

I | *Schoolkid in the Fifties*

Through pastel lenses, many recall the Eisenhower era as the good old days of American education, when things were less complicated, frenetic, fractious, and fraught. Others, donning different spectacles, deplore the injustices and complacency of that era.

Both are partly correct.

U.S. schools bulged in the 1950s as the postwar baby boom hit. K–12 enrollments soared from 25 to 36 million. Just building enough classrooms and hiring teachers to staff them was ample challenge.

America was also beginning to expect all its children to attend high school—and to scorn as “dropouts” those who failed to complete it. During the fifties, the ratio of high-school graduates to seventeen-year-olds in the U.S. population rose from .59 to .69, close to where it is today. College, too, was more widely sought and, thanks to the GI Bill and similar financial aid schemes, more widely affordable. Postsecondary enrollments ballooned from 2.3 million to more than 4 million, and upward of half a million degrees were awarded in 1960. (When my father graduated twenty years earlier, the number was 220,000.) In 1948, a presidential commission urged creation of an entirely new institutional form, the “community college,” to offer more tertiary options to Americans, and hundreds of them opened in the fifties and sixties, alongside dozens more of full-fledged colleges (including former “normal schools”) and state universities.

The public schools of the day were old-fashioned in many respects, not yet jarred by desegregation, big federal and state programs, or technology (though they had mimeograph machines, overhead projectors, and public address systems). Their classrooms were ruled by no-nonsense teachers, many of them fifty-something Depression-era single women possessed of great ability and a solid education for whom this had been the best available career opportunity.

Once the classroom door was closed, it didn't much matter to the teacher what experts and critics were fussing about on the outside. Overhead, however, a philosophical air war raged between devotees of “progressive” or “pragmatic” ideas about curriculum and pedagogy, many of them followers of William Heard Kilpatrick, whose views held sway in

colleges of education, and “essentialists” such as Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Smith, and Arthur Bestor, who founded the Council for Basic Education in 1956 to reclaim what Bestor termed America’s “educational wastelands.”⁴

On the ground below, most people attended neighborhood public schools. The biggest exception was Catholics, who were likely (and, said the Church, supposed) to attend parochial schools, staffed primarily by unpaid members of religious orders and thus tuition-free or nearly so to parishioners. At their apogee in 1960, Catholic schools enrolled one youngster for every seven in the public schools. Today’s ratio is about one to twenty.

Many wealthy families still pursued private (mainly “independent”) schooling for their daughters and sons, though this was more common in the older cities of the Northeast and mid-Atlantic than in the South or West. Burgeoning suburbs—Levittown dates to 1947—added options within the public sector. Towns like Bryn Mawr, Brookline, Winnetka, and Shaker Heights had long boasted “good” public schools, but when the population surge of the 1950s intersected with the increasing metropolitanization of American society, suburban school systems boomed as their communities offered green grass, fresh air, new housing, safety, and amenities.

Many Americans, however, still spent their lives in the towns where they were born, not infrequently working in their father’s trade, often at a job—assembly line, agriculture, heavy labor—that didn’t demand a great deal of formal education or elaborate training. Yet demographic upheavals were palpable—and not only the return of World War II veterans and the tsunami of babies. Family farms were starting their long fade, and rural America was losing population as opportunities centered in the city. Mobility crept into U.S. society as never before. Not least was the continuing movement of rural southern blacks northward to Detroit, Chicago, and other mighty municipalities of the industrial heartland—and into their public schools, which were segregated by neighborhood if not by law.

The growth-oriented education scene of the 1950s was jarred by two major-league surprises. The more profound was the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown* decision, outlawing de jure segregation in public schooling. Second was the 1957 launch of Sputnik, the Soviet satellite that signaled to Americans that the country’s scientific edge was dulling.

Both events drew Washington deeper into education. As the federal judiciary reshaped the racial and institutional contours of public schooling in the aftermath of *Brown*, federal funds, federal attorneys, federal laws and policies, even federal troops made their way into K–12 education, and America’s long-standing if not always honorable tradition of “local control” was threatened.

Though the first U.S. satellite went into space just four months later, Sputnik angst fostered the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, which sought via federal funds to strengthen training in math, science, and foreign languages. Most of the money went to universities, but some dollars sluiced into the K–12 system to purchase equipment, renovate classrooms, train teachers, and develop tests and guidance programs. With that revenue came new rules and restrictions.

For a while, America fretted that it had an education quality problem. *The Pursuit of Excellence*, an influential 1958 Rockefeller Brothers Fund report spearheaded by John W. Gardner, argued that the nation must earnestly strive to develop its human capital and that it could pursue excellence without forfeiting equality.

Even pre-Sputnik, Gardner’s own Carnegie Corporation of New York had engaged former Harvard president James B. Conant to undertake a series of studies of K–12 education. The first of those, *The American High School Today*, appeared in 1959, urging wider propagation of “comprehensive” high schools featuring distinct “tracks” (college prep, vocational, etc.) for different types of students, who would be steered toward particular tracks according to their “aptitudes” and life plans. Far from equipping every young person with a broad, general education and thus spurring social mobility and equalizing opportunity, this view of the high school’s mission would help boys and girls “adjust” to whatever hand fate had dealt them—and keep them off the streets.

Historian Jeffrey Mirel explains that Depression-era joblessness and the accompanying influx of young people into school had fostered

a profoundly important shift in the nature and function of high schools. Increasingly, their task was custodial, to keep students *out of* the adult world (that is, out of the labor market) instead of preparing them for it. As a result, educators channeled increasing numbers of students into undemanding, nonacademic courses, while lowering standards in the academic courses that were required for

graduation. . . . In 1928, nonacademic courses accounted for about 33 percent of the classes taken by U.S. high-school students; by 1961 that number had increased to 43 percent. . . . Despite the sharp decline in the share of academic course taking, indeed, *because* of this decline, education leaders in the 1940s and 1950s declared that significant progress was being made toward equal opportunity for education. Pointing to growing high-school enrollments and graduation rates as evidence of the success of their policies, education leaders reiterated that getting diplomas in the hands of more students was far more egalitarian than having all students educated in discipline-based subject matter.⁵

A few Cassandras warned of catastrophe ahead. Perhaps the most articulate was Bestor, who said U.S. schools lacked serious content and rigor and neglected the core disciplines.⁶ Yet such criticism cut little ice with practitioners and policymakers. Their student numbers and graduation rates were soaring, and Conant's much-discussed report reassured them that their school models were working fine. His book, *Mirel* asserts, "effectively ended the debate about the quality of American high schools for the next two decades."

Meanwhile, the country fared well enough. Despite the deepening Cold War (and, in Korea, a hot war), the economy was robust. The streets were peaceful. Eisenhower presided calmly. The education system seemed to be meeting the nation's needs.

Barely noticed at the time, however, the fifties also sowed the intellectual seeds of today's "school choice" movement. Though one can trace the idea to John Stuart Mill, even Adam Smith, on American shores the father of market-based approaches to schooling was, by common consent, the late Milton Friedman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist then at the University of Chicago. He broached this idea for the first time in a 1955 article, "The Role of Government in Education." In it, he pictured a system in which

Government, preferably local governmental units, would give each child, through his parents, a specified sum to be used solely in paying for his general education; the parents would be free to spend this sum at a school of their own choice, provided it met certain minimum standards laid down by the appropriate governmental unit. Such schools would be conducted under a variety of auspices: by private enterprises

operated for profit, nonprofit institutions established by private endowment, religious bodies, and some even by governmental units.⁷

| I attended the Dayton public schools from kindergarten through ninth grade, benefiting from “Miss McCleary,” “Miss Reynolds,” “Mrs. Scibilia,” “Miss Kramer,” and a dozen other competent, decently educated, hard-working, gray-haired women who knew their stuff, taught us well, and brooked little nonsense. They were, in fact, practiced craftspeople and consummate professionals. Though they did not enjoy the status of doctors and ministers, they commanded respect as honorable practitioners of, even experts at, a vital community responsibility. So far as I could see, they did not dwell overmuch on their own “professionalism.” But neither did they belong to trade unions like the thousands of blue-collar workers in Dayton’s sprawling General Motors and National Cash Register plants.

Jefferson School, into whose district my family moved when I was in second grade, was a sizable K–8 neighborhood school with large classes and unabashed division of reading groups into “blue birds” and “red birds.” For me and many classmates, this yielded effective-enough delivery of basic skills and knowledge without a lot of frills. I had phonics in first grade, memorized the multiplication tables in (as I recall) fourth grade, wrote lots of book reports, and absorbed plenty of history and geography from Miss Reynolds in seventh- and eighth-grade social studies. The only tests we took were the “nationally normed” kind, on which one’s scores were reported according to what grade (and month) one’s attainments in a given subject most closely matched.⁸

Schoolwork was by no means entirely academic. We also took art, music, and gym—and boys and girls alike sampled both home ec and shop.⁹ With ample parent help, I made my share of papier-mâché dioramas, read hundreds of comic books (that’s how Mrs. Scibilia rewarded kids in her third-grade class who finished their work early), and sang off-key in costumed Christmas pageants and school plays.

The teachers, though, were glad to help me learn as much as I wanted, and the system made it possible to accelerate and diversify. I took algebra one summer, seeking an academic leg up on the boarding school experience to follow, and learned touch-typing the following summer. I was a diligent student and fast learner (as well as a nerdy, unathletic, braces-and-glasses-wearing kid who would sometimes wake up early to read the encyclopedia), but Dayton offered no “gifted and talented” programs as such.

Everyone lived within a few blocks of school, and nearly everyone walked there twice a day, going home at noon to find Mom waiting with chicken-noodle soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, then back to school for the afternoon.

Once a year, my mother invited our teachers home for a relatively dressy, slightly stilted lunch. (I loved the shrimp salad and warm Parker House rolls, hated the tomato aspic.) No doubt she was doing her part to foster good teacher relations on behalf of her daughter and sons, but she and many other parents also supported the school itself in myriad ways. The active PTA held well-attended meetings and sponsored an annual “spring festival” to raise money for school extras.

Public school was not my whole life. I had Saturday or Sunday religion lessons at Temple Israel and ransacked the children’s room at the nearby public library. (Particular passions included Bomba the Jungle Boy, the Hardy Boys, even Nancy Drew, and the excellent biographies published under the “Landmark” and “Signature” labels.) Far from making trouble during childhood, I was a dutiful Cub and Boy Scout—Mom was a den mother and Dad went on weekend camping trips—and spent innumerable after-school and Saturday hours at the YMCA taking gym and swimming lessons. For a time, I delivered morning papers to earn spending money, babysat, mowed lawns, and raised hamsters thinking that I might make a small fortune in animal husbandry. (Aware that hamsters were used for medical research, I eagerly phoned the Aero-Medical Laboratory at nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force Base to see what they might pay for the six or seven specimens I had accumulated and was crushed to learn that the Pentagon purchased its research hamsters by the thousand.) My father and I also went through a phase of getting “ham radio” licenses and learning Morse code before breakfast.

Summers were mostly fun, particularly the two years I spent at a rustic, canoe-centric “sleepaway camp” on the shore of Cass Lake in northern Minnesota; the family station-wagon trip “out west”; and the time my grandparents took a cousin and me to Europe by ship.

At home, we went to Saturday matinee double features (with cartoons) whenever we could and occasionally to children’s concerts by the philharmonic. But television occupied only a small corner of our lives. The house had one set in the “den,” and I watched a sequence of cherished programs (*Gunsmoke*, *Dragnet*, *Perry Mason*) on Saturday evenings, particularly when a sitter was in charge. During the week, however, the TV was seldom on—

save for the *Mickey Mouse Club* and occasionally the *Howdy Doody Show*. Instead, I used a flashlight to read under the covers after bedtime and built a “crystal set” radio so I could quietly listen to *The Lone Ranger* in the dark.

In September 1958, just turned fourteen, I began to walk a few blocks farther to attend ninth grade at Colonel White High School, which could have come right off Conant’s pages. A standard-issue “comprehensive high school,” it had something for everyone, including Friday evening football under the lights. Though the culture of the place was rah-rah, there were plenty of decent courses on offer and a smattering of first-rate teachers. You did not have to take those courses, however. One could easily enroll in a nonacademic track, and even the college-prep students could get by without much heavy lifting.

In retrospect, this Mayberry-like upbringing didn’t serve everyone well. I knew that Dayton’s “colored” community lived mainly on the “West Side” but scarcely noticed that the schools I attended were segregated in fact if not by law. I had no more than a couple of classmates who were black and few who were disabled (and then only mildly). Yet I and many others got a satisfactory education at relatively low cost in no-frills public schools that were rooted in their community, staffed by competent professionals, and backstopped by parents. A youngster who was able and eager could take extra (or harder) courses during the year or in summer school and could speed up his education to his heart’s content, without fancy programs or specialized schools. On the other hand, few students were stretched, and not a heckuva lot was demanded of us. Our schools were not visibly “accountable” to anyone for their results—though education-minded families who could afford it might move into or out of neighborhoods according to their schools’ reputations—and had no particular “standards” to follow other than preparing their pupils as they thought best for what would follow.¹⁰