleanse the impurities which run into our midst,’ and *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* provided the answer: ‘There is but one rectifying agent – one infallible filter – the SCHOOL.’” P. 163

From John Knowles – a school committee member at the time Lowell’s Irish school was established. He wrote this recollection, published in the *Lowell Courier* newspaper, in 1871.

- "The writer paid an official visit to the school there in 1830 when we found the schoolmaster at home in one of those [Irish] camps dispensing knowledge as well as he could. He taught them reading and spelling with the prayers of the Catholic Church. He showed the committee his board--consisting of a half a loaf of bread on a small pine table and a pail of water under the table. He apologized for the frugality of his table but said it was as bountiful as his means would allow."

- From Dr. Gray Fitzsimons about Knowles: “Knowles references the Irish school that the school committee established in 1830. One of the duties of school committee members in the antebellum era was to visit the schools and observe teachers and students. Knowles was recounting his visit to the Irish school – the only publicly funded one at that time in 1830 – which he and (Reverend) Edson, among others, supported. As far as I know, a teacher at this time – especially one in a separate school for Irish Catholics – had a great deal of leeway in the use of teaching material and in the curriculum. This continued into the Common School era, but one of the centralizing tendencies of local school committees and the state was associated with attempts to create a more standard curriculum and use more uniform sets of textbooks. The law on public instruction of youth, passed in 1827, forbade tax dollars being spent on sectarian [religious] texts. But teachers could still teach and did teach from the Bible and I have no doubt teachers in the publicly funded Irish Catholic schools used Catholic texts in their teaching, as evidently this particular schoolmaster, mentioned by Knowles, was doing.”

From R. Laurence Moore, “Bible Reading and Nonsectarian Schooling: The Failure of Religious Instruction in Nineteenth-Century Public Education,” *Journal of American History*, March 2000, pg. 1588.

- “In 1827 the state of Massachusetts, where official thinking had always linked education to religion, became the first to pass legislation placing restrictions on the teaching of religion in American schools. It decreed that public money could not be used to purchase “any school books which are calculated to favor the tenets of any particular sect of Christians.” That language intended, not to exclude religion from the schools, but to restrict religious instruction to nonsectarian matters. But what exactly was sectarian, and what was instruction? To most early school leaders in New England, nonsectarian certainly meant Christian. An editorial in the *R.I. Schoolmaster* in 1856 took the position, then relatively noncontroversial among Protestants, that nonsectarianism was “common” Christianity, general instruction about the “mission of Jesus Christ, his holy example, and authoritative teaching.” However, the Massachusetts legislature that passed the 1827 law did not really foresee where the logic of nonsectarianism might go once non-Protestants and non-Christians claimed a place in America’s common schools. Foreseen or not, the difficulties of making Bible reading serve the cause of a generalized religious instruction were written into the Massachusetts 1827 law. Horace Mann served as the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from 1837 to 1848. He took up his task complaining about the “alarming deficiency of moral and religious instruction ... found to exist in our schools.” But Mann had no wish to return to the colonial period, when public schools sought to save children from Satan and had used the famous New England Primer to spread the lessons of the Congregational confession of faith. Mann was a strong proponent of the 1827 law and regarded nonsectarian as an easy term to define. Sectarian meant school books that were “as strictly and exclusively doctrinal as any on the shelves of a theological library.” It meant “teachers giving oral instruction as strictly and purely doctrinal as any ever heard from the pulpit, or from the professor’s chair.” Nonsectarian education did not mean secular education. Religion, in fact the Christian religion, had a natural and essential place in the classroom, and Bible reading was the most important aspect of classroom religion.”