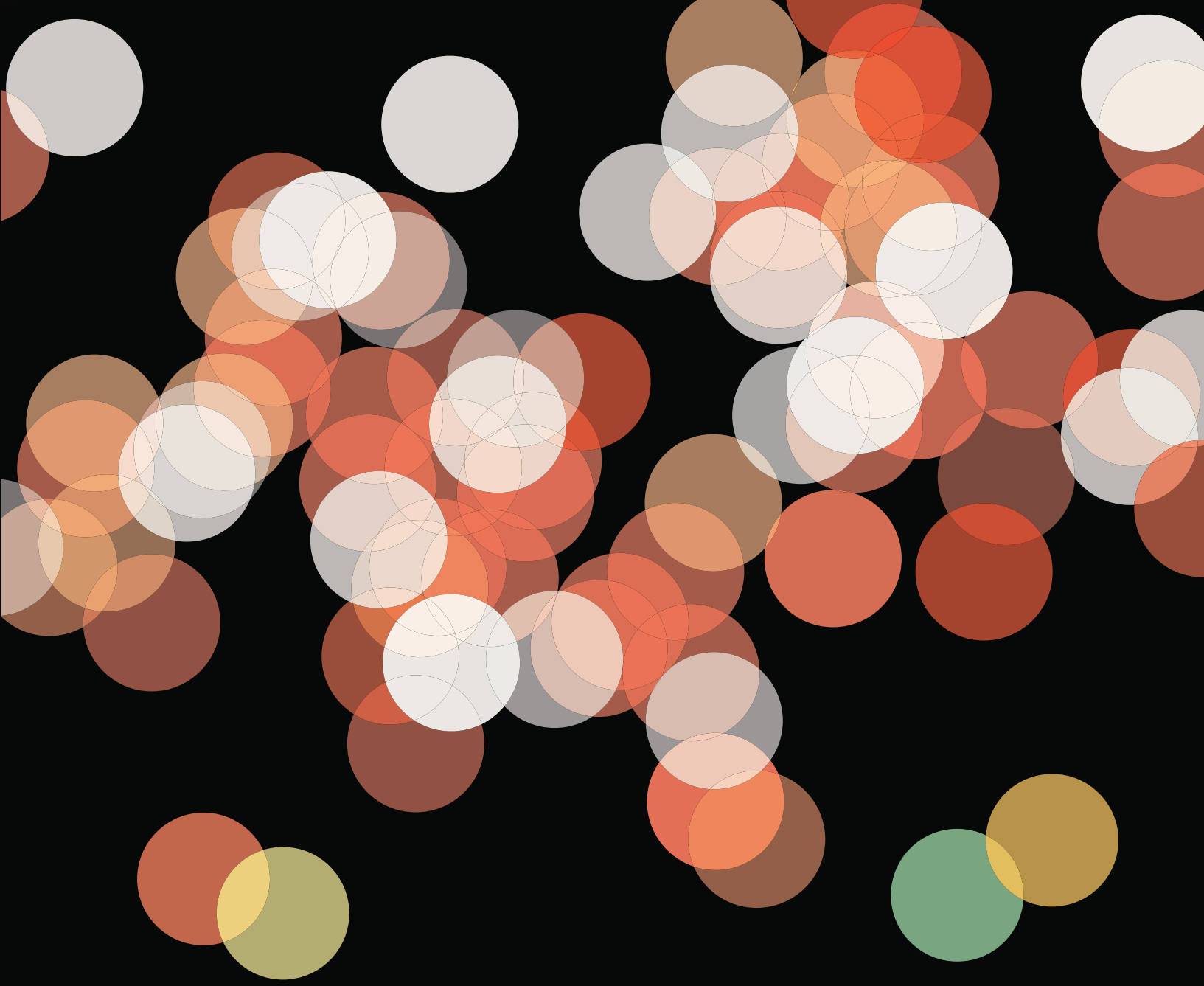

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Tony W. Johnson Ronald F. Reed

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be the business of the visitors entrusted with its execution. The first stage of this education being the schools of the hundreds, wherein the great mass of the people will receive their instruction, the principal foundations of future order will be laid here. Instead therefore of putting the Bible and Testament into the hands of the children, at an age when their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious enquiries, their memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European and American history. The first elements of morality too may be instilled into their minds; such as, when further developed as their judgments advance in strength, may teach them how to work out their own greatest happiness, by shewing them that it does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed them, but it always the result of a good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits.

Those whom either the wealth of their parents or the adoption of the state shall destine to higher degrees of learning, will go on to the grammar schools, which constitute the next stage, there to be instructed in the languages. The learning Greek and Latin, I am told, is going into disuse in Europe. I know not what their manners and occupations may call for, but it would be very ill-judged in us to follow their example in this instance. There is a certain period of life, say from eight to fifteen or sixteen years of age, when the mind, like the body, is not yet firm enough for laborious and close operations. If applied to such, it falls an early victim to premature exertion, exhibiting indeed at first, in these young and tender subjects, the flattering appearance of their being men while they are yet children, but ending in reducing them to be children when they should be men. The memory is then most susceptible and tenacious of impressions, and the learning of languages being chiefly a work of memory, it seems precisely fitted to the powers of this period, which is long enough too for acquiring the most useful languages ancient and modern. I do not pretend that language is science. It is only an instrument for the attainment of science. But that time is not lost which is employed in providing tools for future operation; more especially as in this case the books put into the hands of the youth for this purpose may be such as will at the same time impress their minds with useful facts and good principles. If this period be suffered to pass in idleness, the mind becomes lethargic and impotent, as would the body it inhabits if unexercised during the same time. The sympathy between body and mind during their rise, progress, and decline is too strict and obvious to endanger our being misled while we reason from the one to the other.

As soon as they are of sufficient age, it is supposed they will be sent on from the grammar schools to the university, which constitutes our third and last stage, there to study those sciences which may be adapted to their views. By that part of our plan which prescribes the selection of the youths of genius from among the classes of the poor, we hope to avail the state of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use, if not sought for and cultivated.

But of all the view of this law none is more important, none more legitimate, than that of rendering the people safe, as they are the ultimate guardians of their own liberty. For this purpose the reading in the first stage, where *they* will receive their whole education, is proposed, as has been said, to be chiefly historical. History by apprising them of the past will enable them

to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views. In every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, some germ of corruption and degeneracy, which cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate, and improve. Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe their minds must be improved to a certain degree. This indeed is not all that is necessary, though it be essentially necessary. An amendment of our constitution must here come in aid of the public education. The influence over government must be shared among all the people. If every individual which composes their mass participates of the ultimate authority, the government will be safe because the corrupting the whole mass will exceed any private resources of wealth; and public ones cannot be provided but by levies on the people. In this case every man would have to pay his own price. The government of Great-Britain has been corrupted, because but one man in ten has a right to vote for members of parliament. The sellers of the government therefore get nine-tenths of their price clear. It has been thought that corruption is restrained by confining the right of suffrage to a few of the wealthier of the people, but it would be more effectually restrained by an extension of that right to such numbers as would bid defiance to the means of corruption.

Lastly, it is proposed, by a bill in this revisal, to begin a public library and gallery, by laying out a certain sum annually in books, paintings, and statues.

From Jefferson, Thomas. 1781. *Notes on the State of Virginia.* Brooklyn, N.Y.: Historical Printing Club, 1894.

Questions

1. What is a theocracy?
2. What impact has the Puritan belief in the innate depravity of humankind had on educational beliefs in the United States?
3. Why was education so important for the Puritans?
4. Why was it necessary to establish Harvard College seven years after the Puritans settled in the Massachusetts Bay area?
5. What were the long-term consequences of the school laws passed by the Massachusetts General court in 1642 and 1647?
6. Is Jefferson correct in suggesting that education is the safeguard of liberty?
7. What did Jefferson mean by a "natural aristocracy"?
8. What is the role of education in developing such an aristocracy?
9. How are Jefferson's and the Puritans' vision of society alike? How are they different?
10. Describe in your own words, Jefferson's rationale for his "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge."
11. Does Jefferson's "natural aristocracy" include women?

Local versus Centralized Control of Schooling

7

Local versus Centralized Control of Schooling

Time Line

1783	*A Grammatical Institute of the English Language, Part I* (Noah Webster's "Blue Back Speller") is published.
1789	Webster's "Essay on the Necessity, Advantages, and Practicality of Reforming the Mode of Spelling" is published.
1837	Massachusetts legislature establishes first state board of education in the United States.
1848	Horace Mann's *Twelfth Annual Report* published.

INTRODUCTION

As noted in the previous chapter, Thomas Jefferson failed in his effort to develop a colony or statewide system of education. Indeed, education changed little in the decades following the American revolution. The lack of interest in Jefferson's plan for a centralized educational system suggests that citizens of the newly established United States were generally satisfied with the educational system inherited from the colonial era.

The District School: "Pure Little Democracies"

The district school, controlled by the local community, emerged as the dominant form of schooling in both the colonial and early national periods of American history. During these years, there was widespread suspicion of any form of centralized control. As a result, the village or neighborhood school often constituted the sole civic or public entity that people were willing to support. Towns or townships were established as legal entities for school purposes only. Absent state or federal involvement in education, these small political entities exercised total control over the school and the quality of education it provided.

In short, these district or village schools represent extreme examples of local or community control. They levied their own taxes, established a committee to hire and fire the schoolmaster, determined the length of the school term, and constructed and maintained a schoolhouse. Residents of the district took these activities seriously, resulting in—in the name of fairness and equity—placing the schoolhouse in the exact geographic center of the district. Sometimes this meant that schoolhouses stood in swamps or awkwardly perched on high ridges.

Often the only public facility in the district, the schoolhouse became a multipurpose facility, serving as the meeting place for political debates, social events, and even religious services. Functioning as the community center for the district, these "pure little democracies" often represented the pride and identity of these largely rural communities. The failure of a schoolmaster—often an outsider teaching school while preparing for a more lucrative career—to control the children and youth placed under his care often pleased the residents, for it suggested that outside world was no match for the local community. The quality of education offered in these district schools varied dramatically from district to district, though the level of instruction was often not high. District schools were often boring places where little was taught and learned.

American English: Language as Unifier

Even though local control—fueled by a fear of centralized government—dominated schooling during the early years of the republic, an educational solution to a significant political problem emerged during the early national period. Put simply, how is a sense of nationhood developed for a social order comprised of semiautonomous entities and cultures suspicious of centralization and nationalism? Rejecting the trappings of nationalism associated with the Old World (the monarch, the church, and the military establishment), the young country needed to create or manufacture its own sense of nationalism.

In what had recently become the United States of America, inhabitants of the original thirteen colonies were more likely to think of themselves as New Yorkers, Rhode Islanders, or Carolinians, or belonging to some other indigenous group (Cherokee or Iroquois) rather than consider themselves Americans. While citizens in such countries as France, England, or Spain had inherited their nationalism, Americans turned to education to foster a sense of unity in the new republic. In this regard, Noah Webster stands out in recognizing the importance of language for creating a sense of identity and national pride among former colonists.

In 1783, Noah Webster published what came to known as the "Blue Back Speller." Officially titled *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language, Part I,* this little spelling book met with immediate, if unexpected, success. Spanning both geographic and generational boundaries, Webster's spelling book became the standard for a uniquely American way of spelling. His speller conquered the land, travelling west in Conestoga wagons, leaping the mountains, and invading the south. Generations of young people from Maine to California learned the same words, the same pronunciations, and the same moral lessons from Noah Webster. Webster helped to liberate Americans from a sense of inferiority about their language. He helped break down regional differences in background, class, and religion. He provided Americans with something they all—New Yorkers as well as Carolinians—could be proud of: A common speech and language.