

USING SCHOOL REFORM TO TEACH MODERN U.S. HISTORY

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The history of the modern American high school is a complex subject, full of rich potential for a high school history class. It is a subject with an inherent appeal for high school students, and one that allows a teacher to demonstrate the interconnectedness of politics with social institutions and to trace the impact of large social movements within a familiar context. By following the changes in their own school curriculum and mission from the turn of the century to the present, students experience in microcosm many of the shifting socio-political ideologies of the twentieth century. The impact of progressivism, the war years, the Cold War, the civil rights movement, the Reagan era—these periods become more vivid and comprehensible when seen through the lens of school reform and local educational policy. The study of school reform also allows for the use of a wide range of accessible, interdisciplinary, first-hand source material. National educational mandates and reports, Supreme Court rulings regarding school policy, old school yearbooks, and other local archival material are all useful tools for seeing how the school reflects and enacts the changing norms of the society at large.

A Brief History of School Reform: 1900-present

The high school is in many ways an archetypal American institution. From its formal birth at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the school has evolved self-consciously in response to the democratization of the culture. The earliest high schools were merely extensions of European classical academies—small, aristocratic institutions designed to ready the sons of affluent families for college. The mainstays of the early high school curriculum were Greek and Latin; the favored form of pedagogy, rote memorization. By the early nineteenth century, however, the rise of publicly funded (e.g. tax-supported) high schools necessarily changed the mission and intent of that institution. Like the common elementary schools that preceded them, public high schools of the mid-nineteenth century espoused middle-class, capitalist values, attracting an increasingly diverse and ambitious population as the century unfolded. As David Labaree explains, high schools at mid-century became a kind of Everyman's College—a place where lessons in American values and Protestant morality were merged with a wide menu of practical subjects, both academic and commercial. High

schools differed from community to community, with curriculum often proscribed by the interests and needs of the constituencies who attended them.¹

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, the official goals and purposes of the high school shifted again. Led by Charles Wilson Eliot, the president of Harvard, efforts to regularize the secondary curriculum brought a newly elite focus to that institution. Eliot formed his famous Committee of Ten, a group of university and private school educators who were charged with creating recommendations for a uniform secondary curriculum, one that could be offered in every high school in America. In many ways, the Committee of Ten brought the American high school back to its eighteenth-century roots. The new "common curriculum" for high school was composed only of academic subjects and strict sequences of study. At a time when only the tiniest fraction of high school students even considered advanced education, the high school shifted its offerings to reflect the goals and ambitions of America's elite. The vocational, moral, and civic thrust of the secondary school became overshadowed, in the Committee of Ten Report, by a concern for college readiness.

Eliot's elite vision could not sustain itself for long, however. Within the course of two decades (from 1900 to 1920), educational policy-makers once more radically altered the goals and mission of the high school. Where previously the school had catered to an elite, now it catered to the working-class student. Where previously the curriculum was grounded in classics and college-prep subjects, now it opened itself up to a vast array of vocational and "life-skills" offerings. Where educational policy makers in the late nineteenth century had looked upon the new burgeoning school population and concluded that "the best preparation for life is preparation for college,"² a new generation of educators concluded the opposite; that the main work of high schools was to break down class barriers, prevent crime, and ameliorate poverty.

This sea-change in the school's mission was necessarily inspired by larger social and political factors. As Lawrence Cremin explains in his seminal work on schooling during this period, rapid urbanization, industrialization, and immigration were already creating a powerful imperative for reform. A vast wave of urban liberalism pervaded popular culture and the press. With American cities in the process of dramatic transition, and a powerful progressive labor movement afoot, the schools became an obvious platform for egalitarian reform.³

¹An extensive discussion on the changing clientele of the American high school is presented in David Labaree, *The Making of an American High School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). See especially chapters one and two, 1-35.

²The full text of Charles Wilson Eliot's *The Committee of Ten Report* is available in Bernard Mehl, *High School at the Turn of the Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954).

³Lawrence Arthur Cremin, *The Transformation of the School* (New York: Knopf, 1961).

Of the three forces impacting American culture at the turn of the century, it was immigration that seemed to have the most powerful influence on the twentieth-century high school. With unprecedented numbers of immigrants arriving from southern and eastern Europe, assimilation and Americanization took center stage in the secondary curriculum. Academic courses were replaced by classes that sought to address the basic physical and emotional needs of young immigrants. At the same time, the number of high school course offerings continued to grow. Vocational classes proliferated, as well as courses in civics and conversational English. Home economics, practical math, and life skills became standard offerings. At the same time, liberal reformers such as Jane Addams pushed for schools to embrace the arts and other spiritually nourishing subjects that might help to mitigate against the dreariness of factory life.⁴ Extracurricular sports and modern languages such as Italian and Spanish now entered into the curriculum, again in an attempt to attract and retain the great diversity of students entering the public system. The transformation of educational objectives is most clearly summarized in *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, an influential policy report published in 1918. American high schools, it stated, should now concern themselves with “health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home membership, vocation, citizenship, worthy use of leisure time, and ethical character.”⁵

This transformation of the school found support from very disparate constituencies: By the early years of the twentieth century immigrant and native-born working-class families saw the new high school as a vehicle for upward mobility. Affluent Americans (who rarely utilized the public schools themselves) saw the new schools as an investment in crime prevention. Factory-owners, foremen, and managers hoped the new curriculum would help to develop more compliant and responsible workers. After a century of battling over tax support of public education, the country seemed to briefly find universal justification for that expenditure.

Even as schools were growing more diverse and eclectic, a second strand of progressivism, called Scientific Management, began moving them—ideologically—in the opposite direction. The rise of business and industry and the growing power of corporations in the 1920s had a profound impact on public schooling. Inspired by these corporate models of efficiency and accountability, confounded by chaotic standards, and burdened by overcrowding, high schools began to adopt the familiar hierarchical structures they retain today. A strong central administration (with its superintendents,

⁴For a discussion of the critical role of the arts in the life of the immigrant, see Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House: With Autobiographical Notes* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 371-399.

⁵*Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education: A Report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 5.

principals, and assistant principals) replaced the informal governance system of the past. Teachers, like factory workers, saw themselves grow increasingly powerless, as administrative “managers” set standards for performance. Like the garment worker obliged to produce a certain number of pieces per hour, the teacher was now required to follow rigid rules of pedagogy, to use specific terminology in the classroom, and to even stand with feet at particular angles to the class. At the same time, a new “science of education,” a hybrid of psychology and sociology, was producing an enormous and growing body of research on student cognition and learning styles. Standardized tests and other forms of objective measurements were introduced to help schools sort and label students, based on their “individual needs.” This practice too took power and authority away from the teacher. As factory workers rallied for their rights, so teachers responded to these new constraints in 1916 by forming their own union, the American Federation of Teachers, which actively sought the support of organized labor to advance their cause and their power.

By the 1930s, the vision of efficiency established by the scientific managers began to upstage the vision of the liberal progressives. Fiscal austerity during the Depression years meant the cutting of programs, particularly those in the arts and vocational track. At the same time, the theories of liberal progressive educators seemed to lose their rigor and vision. Now, in the hands of poor teachers, they too often degenerated into an aimless series of “soft” courses. A much-touted high school curriculum at the time, dubbed “Life Adjustment Education,” served as a curriculum coup de grace for progressivism. The program, advertised as a “functional” approach for average high school students, was built exclusively on students’ interests, on resolving their interpersonal problems, and on developing saleable skills. Courses focusing on these nonacademic topics proliferated in the years after the introduction of Life Adjustment Education, and they ultimately became the butt of national jokes.⁶

By the 1940s, the progressive education movement had also lost touch politically with mainstream America. Leaders of the Progressive Education Association (PEA), a group formed originally to advertise and advance the principles of progressive pedagogy, moved increasingly to the left, embracing a platform of beliefs that many Americans associated with Communism. Fears arising from labor unrest, nationalism in the wake of the Second World War, and finally the rise of the Soviet Union all served to undercut the liberal policies associated with progressive education. The final blow, of course, came with the launching of Sputnik in 1957, an event that quickly led to the vilification of all things progressive and a sudden dramatic

⁶The entire tract of *Life Adjustment for Every Youth: A Report of the U.S. Department of Education* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1947) makes interesting reading. It is sprinkled throughout with many examples of misguided progressivism.

move to conservative educational policies. By 1955, the PEA had been disbanded for lack of membership and its journal became defunct.⁷

By the late 1950s, a flood of federal and state legislation, policy papers, and widely disseminated books supported the newly conservative agenda for the schools. The National Defense Education Act⁸ and the Conant Report,⁹ both released in 1959, illustrate well the change in national priorities. The first of these, NDEA, was a sweeping piece of federal legislation that funneled massive amounts of federal money into enrichment programs in math, science, and foreign language, subjects targeted by Cold War warriors as most critical in maintaining American competitiveness. The second, a report on the status of high schools in America, written by James Conant of Harvard, called for the reestablishment of a rigorous academic high school, highly tracked and leveled, with great emphasis placed on the gifted and talented. Arthur Bestor's *Educational Wastelands* used Cold War invective to effectively eliminate the last vestiges of liberal school policies.¹⁰ Throughout the 1950s, with a Republican in the White House and a strong economy, progressivism had become a dirty word, associated with the worst sorts of mindless educational pap.

The conservative educational agenda did not last very long. As the political climate changed, so changed the schools. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964, schools again began a transformation in mission and priorities that echoed in uncanny ways the liberal policies of the progressive period. Where a decade earlier, federal legislation had supported programs for the gifted and talented, now the 89th Congress, acting on the vision of the Lyndon Johnson administration, passed the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act, the most far-reaching and expensive piece of federal legislation for schools that had ever been enacted. Virtually all of the 1.8 billion dollars allotted in this bill was intended for use not by the gifted, but the disadvantaged. The bill's most famous legacy, Title I, called for the creation of the Head Start Program, and dozens of other compensatory education programs also emerged from this legislation.

⁷The rise and fall of the Progressive Education Association is documented well in Cremin's *Transformation of the School*, especially 240-273.

⁸United States Congress House Committee on Appropriations, Review of Activities Under the National Defense Education Act, Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, 86th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960).

⁹James Bryant Conant, *The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959).

¹⁰Arthur Bestor, *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1953).

The Elementary and Secondary Schools Act set the tone for school policy in the next ten years. Once again, the high school became a crucible for testing liberal social reforms and a platform for playing out virtually every progressive impulse in society. The civil rights movement inspired a series of other rights movements that exerted their own powerful influence on the schools. Legal action on behalf of students with disabilities and non-English speaking students led to programs in mainstreaming, bilingual education, and English as a Second Language. The students' rights movement, fueled by Supreme Court legislation defending the rights of minors, helped build a counterculture and changed power relations between children and adults. This, in turn, profoundly impacted the ways in which teachers conducted themselves in the classroom. Court mandated desegregation, which culminated in the late 1960s and early 1970s with key decisions regarding school busing, led to further changes in high schools.

By the early 1970s, liberal educational policies began to lose ground again. As with progressive ideas of the 1930s and 1940s, the educational policies of this second liberal era suffered from their own extremism. Alternative schools and schools-without-walls were followed by a period of radical reform that culminated, ultimately, in the deschooling movement led by Ivan Illich, which essentially was a call to dismantle public education altogether.¹¹ Indeed, by the late 1970s, the leftist rhetoric of this period had finally succeeded in alienating many of the people who first had launched the liberal wave ten years before.

The corrective came in 1983. After years of recession, and inspired by the policies of a popular Republican president, schools were catapulted into yet another period of conservative reform, eerily similar in rhetoric and agenda to the policies that had been discarded twenty years before. With Japan replacing Russia as the new source of competition and enmity, Americans called for a back-to-basics approach designed to raise math and science test scores. Programs for the gifted and talented returned, and states began to design "teacher-proof" curriculum intended to impose regularity and rigor in classrooms. The rhetoric of Terrel Bell's famous report on the state of America schools, *A Nation at Risk*, suggested the sense of imperative felt by many Americans to discard the neo-progressive approach that held sway in many schools. "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today," wrote Bell, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war."¹² As never before, politicians, radio personalities, and local advocacy groups became involved in efforts to reform and restructure American

¹¹Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

¹²United States Department of Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), 1.

schools. High schools were the primary focus of those efforts, with the raising of graduation requirements, the doing away with elective choice, and the cutting back on programs in the arts. Teacher training techniques, such as the Madeleine Hunter method of the early 1980s, proposed prescriptive rules for pedagogy that claimed to result in higher student test scores.¹³ In short, the educational policy of the 1980s—the traditional curricula and calls for bottom-line accountability—stand as a kind of platonic inverse of the extreme laxity of 1970s progressivism and as an eerie repetition of the policies and practices that ousted the original progressive movement fifty years before.

It comes as no surprise that the high school again transformed itself in the 1990s. Under the Clinton administration and the moderate liberalism of the decade, schools again moved in a more progressive direction—tempered this time by the influence of a Republican congress and a new public wariness towards too much educational innovation. Compensatory education programs proliferated, for example, but state testing and school choice (mainstays of conservative reform policies) also gained ground.

Teaching School Reform

Several truisms emerge when one begins to study the history of modern school reform: The first is the political nature of schooling in America; the second is the inevitability of change. The twentieth century has seen dramatic shifts in educational policy and practice, particularly manifest at the secondary level. The challenge in an American history class is to show the ways in which these shifts reflect changing social norms, and political and economic pressures. By revisiting the theme of the high school throughout the course of a modern American history class—looking at the changing priorities of the school in light of different historical events—students can personally identify with the material they study, understanding the impact of national events on local institutions and on themselves.

In this section, I discuss more specifically how material on educational policy can be integrated into the history curriculum. Two examples follow. The first deals with the effect of conservative social policy on schools; the second with liberal reforms in an increasingly liberal era. Lastly, I discuss the ideas of educational liberalism and conservatism themselves, and present strategies for clarifying those labels for students.

Example 1: The 1950s

One of the most dramatic ideological shifts in American schooling occurred in the wake of World War II, when a bankrupt progressive approach gave sudden way

¹³For a brief summary of the theories of Madeleine Hunter, see Ronald Brandt, "On Teaching and Supervising: A Conversation with Madeleine Hunter," *Educational Leadership*, 42 (February 1985), 61-66.

to a conservative back-to-basics curriculum, emphasizing traditional pedagogy and standardized testing. There is a rich and interesting literature in education to supplement students' readings on the rise of nationalism, the McCarthy era, and the Cold War. Some of the most dramatic and accessible of these conservative manifestos were written by lay people (Mortimer Smith¹⁴ and Albert Lynd¹⁵) and military leaders (Admiral Hyman Rykover¹⁶). Excerpts from their work underscore the nation's concerns about international competitiveness and the threat of communist takeover. Arthur Bestor's eloquent condemnation of progressivism offers a clear picture of the intellectual tenor of the day and the anti-communist sentiment emerging on university campuses. Finally, the Conant Report offers a vivid illustration of how an affluent, xenophobic, baby-booming America reconceptualized the idea of the American high school. Conant calls for the creation of large regional schools, packed with programs in math and science, programs for the gifted, ability grouping, and tracking. Students can draw clear connections between these recommendations and the nation's concerns about Soviet-American relations in general, and the launching of Sputnik in particular. How did the Cold War affect the average high school student? Conant's report goes some distance in answering that question.

The new shift to conformity and patriotism can also be dramatically illustrated for students through yearbooks in their own school libraries. Yearbooks from this period are invariably testaments to civic pride and value consensus. Students will be struck by the homogeneity of the student body and by gender and racial stereotypes that abound there. A third source of vivid and useful material for illustrating life in the 1950s era schools is the educational fiction of the day. Short stories like "A Wreath for Miss Totten" by Hortense Calisher¹⁷ and *Good Morning, Miss Dove* by Frances Gray Patton,¹⁸ though they deal with upper-elementary-aged children, are again testaments to the social realities of the period, as they manifest themselves in public schools.

¹⁴Mortimer Smith, *The Diminished Mind: A Study of Planned Mediocrity in Our Public Schools* (Chicago: Regnery, 1954).

¹⁵Albert Lynd, *Quackery in the Public Schools* (Boston: Little Brown, 1953).

¹⁶Hyman Rykover, *American Education: A National Failure: The Problem of Our Schools and What We Can Learn from England* (New York: Dutton, 1963).

¹⁷Hortense Calisher, "A Wreath for Miss Totten," in *The Absence of Angels: Stories* (Boston: Little Brown, 1951).

¹⁸Frances Gray Patton, *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1954).

Example 2: Civil Rights and Schools

While most lessons derived from following the ideological swing of schooling suggest that schools are influenced by larger social movements, there are also examples of that influence working in the opposite direction. School policy can sometimes spearhead national policy. One excellent example of this is the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 and subsequent legislation and court rulings regarding school integration. While the modern civil rights movement has its roots in a complex array of policy mandates, legislation, and personal acts of courage, one can build a case that these pivotal school policies were profoundly influential in forwarding the civil rights agenda.

Students can begin by comparing and discussing the change in judicial attitudes between the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of 1896 and the *Brown* decision. The impact of the Civil Rights Act on public schools and the school legislation passed during the Johnson administration show the gradual shift in national priorities. After the death of Martin Luther King and the rise of the Black Power movement, students again can chart changes in federal policy regarding schools. The new urgency to implement real integration is reflected in the Supreme Court ruling on *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenberg* in which busing and direct gerrymandering are mandated by the court. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict and the Boston school riots, traced through newspaper articles, again illustrate how school policy impacted ordinary citizens.

In addition to court decisions and legislative action, non-fiction accounts of schools during this era, especially inner city schools, drive home a sense of what was at stake in schools for a young person of color. Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age*¹⁹ and John Herndon's *The Way It 'Sposed to Be*²⁰ offer devastating first-hand critiques of schools in the wake of the *Brown* decision. Excerpts from Gerald Grant's *The World We Created at Hamilton High*²¹ brilliantly document the disintegration and slow renewal of a single public high school throughout the decade of the 1970s. Finally, school yearbooks again become useful primary sources for gauging the social norms of the school. The slow process of school integration is visually apparent in yearbooks. Tracing the frequency of black faces in particular clubs, in positions of school authority, in candid photos, and among faculty, all afford students insight into local attitudes towards integration during this time period.

¹⁹Jonathan Kozol, *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967).

²⁰James Herndon, *The Way It 'Sposed to Be* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

²¹See chapters 2 and 3 of Gerald Grant, *The World We Created at Hamilton High* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Liberal vs. Conservative: What Does That Mean for Schools?

The swings between liberal and conservative policies in schools are marked, of course, by explicit behaviors, programs, and approaches. We associate liberal periods, for example, with such pedagogies as hands-on learning, cooperative learning, individualization, and alternative assessment. Conservative periods are marked by a return to traditional basic skills work, objective testing, and ability grouping. Often, students themselves have intuited these ideological distinctions in the course of their own schooling. By discussing why and how these approaches are ideological—in what ways they are associated with distinct political and social agendas—students gain further insight into the interrelationship of schools and society.

For example, the concept of hands-on learning, which stands at the heart of progressive education and has continued to resurface in each liberal era, has its roots, in part, in an attempt to democratize the culture and to value the contributions of immigrants at the turn of the century. Hands-on learning or “learning by doing” was a rational pedagogical response to a newly diverse student population, many of them non-English speaking, whose incentive to learn could not be piqued by the promise of college admission. Jane Addams’s *Twenty Years at Hull House* and early educational policy mandates such as the Cardinal Principles demonstrate this quite explicitly. Students can then draw contextual connections between the reemergence of learning-by-doing in the late 1960s and the political imperatives of the day.

Similarly, tensions associated with the Cold War help to explain the powerful reemergence of such conservative educational policies as ability grouping and standardized testing. The sudden need to isolate the best and the brightest and to groom students for science careers certainly can be explained in large part by political events. Students can find the same motivations underlying the conservative backlash of the 1980s. Why, in the 1980s, does the country need the assurance of an objective test score to measure the success of its schools? What forces might contribute to that impulse towards bottom-line accountability? By reading *A Nation at Risk* in the context of the Reagan era, it is easy to form hypotheses on this subject.

Conclusion

One final and critical understanding that is reinforced by the study of school reform is the failure of most federal policy-makers to consider historical precedents when spearheading change. As students study educational changes over the course of the century, they will see the same ideas repeating themselves over and over again. Beliefs about the nature of “good teaching” and about what is most important to learn come and go with confounding regularity. Policies emerge, are reviled, and then reemerge again—twenty or thirty years later—often with a new title and accompanied by a new series of promises. Noting this, and seeing the subtle and obvious ways in which school policy is tied to societal norms and beliefs, students learn to become wary

consumers of reform promises—whether in their public schools or in the larger context of their communities.

Key Sources and Materials

The following is a brief list of key reports, court cases, and policy statements that trace the changes in high school curriculum and mission over the twentieth century. The sources are all accessible to high school students; many of them are available on the World Wide Web. The sources can be used to punctuate various units in an American history course, e.g. they can be presented as a “theme” that is revisited at many points in the semester to highlight the major ideas and concepts of the course.

An Annotated Source List:

Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1911): Addams’s description of her work at Hull House, and particularly the sections of the book which deal with the arts curriculum offered there, dramatically illustrate the shifting mindset of urban reformers. Addams’s writing is a testament to the progressive idea that culture could be “democratized without being debased.”

Arthur Bestor, *Educational Wastelands* (1953): Excerpts from this scathing critique of progressivism are valuable for establishing the tenor of the educational establishment during the Cold War period. Bestor’s thesis is that the school should return to its initial mission, that of intellectual training in the academic disciplines. Returning to the reasoning of Charles Wilson Eliot at the turn of the century, Bestor puts forward a common curriculum (eschewing tracks and interest-based courses) that all students would be expected to follow. It is a quintessentially conservative doctrine.

The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (1918): Arising out of the theories of John Dewey, Francis Parker, Jane Addams, and other educational progressives, the Cardinal Principles Report represents a copernican change in public thinking about education. Probably the most far-reaching liberal reform agenda ever implemented in the public schools, this document inspired most of the structures and policies associated with progressive schooling: electives, vocational courses and tracks, experiential pedagogies, individualized instruction, the establishing of guidance departments and other support personnel. The opening sentence of the report summarizes the school’s change of mission: “Secondary education,” it begins, “should be determined by the needs of the society to be served, the character of the individuals to be educated, and the knowledge of educational theory and practice.”

James Coleman, *The Coleman Report* (1966):²² James Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (the original name of this infamous report) sought to study the effects of federal aid on American schools. Coleman's hypothesis was that the more money a school received, the better its students would score on tests and other standardized measures. Coleman's findings, however, proved to be quite different: that the quality of a school's physical facilities had little or no relationship to the achievement levels of a typical student. What did seem to have greatest effect was the social class of the student's peers. Coleman concluded:

One implication stands out above all: That schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent social effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school.²³

Coleman's findings became fodder for a great range of disparate policies: desegregation, busing, deschooling, and ultimately—later, during the Nixon administration, cutting of federal support from public schools.

The Committee of Ten Report (1892): Authored by Charles Wilson Eliot, the president of Harvard, this seminal document laid out the first comprehensive, common curriculum for public secondary schools in the United States. The report became a national model for schools and established certain familiar course sequences (Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, Calculus) and time blocks that are still used in high schools. The report is interesting from a socio-political perspective in that it lays out the framework of and argument for a conservative educational agenda that is repeated at various points in the twentieth century. Eliot's belief that "the best preparation for life is preparation for college" reflects both then and now the views of many of America's power elite.

James Conant, *The Conant Report* (1959): Putting conservative ideals of the period into a systematic framework for school reform, this influential report was largely responsible for the creation of large, bureaucratic, regional high schools. Conant believed that students (particularly gifted students) would be served better by regionalizing small high schools, pooling resources, and developing giant institutions

²²James Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966).

²³James Coleman, "Equal School or Equal Students?" *Public Interest*, 4 (Summer 1966), 73.

capable of offering more extensive curricula and enrichment opportunities for the brightest students. The report reflects the affluence of post-war America, the country's response to the baby boom, and the shift in educational priorities as a direct result of Sputnik and the Cold War.

George Counts, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* (1932):²⁴ Counts, a brilliant social critic and reformer, signals the beginning of the end of progressive education. Counts's radical politics are reflected here in his call for teachers to consciously and unabashedly impose liberationist values on their students. The essay is interesting from both an educational and a political perspective, as a companion to readings on American socialism and the rise of the labor movement.

Legislation and court cases promoting civil rights in the schools:

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) became the legal basis for other civil rights legislation. But it was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that the pace of change began to quicken. A series of important Supreme Court rulings in the ensuing decade directly addressed the rights of many formerly disenfranchised constituencies. Students might want to look at the following legislation and court cases to trace the changing attitudes of Court and country regarding power and privilege in the schools.

1968: The Supreme Court ruled that local school boards must develop "workable" desegregation plans.

1971: In *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* the Supreme Court mandated busing and gerrymandering of school district lines to ensure integration of schools.

1972: Public Law 94-142 dramatically increased the rights of handicapped children to have equal access to all public school curricula and activities—academic, vocational, and extracurricular—in the "least restrictive environment" possible. This law initiated the mainstreaming movement for children with disabilities.

1974: In *Law v. Nichols* the Supreme Court ruled that a school system's failure to provide language instruction for children whose primary language is not English denied those children equal opportunity, and was a violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This ruling established the precedent for bilingual education.

²⁴George Counts, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* (New York: The John Day Company, 1932).

In *Gault* (1967) and *Winship* (1970) the Supreme Court laid groundwork for the "Students Rights" movement of the 1970s. The *Gault* ruling established a new standard that juvenile-court proceedings "must measure up to the essentials of due process and fair treatment" afforded adults. *Winship* insisted that juvenile courts prove guilt "beyond a reasonable doubt." These decisions, in tandem with the ACLU's report on "Academic Freedom in the Secondary School," changed power relations between children and adults in public schools. Teachers were now required to justify and defend academic decisions that had never been open to question before. Adult authority was dramatically compromised.

A Nation at Risk (1983), Secretary Terrel Bell's well-known call for tougher standards and higher test scores, is a testament to 1980s attitudes and beliefs. Bell's report launched a powerful "back to basics" movement, and began an era of educational conservatism that reflected the politics of the Reagan era. Students will find much similarity in the rhetoric of this report with the language of Bestor's *Educational Wastelands*. It is also interesting for students to compare their present schools to the model invoked in Bell's report. Much persists.

Goals 2000 (1994),²⁵ President Bill Clinton's report on education attempts to realign school policy with his own moderate political agenda. The language is more humanistic, but the policies are characteristically "middle of the road." Clinton called for school choice and accountability; but he also advocated compensatory education programs and other reforms associated with liberal politics. Students, by this point, may be able to predict the Clinton agenda for schools, based solely on their understanding of his administration and the social imperatives of the 1990s.

²⁵*Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994).